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by John D. Zizioulas



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Editorial

Throughout his extensive academic and ecclesiastical career, Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon engaged in meaningful theological dialogue with prominent figures from various Christian traditions. While pursuing his doctoral studies and conducting research in the United States he became acquainted with several notable thinkers, among them his doctoral advisors: Fr. Georges Florovsky, the founder of the neopatristic synthesis and a prominent émigré theologian; Harvard Church historian George Williams, and the Swedish New Testament scholar Krister Stendahl. In addition, he was conversant with the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, and became close to Fr. John Meyendorff, a prominent émigré Russian historian, during his research stay at the Dumbarton Oaks Center.

Upon returning to Europe, where he spent the majority of his academic career in Geneva, Italy, and the United Kingdom, Zizioulas interacted with some of the most important theologians of his time. He engaged directly with figures such as Thomas F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, Yves Congar, and Walter Kasper, and had indirect interactions with scholars like Wolfgang Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and the late Metropolitan Kallistos Ware. His continuous engagement with distinguished theologians, whether as a lay theologian in Greece during the early 1960s or after his return in the early 1990s, is noteworthy.

His relationships and friendships with figures such as Nikos Nissiotis and Christos Yannaras, as well as other professors at Greek universities—Gerasimos Konidaris, in particular, who supervised his dissertation at the University of Athens—further emphasize

this aspect of his career. Additionally, he became the most influential contemporary Orthodox theologian in Serbia from 1985 to 2016, closely collaborating with bishops like the late Athanasios Jevtić and Ignatios Midić.

More recently, while serving as the Metropolitan of Pergamon and as the primary spokesperson for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Zizioulas interacted with church leaders, including former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams and the recently deceased Pope Francis. This ongoing dialogue profoundly influenced his character and enriched his theological vision. It fostered a commitment to constant communication and openness toward others, as well as a deep respect for the quest of Christian unity and advancements in modern science and philosophy—contextual elements within which the Orthodox Church should carry out its mission today.

This dialogical ethos, inspired by his patristic heroes (the Cappadocian Fathers and Maximus the Confessor in particular), became a guiding principle in his intellectual formation and the formulation of his theology. He remained committed to serious theological dialogue on critical existential themes, even in his most recent book, titled *Remembering the Future*, written shortly before his passing, which reveals the fresh spirit of a scholar who seeks to delve deeply into the sources of his research. It is not an exaggeration to say that Zizioulas, not only in his life but also in his work, embodied an occasion for dialogue, where his fundamental theological themes of communion and otherness converged.

Both issues of the 2026 volume explore the most representative paradigms of Zizioulas' theological encounters with important figures in the inter-Christian theological landscape, though the exploration is not exhaustive. Additionally, previously unpublished material—such as a manuscript lecture on the theological anthropology of Fyodor Dostoevsky, personal correspondence, and archival photos—is featured for the first time.

Nikolaos Asproulis
Editor-in-Chief



Dostoevsky on Man and Freedom

JOHN D. ZIZIOULAS

Editor’s Note: The following text presents a previously unpublished lecture manuscript by Metropolitan of Pergamon John D. Zizioulas (1931–2023). The manuscript appears to date from the early period of Zizioulas’ academic career at New College in Edinburgh (1971–1973) and reflects his engagement with the theological anthropology of Fyodor Dostoevsky, particularly the relationship between freedom, suffering, and the possibility of resurrection. While the text was prepared in the form of lecture notes, it already displays themes that would later become central to Zizioulas’ mature theology—especially the connection between freedom, personal existence, and the overcoming of death. The text has been lightly edited for clarity and readability by Bishop Maxim Vasiljević, while preserving the structure, terminology, and rhetorical character of the original lecture. Minor grammatical adjustments and punctuation corrections have been introduced where necessary. Titles of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s works have been standardized, and a small number of unclear references have been clarified. Quotations have been retained substantially as they appear in the manuscript. The editor believes that this lecture is of particular interest not only for students of Dostoevsky but also for scholars of modern Orthodox theology, as it offers a rare glimpse into Zizioulas’ early reflections on human freedom, suffering, and resurrection—themes that would later find systematic expression in his well-known theological works.

Abstract

This previously unpublished lecture manuscript by John D. Zizioulas examines Fyodor Dostoevsky as a theological thinker whose reflections on freedom, suffering, and death raise fundamental questions for Christian anthropology. Rather than approaching Dostoevsky primarily as a literary figure, Zizioulas interprets his novels as explorations of the existential limits of human freedom. Dostoevsky's characters reveal a paradox at the heart of human existence: the human longing for absolute freedom confronts the reality of suffering and death. According to Zizioulas, Dostoevsky's anthropology challenges both Western humanistic optimism and modern ideological projects that seek to eliminate suffering while preserving freedom. The lecture further explores Dostoevsky's eschatological vision, especially as articulated in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where the problem of death becomes central to the future of humanity. The text offers a rare glimpse into Zizioulas' early engagement with themes that would later become central to his theology of personhood, freedom, and resurrection.

Keywords: Dostoevsky, freedom, theological anthropology, suffering, resurrection, Christian eschatology

Preface

The purpose of this talk is to discuss Dostoevsky as a theologian. No attempt will be made to judge him as a writer of literature (for I make no claim to competence in his own field), but simply to point to certain themes that emerge from his work and that are of particular interest for theological reflection.

Dostoevsky has often perplexed those who have attempted to write about him. Many books have been written, yet no consensus has emerged. The most incompatible things have been said about him: Christian—or atheist (or are these necessarily incompatible?); a pathological type—or the most lucid mind capable of distinguishing good from evil; a representative of the decay of Christianity—or an example of its rebirth.

Yet this perplexity is not accidental; it is itself theologically meaningful. For is it really possible to draw the lines between these interpretations as sharply as we tend to do? Dostoevsky's works and overall message seem precisely to question such neat distinctions. It is therefore not surprising that he cannot easily be placed within clearly defined categories.

Dostoevsky's primary concern is *man*. He seeks to penetrate as deeply as possible into the mysteries of human existence (in this sense he may even be regarded as a forerunner of depth psychology). Only through such exploration can he speak—if he speaks at all—about God.

In this presentation we shall attempt to follow Dostoevsky's own method and avoid imposing upon him a ready-made theological system. It is true that Dostoevsky himself avoids systematizing. Yet in a certain sense it becomes our task to do systematically what he expresses through images and narratives. We shall try to do this, however, without distorting his vision of man. Indeed, if we follow this vision faithfully, we may discover that it itself calls into question the adequacy of purely logical structures when applied to human existence.

Before turning to this vision, however, it is helpful to look briefly at Dostoevsky's life, for the two are closely connected. In many respects Dostoevsky was an autobiographical writer, and the events of his life illuminate the themes of his work.

I. Biographical Sketch

Dostoevsky was born on October 1821. He came from a family of Lithuanian origin. His grandfather had been a priest, his father was a military doctor, and his mother was known as a simple and deeply pious woman.

His family life was far from happy. His father was oppressive and irritable, and toward the end of his life he took to drink. He was eventually killed by his own serfs when Dostoevsky was seventeen years old. His mother had died earlier. Among his siblings, the one closest to him was his brother Mikhail, who shared much

of his life and work; yet Mikhail too died relatively young, when Dostoevsky was about forty.

Dostoevsky married twice. His first wife died while still young. His second wife, Anna, played a crucial role in stabilizing his life and supporting him financially during difficult periods.

At his father's insistence, Dostoevsky entered the College of Military Engineering. Yet his true interests lay elsewhere. He was passionately drawn to literature and read widely: the Russians Pushkin and Gogol, and among Western writers Dickens, Schiller, Hoffmann, Balzac, and Victor Hugo.

After a brief career in government service, he abandoned this path in order to devote himself entirely to writing—a decision that brought him many hardships.

His life was marked by repeated trials. These included:

- a death sentence, later commuted to four years of exile and hard labor in Siberia, because of his association with intellectual circles influenced by European socialism;
- severe financial difficulties, which often made him dependent upon friends and upon the support of his wife;
- serious ill health, especially epileptic seizures;
- and the fact that his international recognition came largely only after his death.

Works (Chronological Overview)

Poor Folk (his first work, 1845)

The Double

Periodical *Vremya* (“The Time”), edited with his brother (after the exile: 1859–1865)

Notes from the House of the Dead (Siberian memoirs, published in *Vremya*)

Periodical *Epoch* (1864)

His major works were produced within only a few decades.

Crime and Punishment (1866)

The Idiot (1868)

Demons (also known as *The Possessed* or *The Devils*) (1872)

The Adolescent (also translated as *A Raw Youth*) (1875)

A Writer's Diary (published periodically between 1873 and 1881; regular issues 1877–1881)

The Brothers Karamazov (1879–1880)

Dostoevsky died in 1881.

II. Dostoevsky's Main Concern and the Historical Explanation of His Work

Dostoevsky's fundamental concern may be summarized in the following way: to enter into the abysmal depths of human existence and uncover its paradoxes, and then to attempt to encounter God through this exploration. Hence the basic theological question raised by Dostoevsky: *What do God and man look like if human existence is pushed to its extreme?*

Many attempts have been made to explain the sources of Dostoevsky's thought, and as always it is difficult to determine precisely where a writer derives his inspiration. Nevertheless, several elements can be identified as particularly significant.

(a) *The Slavophile–Westernizer Debate*. Dostoevsky lived at a time when Russian intellectual life was divided between the *Slavophiles* and the *Westernizers*. Peter the Great's westernizing reforms had provoked a fundamental debate about whether Russia should follow the path of European civilization or preserve its own cultural and spiritual identity. The question was not merely political or cultural—it had profound theological implications.

In this debate many of the central issues separating Eastern and Western theology came to the surface, and a creative polemic emerged concerning the strengths and limitations of each tradition. Important figures in this discussion included Aleksei Khomyakov and Vladimir Soloviev.

(b) *The Emergence of Socialism*. A second factor was the rise of socialist ideology in Europe and its spread into Russia. Dostoevsky proved remarkably perceptive in recognizing the deeper implications of this development. His analysis of emerging socialism and communism is often strikingly prophetic. This is theologically most revealing, but we shall return to it in greater detail later.

These factors became an important stimulus for his thought.

(c) *Personal Suffering and Monastic Influence*. The deeper sources of Dostoevsky's inspiration are more difficult to determine, yet they may be located primarily in two areas. First, his personal suffering, especially his years of exile and forced labor in Siberia. Second, his encounters with the *starets*—the spiritual elders of Russian monasticism. This monastic tradition played a significant role in Russian religious life at the time, and Dostoevsky's works reveal the deep impression these encounters made upon him.

These elements together help us understand the background of Dostoevsky's theological vision. We may therefore restate once more his central question: What do God and man look like when human existence is pressed to its ultimate limits?

III. Dostoevsky's Heroes

Dostoevsky's heroes are characterized by their inability to fit into any of the existing categories of human beings, particularly those that divide humanity into positive and negative, good and evil. "It is impossible to describe them simply as intelligent or stupid, moral or immoral, good or bad. They are capable of heroism and self-sacrifice, yet at the same time they may commit the most vile and cruel acts."¹ "Their entire existence is a struggle. They are torn between their hopes and their fears. Love and hatred constantly contest in them and none can predict the direction in which they will finally move."² Thus, Dostoevsky's characters often appear, at first sight, pathological or abnormal.

And yet no one who reads them carefully can detect any artificiality in them. They all are so *very human*—indeed, strikingly close to what we might call our true selves. The question therefore arises: what makes them appear abnormal and pathological at first glance?

¹ Source unverified.—*Editor's note*.

² Source unverified.—*Editor's note*.

IV. Man's Existence Beyond Good and Evil

1. *Dostoevsky Against Moralistic Anthropology*

We shall never understand Dostoevsky unless we first see what he seeks to refute. His struggle is directed against the idea that man can be understood and classified primarily through moral categories or ethical systems. This idea is closely connected with the humanistic ideals that became dominant in post-Renaissance Europe—the belief that if man becomes sufficiently educated and cultured, he will thereby become good. Culture was seen as the hope of humanity: improved social conditions, the elimination of poverty, the refinement of manners, the ideal of the “gentleman.”

Dostoevsky began very early to question this central axiom of European civilization. In *Notes from the House of the Dead*, based on his experiences in Siberia, he writes about the executioners he encountered there:

“Many times I have met executioners. They were all well-developed men with common sense and intelligence, but also with inordinate self-love and even pride...”³

He concludes:

“These are people who, like tigers, are greedy for blood. Those who have possessed unlimited power over the flesh, blood, and soul of their fellow creatures—those who have possessed such power and have been able to degrade another human being in the most extreme way—are incapable of restraining their desires. ... *I declare that the best man in the world can become hardened and brutalized to such a point that nothing will distinguish him from a wild beast.*”⁴

2. *The Rejection of Man as Animal Rationale*

The next step in Dostoevsky's thought is the rejection of the classical definition of man as *animal rationale*. The following passage

³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), Part I.—*Editor's note*.

⁴ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the House of the Dead*, trans. David McDuff (London: Penguin Classics, 1985), Part I.—*Editor's note*.

from *Notes from Underground* is particularly illuminating. The hero of these letters, after having described the state of perfect harmony and reasonableness supposedly reached by mankind after so much effort and sacrifice, says:

“All human actions will then be tabulated according to these laws, mathematically, like tables of logarithms, up to 108,000, and entered in an index; or, better still, certain edifying works of the present kind will be published ... so that there will be no more actions or adventures in the world. ... And after so many centuries of labor, all this will be so arranged that man will at last know his interests exactly, and there will be no more incidents or adventures.”⁵

And later:

“I should not be surprised if, amidst all this order and regularity, sometime in the future there should suddenly arise some curmudgeon—or rather some cynical and sneering gentleman—who, with his arms akimbo, will say to us: ‘Now then, you fellows, what about smashing all this order to bits, sending these logarithms to the devil, and living according to your own silly will?’ That might not be much, but the annoying thing is that he would immediately get plenty of followers.”⁶

Later the following passage comes:

“Where then have all these wiseacres found that man’s will should primarily be governed by reason? Why have they imagined that man needs a will directed toward reason and his own benefit? All he needs is an independent will, whatever it may cost him and wherever it may lead him. And why are you gentlemen so firmly convinced that only that which is normal and positive—in a word, his well-being—is good for man? Is reason never deceived about what is beneficial? Is it not possible that, besides loving his own welfare, man may also love suffering—indeed, may be passionately fond of it?”⁷

⁵ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, §§8–9.—*Editor’s note.*

⁶ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor’s note.*

⁷ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor’s note.*

3. *Freedom as the Key to Man*

This leads Dostoevsky to his central anthropological insight: *man can be understood only in the light of freedom*. This is both his greatness and his weakness, his capacity and his incapacity.

But how does freedom manifest itself in human existence? Dostoevsky pushes this question to its extreme—for example in *Demons* (*The Possessed*). He is not interested in conventional discussions of freedom as the ability to choose between trivial alternatives. Instead he raises the ultimate existential question: Is man free to affirm himself as the lord of creation?

It is this question that reveals whether freedom can be real, ultimate freedom. The answer is that man certainly does feel deep within himself this desire, but it is precisely here that he is confronted with God. God appears in Dostoevsky's works *not as a presupposed and pre-existing entity*, but as a *postulate of existence itself*, and this is tested in the realm of *freedom*.

As Ivan Karamazov says, man is free to “respectfully return the ticket”⁸ to God and to disagree utterly with the actual existence of the world. Man is free to think that he could manage the world better if it were left to himself. Yet the existential implications of denying God amount to man's self-destruction. Kirillov in *Demons* expresses this radical logic:

“God is nothing else than pain and fear of death. He who conquers suffering and fear of death will become God himself. Then there will be new life, a new man. ... Everything will be renewed. The whole of history is divided into two parts: the first from the gorilla to the destruction of God; the second from the destruction of God to the transformation of the earth and man. Everyone who wants to attain complete freedom must be daring enough to kill himself. ... This is the final limit of freedom; that is all, there is nothing beyond it. Whoever dares to kill himself becomes God. Everyone can do this and thus cause God to cease to

⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), Book V, chap. 4 (“Rebellion”).—*Editor's note*.

exist, and then nothing will exist at all. But this has never yet been done, and therefore the world continues to be...”⁹

Kirillov is firmly convinced that if God and eternal life are only the fruits of man’s imagination, then by committing suicide man achieves not only his own final self-annihilation but also destroys the whole universe. Thus, the same man who proudly claims that he can shape a better creation than God ends with the desire to smash up everything; his desire for self-sufficiency ultimately leads him to self-destruction.

Thus, the ultimate dilemma that freedom poses for man is this: either self-annihilation or the acceptance of the suffering that exists in this world.

4. Freedom and the Acceptance of Suffering

Now we may well dismiss this in a pathological way: we would say that we would never speak in such terms. Why should we go that far? The scandal that Dostoevsky poses for our Western minds is this: why should we accept suffering in order to be free? Why cannot we maintain both freedom and the elimination of suffering?

This question seems, in my view, to underlie the well-known scene of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. What is this scene about? In that scene Christ appears before the Inquisitor and faces perhaps the most profound criticism ever directed against Christianity. The accusation is simple: What have you done to the world with this idea of freedom? The only thing you have achieved, the Inquisitor argues, is to make people unhappy, for they simply cannot be free, because they are men and not gods. We—the Church—had to correct you on this point and try to preserve at least some followers for you. For who would remain your follower if your idea of freedom had prevailed? And the method we used? Simply by eliminating—or by trying to eliminate—suffering. Now Dostoevsky is convinced that what is usually said about

⁹ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), Part III, chap. 6.—*Editor’s note*.

freedom from suffering expresses not the ontological but the merely “normal” side of man.¹⁰

The mystery of freedom as the acceptance of suffering presents itself to Dostoevsky not as a doctrine but as a basic aspect of human existence. He believes that man is fond of suffering, “*even passionately fond of it.*”

“I am sure that man will never renounce genuine suffering, even if it brings him ruin and chaos. ... Suffering is the one and only source of true knowledge; adversity is the mainspring of self-realization.”¹¹

Christ, for Dostoevsky, is the man par excellence, because He remains free from every attempt to eliminate suffering; He accepts suffering. This is not a sentimentalism about suffering nor an idealization of it. For Dostoevsky, this link between freedom and suffering is an existential necessity that no one can break. His Grand Inquisitor is not merely a symbol of the Roman Catholic medieval tradition but applies equally well to humanity in every age. Indeed, it fits quite clearly into the picture of socialism as it developed after his death. The axiom that freedom and the elimination of suffering cannot coexist is explained by the Inquisitor when he says:

“No science will give men bread so long as they remain free; they will understand themselves that freedom and bread enough for all are inconceivable together. For never, never will they be able to have both. They will be convinced that they can never be free, for they are weak, vicious, worthless, and rebellious.”

In *The Possessed*, Shatov develops the theory that absolute freedom will inevitably lead to absolute despotism. He prophetically describes how every member of a collective society will be ordered to spy on all the others and to denounce the guilty to the government. Then everyone will belong to all, and all to everyone.

Dostoevsky, in inseparably linking freedom and suffering, points to an anthropology that is utterly paradoxical. The paradox

¹⁰ The author refers to pages 296, 297, 298, and 300 of his Dostoevsky source.—*Editor's note.*

¹¹ Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, Part I, chap. 7.—*Editor's note.*

lies in the fact that man's glory, which is his freedom, is revealed in his shame, which is suffering. Dostoevsky does not develop the theological explanations of this paradox, but it certainly reminds us of the glory of the Cross. Here Dostoevsky offers one of the most maximalist anthropologies ever conceived. For he refuses to admit that man is incapable of freedom. The interesting thing is that, in doing so, he shows that both the Nietzschean Superman and the Marxist faith in man strangely share a minimalist anthropology: both ultimately accept man's impotence when it comes to full freedom.

For Dostoevsky, both are based on a fundamental contempt for man. He calls them either naive or liars, for they refuse to acknowledge—and perhaps do not wish to admit—that suffering is so much the substratum of existence, so deeply intrinsic to sin, that it is impossible to eliminate it while preserving freedom. For Dostoevsky there is only one way left open to man, namely, to embrace suffering. Thus, suffering becomes the point of man's glory: freedom to accept suffering, freedom from the fear of suffering—this is the only freedom that truly exists for man.

For theologians this may raise the question of how this is to be explained in terms of Christology, and much could indeed be said about that. But for Dostoevsky there is one method by which a fact is established and demonstrated—what I would call the method of possibility. Dostoevsky does not proceed in such a way that we might ask him, “*But why should it be so?*” His language is not the language of “ought to be,” but simply the language of “is.” Thus his point about suffering is that man, deep in his existence, loves it. Not only does he like to impose it on others, but he is also willing to undergo it himself. Culture does nothing more than cover this fact up. At the first opportunity, this love of suffering reveals itself.

5. Two Possible Paths

What Dostoevsky seems to imply is that in actual human existence there are simply two possibilities, one of which must be ruled out because it leads nowhere.

(a) *Freedom without Suffering.* One possibility is that humanity attempts to eliminate suffering while preserving freedom. This possibility must be ruled out unless freedom itself is relativized. Modern societies are facing precisely this problem, and the slogan is well known: unless we sacrifice something of our freedom, we can have no freedom at all. But Dostoevsky would not call what we actually possess real freedom, for freedom is not a quantitative reality that can exist partially. It is either all or nothing.

This appears to suggest an absolute individualism as the only alternative. It seems to imply that man is called to rebel and never conform to society. It might therefore make Dostoevsky appear an impossible figure for Marxism and communistic socialism. For he seems acceptable when he appeals to freedom that makes people rebel, but he becomes problematic when, by the same appeal, he appears to be anti-social.

Where, then, does Dostoevsky's position truly lie? This question is related to the second possibility, which for Dostoevsky is the only real possibility left open to man.

(b) *Freedom through Suffering.* The second possibility is that man uses his freedom by eliminating the fear of suffering, by recognizing a blessing in suffering, and by being able to say "yes" to suffering.

This seems to threaten our ideals of civilization, for these ideals are largely based on the effort to eliminate suffering. In this respect Dostoevsky fits neither into Marxism nor into the free Western society. He remains a stranger to both. He claims to have Christ with him—and perhaps a few monks, the starets, whom he used to visit so often. Whether he is right in making this claim or not is something that theology must decide.

And this is certainly the most acute challenge that Dostoevsky presents to theology: Where does Christ stand in this situation? Is He with Dostoevsky—or not?

V. Any Future for Man?

All that we have said so far may seem to suggest that Dostoevsky was concerned simply with a diagnosis of human existence, not

with a solution to the problem it creates. If his idea of absolute freedom so radically denies the titanic efforts of Western civilization—as well as the idea that God is there to assist human efforts toward development—what, then, is the future of man according to him? Is there any future for man?

Is Dostoevsky not a pessimist? Dostoevsky's idea of the human future is as strong and emphatic as his diagnosis of the present problem of man. It is an idea centered around the problem of *death*.

1. This problem held a particular fascination for Dostoevsky's mind. He had the unusual experience of facing it directly when, as a young man, he stood on the scaffold expecting his life to end within a few moments. He also glimpsed several times behind its veil during his attacks of epilepsy. He made many attempts to convey to his readers his vision of death. Yet, as he writes in his last letters—and as he puts into the mouths of many of his heroes—the right words and gestures for expressing this vision were always lacking.

2. Dostoevsky believed deeply that the only way to bring about any kind of future for humanity is to overcome death. He believed that death is bound up with man's sinful self, and that overcoming sin and overcoming death are almost identical realities.

3. Was this utopianism or not? This was the question Dostoevsky wrestled with in all his major novels, but he gave his most definite answer only in his final novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The decisive influence on Dostoevsky's attitude toward death in this novel seems to have been a manuscript sent to him in 1877 by a priest named Peterson,¹² containing ideas written by the famous Russian thinker Nikolai Fedorov (1828–1903). The text to which Dostoevsky enthusiastically subscribed includes the following:

“We ascribe to God's thought the creation of limited beings and in their abandonment forever to the present unsatisfactory

¹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letter to N. P. Peterson*, April 1878, in Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Letters*, ed. and trans. David Lowe (New York: Ardis, 1988).—*Editor's note*.

conditions. The creation of imperfect beings does not require, however, either omnipotence or omniscience, or even absolute love. ... Nothing positive is achieved by the mere removal of mortal beings from this world, which remains mortal. ... *The true task is to transform nature in such a way as to make it instrumental in the general resurrection.* [The Kingdom of God, or Paradise, must be the creation of men themselves. It can only be the fruit of their natural knowledge, of their deep feelings, and of their utmost energy, all directed toward the fulfilment of God's will. They can achieve it not in isolation, but only through their corporate efforts, through the whole of humanity acting together]. *Christianity is the union of the living for the resurrection of the dead; it is the fellowship of love of those who eat and drink with the purpose of bringing back to the sacred meal all the departed. We eat and drink in order to be able to restore the dead to life.* Christ, at the time of His departure, linked together remembrance and love for Him (and thus for all the departed) with eating—with the action that gives life and strength for work. He commanded all the living to gather together around the feast of love—of love for Him and for all the departed—a love that directs all its energy toward making it possible to see and hear them again, together with all the other departed.”¹³

In response to this, Dostoevsky writes to Peterson:

“It is unquestionably our duty to raise our ancestors to life. The resurrection will be real and personal. The gulf separating us from the souls of our ancestors will be bridged. Those who have been defeated by death will triumph, and they will rise up—not only metaphorically in our consciousness, but actually, individually, in their bodies.”

Both in *The Possessed* and in *The Adolescent*, Dostoevsky's heroes raise the question: Can man overcome the power of sin and death? But it is only in *The Brothers Karamazov* that the answer is given emphatically. Father Zosima says there: “We do not under-

¹³ Nikolai Fyodorov, *The Philosophy of the Common Task*, trans. and ed. George M. Young (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).—*Editor's note.*

stand that life is a paradise; it suffices only to wish to understand it, and at once paradise will appear before us in all its beauty.”¹⁴ Thus this is significant for Dostoevsky’s own development and thought: his greatest and final work ends with a triumphant affirmation of the glory and certainty of the general resurrection:

“Karamazov,” cried Kolia, “can it be true what’s taught in religion—that we shall all rise again from the dead, and that we shall live and see each other again, all of us—Ilyusha too?”

“Certainly we shall rise again; certainly we shall see each other and shall tell each other with joy and gladness all that has happened,” Alyosha answered, half laughing, half with tears.¹⁵

The meal, as the event which existentially prolongs our life in living communion—according to an old Orthodox custom—follows the funeral and once again gives the impetus and courage for eternal life.

A few concluding reflections and questions may help clarify the implications of what has been said:

How are we to understand and appreciate Dostoevsky? Certainly, in many ways he has proven to be prophetic (communism, world wars, and other upheavals). This is due to his genius for penetrating deeply into human nature.

Was he a naive or even a disturbed visionary? What can account for his faith in the resurrection of the body? How are we to understand his critique of the idea of a human paradise offered by the West, while he himself seems to believe in the possibility of such a paradise and in our task to work toward it? Was he, perhaps, a kind of Christian socialist?

Finally, the overall question arises: Was Dostoevsky drawing his vision from a vision of man as he actually is and becomes, or was he in fact doing the opposite?

This amounts to the question: Was Dostoevsky perhaps a theologian—a theologian in the true sense of the word?

¹⁴ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book VI, chap. 3.—*Editor’s note.*

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Book XII, chap. 13.—*Editor’s note.*

VII. Concluding Remarks

How then are we to understand Dostoevsky? Certainly, in many ways he has proved to be a prophet (communism, world wars, etc.). All this justifies his distrust of the idealistic, culture-centered Western European view of man. This alone would suffice to make us take Dostoevsky seriously in his understanding of human nature.

But how can we fully agree with him? There seem to be at least two main questions that arise and that make it difficult to accept Dostoevsky's position without reservation.

(a) How can we avoid thinking of his heroes—and perhaps of himself as well—as pathological types? How can we recognize ourselves in them? The difficulty is as real as when we try to find meaning in much of modern existentialist art: the appearance sometimes does not resemble what we know to be man. We tend to think primarily in terms of the form we possess through our culture; we are conditioned by it. Is it possible for us to demythologize man from his culture? Only if we do this can we finally decide whether Dostoevsky was right or wrong in his understanding of man.

(b) The second problem: How can we make practical sense of Dostoevsky's view of the future of man? Is the whole thing not merely wishful thinking? Is it not simply the case that his understanding of freedom is mistaken, and that because of this we are forced into a utopian view of the future?

The answer is by no means easy. Yet it is certainly true that there is a profound consistency between Dostoevsky's understanding of freedom and his vision of man's future. Dostoevsky is caught up in a vision of man that calls for extra-human factors in order to be resolved. Dostoevsky's God is a God of existential necessity, and unless he was entirely mistaken about human freedom, Dostoevsky's conception of man becomes inconceivable without Christ.



Theologizing as Interlocution: The Cross-Pollination of John Zizioulas’ and Colin Gunton’s Eschatological Trinitarian Reasoning

NAJIB GEORGE AWAD

Abstract

This essay focuses on the cross-pollination between John Zizioulas’ eschatological-trinitarian ontology and Colin Gunton’s trinitarian theology, and endeavors to unearth in Colin Gunton’s legacy some focal concurrences as well as central discrepancies between the two theologians on this aspect. These similarities and nuances indicate Gunton’s and Zizioulas’ genuine interaction, attentive interlocution, and profound correlation to each other’s literature and discourses. In the interlocution of these two giant trinitarian theoreticians we have the profound theological lesson that to reason the Trinity theologically means to image the Trinity as such in one’s personal reasoning and theologizing activities and manners. By putting this reasoning in the light of the eschatological Kingdom, it opens the horizon for future-based reflection and creative syntheses.

Keywords: Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, eschatology, trinitarian ontology, patro-causal linearity, perichoretic trinitarian teleology, cross-pollination

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I. Introduction

In April 2003, the sudden passing away of Colin Gunton, the Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College University of London, deeply shocked and saddened his colleagues, students, and friends and left a huge gap in trinitarian theological circles in the anglophone, Protestant (Reformed) world. In February 2023, the Christian theological world further witnessed the death of Gunton's ex-colleague and life-long friend, John Zizioulas. With the departure of the Metropolitan of Pergamon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople since 1986, the theological, Greek Orthodox world lost one of the most profound, renowned, and influential trinitarian thinkers in the Orthodox scene during the last decades of the twentieth century. After the absence of these two trinitarian authorities, many studies were conducted on each author's theological legacies, as had been done during their lifetimes. However, theological libraries lack sufficient comparative analysis and examination of these two theologians' cross-pollinational interlocution on the doctrine of the Trinity, which they conducted throughout their long-lasting friendship. Other than sporadic, incidental comments, as well as two publications wherein I pursued briefly such a comparison, no comprehensive, coherent, fully-fledged forensic assessment has yet been developed on the impact which these two theological fellows, and consistent close interlocutors, left on their mutual theological trinitarian reasoning.

In this essay, I continue a comparative trajectory I started treading on a few years ago but could not continue for various circumstances. It focuses on the cross-pollination between John Zizioulas' trinitarian discourse and Gunton's trinitarian theology, and endeavors to unearth in these theologians' legacy some focal concurrences as well as central discrepancies. These similarities and nuances indicate Gunton's and Zizioulas' genuine interaction, attentive interlocution, and profound correlation with each other's literature and discourses. The essay focuses primarily on the impact Zizioulas made on the thinking of Colin Gunton. Due to space limitations, the essay leaves the traveling on the other track of the impact of Gunton on Zizioulas' legacy to another study on

a different occasion. On the other hand, the essay does not aspire to chasing after Zizioulas' influence over all of Gunton's published texts. It rather looks specifically at one of his latest monographs that was published only one year before his passing away. This volume is titled, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. No one has yet paused at this latest literature, or at least studied it from the perspective of Zizioulas' impact on Gunton's systematic structuring of doctrinal interpretation.

This essay, firstly, demonstrates the affinity between Gunton and Zizioulas that is made manifest in the systematic framework and hermeneutic strategy which Gunton uses and develops in the forementioned monograph. The essay then moves into highlighting a basic nuance between Gunton and Zizioulas in order to contest a claim made by a group of Western scholars during the past few years: that Gunton fully embraced Zizioulas' trinitarian ontological interpretation, and echoed its ideas without any reservation, in total praise, and almost slavishly. The essay endeavors to demonstrate that this slavish echoing of Zizioulas' legacy is not quite accurate since the interlocution between the two intellectuals was genuinely cross-pollinational and reciprocal in nature, and cross-pollination presumes distinctions and nuances between the two interlocuting sides. The essay will, finally, end with a post-script related to the potential impact Gunton might have also left on Zizioulas' own trinitarian thinking. This will briefly, and in a postlude-like manner, pave the way for this trajectory without engaging any exhaustive or detailed digging through it.

II. Hither and Thither between Barth's Terrain and Zizioulas' Territory

In his contribution to the 2010 anthological *Festschrift* for Colin Gunton, the Barthian theologian, John Webster, starts his essay with the following comment on Gunton's relatedness to Karl Barth:

Karl Barth was an enormously important figure in Gunton's intellectual formation, and a reference point in nearly all his mature work; even when he felt duty bound to part

company with Barth (which was increasingly often as the years went by), he usually did so with the acknowledgment of the magisterial character of Barth's achievement.¹

Webster's erudite perception of Gunton's gradual parting ways with Karl Barth is quite telling indeed. It invites us to ponder seriously the fact that, despite his genuine indebtedness to Barth's legacy, Gunton was not exactly as staunchly Barthian as some of his other compatriot theologians, like Thomas Torrance and John Webster (whom Colin knew closely). One of the reasons behind Gunton's qualified or diluted Barthianism lies in the fact that Gunton constructed his theological reasoning in consistent tandem with three other theological giants who were his friends and intimate interlocutors throughout his (and their) professional theological life: Christoph Schwöbel, Robert Jenson, and John Zizioulas. It is the particular impact of the Greek Orthodox theologian in this *trio*, I reckon, that specifically contributed to the balancing of the Barthian impact on Gunton's mind. This was achieved by means of a genuine and profound attention to the Eastern patristic and conciliar Trinitarian mind (especially the Cappadocian Fathers' legacy). This legacy equally inspired Zizioulas and Gunton of the hermeneutic centrality in theological thinking of notions like "communion," "relationality," "interpenetration," "personhood," "otherness," and "particularity." Stephen Holmes eloquently expresses Gunton's attention to patristic trinitarianism throughout his career when he says: "In place of Aquinas' *analogia entis* or Barth's *analogia fide*, Gunton seems to be reaching towards an *analogia personae et relationis*."²

It is my conviction that this development is the outcome of Gunton's close and intensive interlocutions with his friend John Zizioulas. One of the central aspects wherein one can trace Zizioulas' impact on Gunton's theological thought in general is related

¹ John Webster, "Gunton and Barth," in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (T&T Clark International, 2012), 17.

² Stephen R. Holmes, "Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*: Developments in Gunton's Trinitarian Thinking," in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, 42.

to Gunton's later decision to move his theological reasoning on Christian doctrine from its earlier framework within the boundaries of Barth's revelation-centered criteria into a new, more crudely trinitarian grounding of doctrinal reasoning within a framework derived from patristic, creedal, and ontological thought. Gunton started to reinterpret the trinitarian nature of God's divine revelation by means of more explicitly relying on patristic trinitarian reasoning. He uses this logic instead of the Hegelian-like thought-form that Barth used in his *Church Dogmatics*. Gunton based this paradigm-shift on no other than the achievement and success of the Cappadocian Fathers' trinitarian discourses, which are now, according to Stephen Holmes' assertion, "understood to be exactly what Zizioulas has claimed [them] to be."³

In order to see how Gunton expanded his revelational understanding of theology by moving it into a broader epistemological framework that circles around patristic, creedal reasoning, I will invite us to look at one of the latest writings which Gunton left behind shortly before his sudden death. In 2002, Gunton produced an introductory volume on his reading of Christian Doctrine. This systematic, constructive discourse states from the outset Gunton's attempt to theologially explain and analyze the objective content of Christian faith as it was articulated in the patristic, creedal confession of faith. This is why he structures the main parts of the book in a trinitarian order that starts with the Father, proceeds to the Son, and then ends with the Holy Spirit. He also titles the triadic parts of the volume with statements extracted from the creedal confession of faith *per se*: Part 1 of the Father is titled "Maker of Heaven and Earth"; Part 2 of the Son is titled "His Only Son, Our Lord"; and Part 3 of the Holy Spirit is titled "And in the Holy Spirit." For Gunton, this creedal-trinitarian objectivity differs in theological reasoning from both the Hegelian dialectic triadic logic of "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" of Karth Barth and revelationist theology, on the one hand, and the subjective stance of the believer who upholds this faith in the herme-

³ Ibid., 34.

neutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and existentialist theology, on the other. Gunton expresses in *The Christian Faith*'s preface his belief that this methodological choice places his theology clearly on a theological trajectory that is totally different from the "universal subjective dimension of the human being," which "took its most influential form in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher at the beginning of the nineteenth century."⁴

According to Gunton, the most prominent and referential source for the content of faith is epistemologically the hermeneutics of divine revelation as they are unfolded in the patristic, trinitarian theology that is articulated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of faith. This confessional, hermeneutical strategy was made by the Church *for* the service of the community that believes in a God of a specific Triune divine nature; in a particular incarnate savior, Jesus Christ, who is a unique revelation of the triune God's personal and relational Being in history; and, finally, in a perfecting Holy Spirit who brings the trinitarian process of the "God-Creation" relation into its eschatological fulfillment. In other words, for Gunton, who has always been fond of Irenaeus' metaphor of "the two arms of God,"⁵ the doctrine of the Trinity and its two arms of Christology and pneumatology is the hermeneutical and epistemological foundation of ecclesiology and eschatology alike.

Such an Irenaean-like analogy is reminiscent of Zizioulas' similar speech about personhood (imaged in the Trinity) and communion (imaged in the Incarnation and in sanctification) as the founding pillars of ecclesiology and its eschatological completion. What Gunton pursues in his systemization is similar to Zizioulas' construction of his interpretation of communality on a frank (trinitarian) ontological preconception that witnesses its fulfillment in the eschatological future of the Kingdom of perfect communion. Gunton similarly orders and constructs his textual dis-

⁴ Colin G. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), viii.

⁵ Irenaeus of Lyon, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. J. P. Smith (Longmans, Green & Co, 1952).

course on Christian doctrine on the basis of a trinitarian, creedal form of ontological reasoning that seeks fulfillment in the completion of God's eschatological perfection of Creation. He displays the content of faith as a whole in the form of a building: the building's foundation is the confession which Creation declares of its triune, relational Creator.⁶ The building's body is the communal relatedness (mediatorial, for Gunton) to God's history of salvation (*Heilsgeschichte*) in the person of the divine incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.⁷ Finally, the whole building's decoration and the perfection of its entire erection that completes the economic project of God's relation to Creation, lies in the Churchly, ontological manifestation that the One who erected the building through the Son is continuously residing in it and is relationally involved in the life of its residents. He fulfills this vis-à-vis the sanctifying and glorifying agency of the Holy Spirit. The overall picture which Gunton paints depicts the core-meaning of the patristic trinitarian confession.⁸ Nothing expresses Gunton's rootedness in such building and structuring metaphors than his assertion that "to create is to establish."⁹

Gunton's creation of a framework grounded on patristic, creedal trinitarian ontology, and his constructive interpretation of the Christian faith with triadic logic exceeds any narrow Hegelian dialectic or revelation-centered perspective. It equally withstands postmodernist theological trends, like the one of George Lindbeck, who construes the creeds of patristic confession as mere subjectivist discourses that are reflective of a socio-linguistic enterprise produced by a certain religious community within a certain conditioning context.¹⁰ Gunton's systematic approach to faith on the basis of the creedal trinitarian order revives epistemology by means of a serious attention to ontology. This is something

⁶ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 3–55.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57–116.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 117–172.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Goerge A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

Zizioulas similarly follows in his balancing of praxical ecclesiology with trinitarian, communion-based ontology. In Gunton's version of this balancing approach, we encounter a resuscitation of the degraded and marginalized confessional, proclamational, and eschatological nature of the creedal trinitarian faith that is essentially grounded in the belief in a truth that has been bequeathed to us *from without* our mind. This truth was revealed so that the community of faith can express, reflect upon, and re-articulate its reality as a response to the encounter with God *from within*; that is, from the depth of a personal-relational human manifestation of the *imago trinitatis*. It is this ontological-trinitarian foundation that drives Gunton, as it drives Zizioulas in his eschatological ecclesiology, to avoid departing epistemologically from the present human condition of the Church's community, or not to fall into purely imagining a triadic activity proceeding hypothetically within the mind alone. Both theologians similarly start, instead, from this community's confession and future promise of the imaging of the community's triune *arche* and encountering the divine triune Godhead as three *hypostases*, not just three modalist forms of a singular divine reality.

Neither Gunton nor Zizioulas ignore the Church's present, historical role, context, responsiveness, awareness, and expressiveness, which constitute the "from-within" dimension of relationality. They emphasize this dimension in the service of concentrating on the *eschaton* or "over-realized eschatology," as John Zizioulas has been cited as doing since 1989.¹¹ What Zizioulas and Gunton

¹¹ Zizioulas was first criticized about this in the 1989 monograph of Gaetan Baillargeon, *Perspectives orthodoxes sur L'Eglise Communion: L'oeuvre de Jean Zizioulas* (Editions Paulines, 1989), 256. Afterwards, other authors rearticulated a similar criticism. See for example: Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 101; and Edward Russell, "Reconsidering Relational Anthropology," in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5/2 (2003): 181–182. In response to these critiques, Nikolas Asproulis has recently suggested that Zizioulas' prioritized eschatological reality in his writings do not overshadow the church's historical identity and life. Zizioulas does this, Asproulis suggests, because he "feels that the most important question at hand is choosing which reality inside the church should take precedence in terms of theological *method*." (Nikolas Asproulis, *Theologically Reading Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas: Orthodox, Ecumenical and Modern* [Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025], 125).

do, rather, is to harbor this present from-within-ness state of being in its natural *habitat*; namely the creedal, trinitarian eschatological-ontological promise, or the relation between the third divine *hypostasis* of the Holy Trinity and the *ecclesia* of faith. That eschatological perception of ontology is something Gunton and Zizioulas equally endorsed and frequently expressed. It is what makes Zizioulas, for instance, speak about experiencing the trinitarian ontological promise as a movement “from the end to the present” and about the *Parousia* or eschatology as “*the remembrance of the future that dominated the remembrance of the past. The past was remembered via the future.*”¹²

It is noticeable that, in the third part of his monograph, *The Christian Faith*, Gunton talks about the relation of the Christian incarnation of trinitarian communion (the Church) with human society vis-à-vis the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Zizioulas follows the same track in different parts of his major book, *Being as Communion*.¹⁴ Both theologians are equally convinced that the relation with the person of the Holy Spirit never snatches the community of faith away from its temporal, human, and rational embodiment as a community in history. This is something Gunton spoke about at length, and in great depth, in his 1993 significant monograph, *The One, the Three and the Many*. There, he touched upon this in-history perception by means of developing a trinitarian ontological interpretation of the “one-many” equation and its manifestation in modernity and postmodernity, pondering this within the framework of a trinitarian and pneumatological perception of worldliness.¹⁵ Zizioulas also elaborates on this, yet in a far more doctrinal, almost mystical-ontological, accent, when he gives the historical and existential reality of personhood eschatological, metaphysical, and relational dimensions that

¹² John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology*, ed. Maxim Vasiljevic (St. Sebastian Press, 2023), 11, 17 [Original emphasis].

¹³ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 157–171.

¹⁴ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), 154–158, 181–203, 257–260.

¹⁵ Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180–231.

never de-historize human communion. He, rather, eschatologizes this communion in a trinitarian, personal-relational manner.¹⁶ It seems to be the case that Zizioulas was the one who inspired Gunton to understand human historical personhood as an eschatological state of being, an eschatological state of hypostatization, the perfection of which lies in Creation's final and perfect relatedness to the personal-communal reality of the immanent Trinity, through the process of the eternal perfection of Creation.¹⁷

Gunton walks in Zizioulas' eschatological and pneumatological shoes when in *The Christian Faith* he unfolds his conviction that the Holy Spirit harbors the community of faith in the bay of the triune God's immanent personal-relational reality that is eschatological and processive in nature. The Spirit performs this by grounding the community in its human, historical, existential, and relational contexts. The Spirit leads the community of faith to activate its subjective communal self-perception by means of God's powerful domination over death.¹⁸ The subjectivist dimension of the human self before, or in front of, the objective relational reality of God's salvation and trinitarian, hypostatic self-emptiness is now confessed by the triune God *per se*. It is revealed in God's insistence on the high value of human existence, if not all Creation's existence. This is the backbone of Gunton's promotion of the belief that the crux of the *Evangelion*, or the *Kerygma*, as such is not submission or judgment, but "life."¹⁹ This stress on human life in all its dimensions, bases, and contexts is Gunton's manner of relating that the subjective dimension of faith, exemplified in the idea

¹⁶ See, for instance, John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 171–208.

¹⁷ Holmes, "Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*," 44. See also Colin Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, eds. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton, (T&T Clark, 1991), 60. Gunton here refers to what Zizioulas says in the very same collection of essays. See John Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 33–46.

¹⁸ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 157–165. See also John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (T&T Clark, 2006), 263–269.

¹⁹ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 147–151, 161–165.

of “life,” is basic and undeniable in the building of faith. It plays its intended role in this building process only when it is located in its accurate place; that is, after, and not before, the objective personal-relational ontological reality of the triune God’s salvific re-creation of life after His image as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Be that as it may, patristic, creedal trinitarian ontology for Gunton, as for Zizioulas, is the theologico-hermeneutic foundational response made by the human community that has been first brought from death to life by a wholly other, hypostatic trinitarian God. Human communal existence, churchly and societal alike, is a reflection of the personal community of the Trinity’s eternal divine life that created Creation’s contingent life in its own image. Faith, therefore, is not ultimately an expression of relational epistemology. It is primarily an imaging of a *confessional, ecclesiological ontology* standing within an eschatological framework. It proclaims a trinitarian God, whose nature as “being in/as communion” is the basic framework for what is the real image of life, as well as the true theological reasoning about this life’s eschatological nature. It is not the language that is used by the Church that created the notions of faith about who is God. On the contrary, “the common and inherited stock of language was drawn upon in the interest of a notion of Creation as personal divine action.”²⁰ God’s personal-relational triune nature is the epistemological and ontological inspiring source that makes us express God’s actions in personalist language. Here lies not only the particularity of the Biblical, socio-linguistic discourse about God, but mainly the particularity of the truth of God’s being in communion.

In both Gunton’s and Zizioulas’ trinitarian ontological epistemology, the track of theological reasoning is from the future of God’s trinitarian relationality into the present of the universe’s belief, not the other way round: from God’s relational being that was promised in Scripture and its patristic, creedal interpretations, into the human present personal-communal confession and imaging of that being-ness. This methodological approach in *The*

²⁰ Ibid., 4.

Christian Faith monograph is demonstrative of Gunton's following in the footsteps of Zizioulas' methodological choices that are manifest in the latter's *Being as Communion*. Every section in both monographs begins with interpretations of God's ontological, triune personhood and actions, and then ensues with unpacking the doctrinal implications of every item concerning humanity's relatedness to God's revelation. This framework is both Gunton's and Zizioulas' strategy for broadening and exceeding the revelation-centered, *analogia fide*, approach. But it is also their strategy for withstanding the whole postmodern anthropocentric, language-centered and deontological frameworks, where the starting point lies not, actually, in the content of belief that results from a relation the human makes with the divine as a recipient of a revealed truth from-without. It, rather, treats that content as the anthropological, linguistic basis of a personal religious attitude.

III. Exceeding Zizioulas' Patro-Causal Trinitarian Ontology

Colin Gunton's systematic construction of Christian doctrine's exegetical discourses via an eschatologically-shaped trinitarian, creedal reading game and hermeneutic strategy demonstrates, as I proposed, his affinity with John Zizioulas' equally eschatologically framed, patristic, trinitarian ontological reasoning framework. All of Gunton's friends, students, and colleagues, therefore, took this affinity on board, and chased after its traces throughout Gunton's career in his publications. They have paused particularly at Gunton's bashing of Augustine and alternatively embracing the trinitarian logic of the Cappadocian Fathers. Gunton adopted Zizioulas' attention to the Cappadocians' granting of an ontological weight to the notions of "person" and "relation." He gleaned from Zizioulas that the Cappadocians used these notions to conjure a new understanding of God's "is-ness" and, by analogy, of human "is-ness" as well. Gunton piercingly studied and used the Cappadocians' trinitarian ontology that is believed to treat God "as communion" (a Zizioulan phrase par excellence, yet not necessarily

fully Cappadocian²¹). On this particular impact of Zizioulas on Gunton, the latter's life-long friend, Robert Jensen, says the following:

Gunton cites with satisfaction a letter usually attributed to Basil of Caesarea: God *is* “a sort of continuous and indivisible community.” How much of this Gunton took from his sometime colleague at King's, John Zizioulas, and how much of it he would have come to in any case, is probably impossible to determine—and of course it makes no important difference.²²

Stephen Holmes, an ex-student and another colleague of Gunton at King's College University of London, has also noticed Gunton's attention to Zizioulas' Cappadocian trinitarian ontology. In Holmes' opinion, Gunton's exceeding of Barth's shortcoming on the trinitarian concept of “person” and on personhood reflects nothing but Gunton's “simple celebration of the conclusions of John Zizioulas,” and his “unsurprising” praise of the Cappadocian Fathers, whose achievement “is understood to be exactly what Zizioulas has claimed it to be.”²³ According to Holmes, Gunton's unqualified and full-scale adoption of Zizioulas' account of Cappadocian theology is a mark of inconsistency and contradiction in Gunton's theological thinking. It makes him embrace with energy and passion, Holmes alleges, “positions that he had himself criticized as verging on the tritheistic not many years earlier.”²⁴

The impression that Holmes' insinuations leave on the reader is that Gunton suddenly decided to contradict his own earlier convictions and become a wholesale and slavish Zizioulan voice after he opted for embracing without any reservation the latter's

²¹ On the nuances within the discourses of the Cappadocian Fathers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzus regarding this, see Najib George Awad, “Between Subordination and Koinonia: Toward a New Reading of the Cappadocian Theology,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 181–204.

²² Robert W. Jensen, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton's Thinking,” in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, 12.

²³ Holmes, “Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*,” 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Cappadocian trinitarian understanding of personhood and relationality. In the remaining lines of this section, I will concur with Jenson's more balanced perception of the affinity between Gunton and Zizioulas, yet I will equally beg to differ from Holmes' rather unfair allegation of Gunton's total and full-scale echoing and praising of Zizioulas' reading of the Cappadocians' trinitarian ontology. In order to do that, it is necessary to make a short detour to Zizioulas' mentioned reading, despite the fact that I already did this in detail quite a few years ago.²⁵

Zizioulas, as all know, develops his "being *as* communion" thesis vis-à-vis implementing the Cappadocian trinitarian ontology in the service of developing an ecclesiological understanding of personhood, "in which he construes the church as the image of the triune personhood of God that ultimately lies in the concept of 'communion.'"²⁶ Aiming to extend the boundaries of the anthropology and theology of personhood, Zizioulas "grounds the concepts of 'communion' and 'relation' on an ontological foundation that lies in the trinitarian being of God."²⁷ Zizioulas philosophically and ontologically constructed this "communion-and-personhood-based" ecclesiological anthropology by means of conceptually identifying "person" and "relation" (person *as* relation), which he claimed to have derived from the Cappadocian Fathers who, according to him, identified the notion of "being" with the concept of "relationship," making "relation" definitive and constitutive of being-ness.²⁸ According to Zizioulas, "the Cappadocians represent a step beyond other Greek and Latin trinitarian theologies in that they successfully found a formula by which they spoke about the *ad intra trinitatis* distinction in God without splitting His being into plural substances ... They did this by

²⁵ Najib George Awad, *God Without a Face? On the Personal Individuation of the Holy Spirit* (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 108–111, 172–182; and Najib G. Awad, "Personhood as Particularity: John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton and the Trinitarian Theology of Personhood," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (2010): 1–22.

²⁶ Awad, "Personhood as Particularity," 3. The ensuing lines on Zizioulas are derived from my earlier, aforementioned essays.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3; Awad, *God Without a Face?* 172.

²⁸ Awad, "Personhood as Particularity," 4–5; Awad, *God Without a Face?* 173ff.

completely identifying essence with relation and life with substance, so that ‘to be’ and ‘to be in relation’ become one and the same thing.”²⁹

It is within this circle of reasoning that Zizioulas developed his other, rather controversial, concentric patro-causal reading of Cappadocian trinitarian ontology. A major theme in Zizioulas’ reading of the Cappadocians is his claim that “the particularity factor in relation to the divine person’s identity should be understood causatively in the trinity *ad intra*.”³⁰ Zizioulas gleaned this basically from his reading of the discourses of Basil of Caesarea. From Basil of Caesarea, Zizioulas extracted the conviction that divine causality in the immanent Trinity furnishes a patro-centric process within the circle of relatedness between the three *hypostases*, as it delineates a similar “Father-centered” causality in the historical, economic Trinity. On this basis, Zizioulas adopted a full-scale belief that, in the *ad intra trinitatis*, “everything that originally initiates from the Father passes through the Son and comes finally to us by the Holy Spirit, who is third in order in the economic trinity.”³¹ Zizioulas advocates this patro-causal logic in the following words:

If this person is not Father alone, it is impossible to maintain the divine unity or oneness without taking resort into the ultimacy of substance in ontology, i.e., without subjecting freedom to necessity and person to substance.³²

Based on his reading of the Cappadocian literature, Zizioulas goes so far as to assert that the *hypostasis* of the Father “makes the one

²⁹ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 173–174. See also John Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of the Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution,” in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel, (T&T Clark, 1995), 45–47; and Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15–34.

³⁰ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 108. See also Zizioulas, “On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood,” in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 33–46.

³¹ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 108.

³² J. Zizioulas, “The Teaching of the 2nd Ecumenical Council on the Holy Spirit in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective,” in *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1983), 45.

divine substance be that which it is; the one God.”³³ This means that, for Zizioulas, “the Father *alone* ... is constitutive of God’s essence,” and “the Godhead should be defined by virtue of the Father alone, as the *hypostasis* of the Godhead, for the Son and the Spirit merely confirm this Godhead by pointing to the Father.”³⁴ In the monograph that was published in the same year of his passing away, *Remembering the Future*, Zizioulas jots down one of his probably most explicit patro-centric statements, which merits full-length citation:

God, the *ὁ ὅν*, is not the divine *ousia* but the hypostasis of the Father whose being is constituted as Trinity, since being the Father implies his relationship with the Son and the Spirit, that is, an understanding of being as communion ... If death is conceived as the collapse of communion and the dissolution of beings into substances, the *ὁ ὅν* can never die, not because he is an eternal substance ... but because he is the Father whose being is by definition relational.³⁵

This statement demonstrates that, for Zizioulas, the Father is not only the source of the Godhead or the arche of the divine essence. He makes the Father the ultimate and primary representative of “the Trinity.” This is not just patro-centric logic—it is also, and more intriguingly, patro-monistic logic *par excellence*. The divine essence is no more exactly “Father, Son, and Spirit,” nor is it exactly triune. It seems to be turned now into a “Father relating to him-

³³ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

³⁴ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 109; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 88–89. I have controverted Zizioulas’ patro-causal logic in *God Without a Face?* and also in “Between Subordination and Koinonia,” 188–190, 196–198. For other important critiques of the patro-causal logic, see Allan. J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (T&T Clark, 1996), 203, note 93; and Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 154–160. John Zizioulas’ response to Torrance and Papanikolaou, and his defense of the patro-causal logic is now posthumously published in John Zizioulas, *Knowing as Willing: The Ontology of Person, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (St. Sebastian Press, 2025), 41–46.

³⁵ Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 71.

self in a creative manner” or a “Father fulfilling his self in two distinguished, progenitive and spiritual, relational manners.” The existence (the “never dying” capacity) of God lies not in the triune coinherence of the three divine hypostases, but in the fatherly personal identity of the one divine reality called “Father.” Being is not exactly any more in “communion,” but in “paternal dynamic relatedness.”

The question one can ask out of this brief display is: Does Gunton slavishly embrace and adopt full-scale the abovementioned Zizioulan reading of the Cappadocian trinitarian ontology, as some have claimed? It is my belief, initially (as the previous section demonstrated), that Gunton’s affinity to Zizioulas’ theological reasoning is clearly evident. Discerning Gunton’s borrowing of ideas and views from his ex-colleague at King’s College University of London is not so impossible to determine, as Robert Jenson presumed. All this notwithstanding, and when it comes to the reading of the Cappadocians’ trinitarian ontology in patro-causal, reductionist lenses, Gunton does not unreservedly embrace Zizioulas’ reading game. “Gunton basically agrees with Zizioulas’ ontological emphasis on the communal nature of being. But, Gunton’s agreement with Zizioulas’ trinitarian ontology is qualified.”³⁶ Gunton not only avoids the language of “being *as* communion,” but prefers instead “person with relational particularity” and refuses to concede the eschatological reduction of *hypostases* into mere relations, let alone into the complete manifestation of the Father as alone God in the *eschaton*.³⁷

Even more essentially, Gunton conveys serious skepticism towards the patro-causal and patro-monistic reductionist reading of the Trinity *ad intra*. In his major monograph of 1991, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Gunton sets forth his understanding of the Trinity as an in-between option in equal opposition to two extreme interpretations of the ontological particularity of the three divine *hypostases*, which Gunton believes must be avoided.

³⁶ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 194.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 194–195.

The first extreme, according to him, is the overstressing of the total equality of the three persons to such an extent that their particularities are obliterated. The second extreme, which concerns us here, is “the tendency to stress the primacy of the Father that there is a danger of an ontological subordinationism, with the Son and the Spirit, at least appearing to be less truly God than the Father.”³⁸

Siding with Wolfhart Pannenberg’s trinitarian view, Gunton also calls for not reducing the perichoretic dynamic of relationality *ad intra trinitatis* narrowly to the relations of origin: “Who causes whom or who derives from whom.”³⁹ Gunton intertwines this conviction with a frank endorsement of Zizioulas’ argument that, if God is relational ontologically, the divine Godhead must image hypostatic communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, nevertheless, Gunton pauses at the answer Zizioulas offers regarding the inquiry about the source of this communal divine being and its ultimate eschatological manifestation. Zizioulas responds to this question by maintaining that this eschatologically fulfilled ontological “being-as-communion” is derived from the Father, or the causal *arche* of the communal Godhead in the Trinity.⁴⁰ In response, Gunton shares the following, profoundly telling words that merit full-length citation:

While [Zizioulas’] claim preserves the due priority of the Father in the Godhead, I do not believe that it allows for an adequate theology of the mutual constitution of Father, Son, and Spirit. ... Whatever the priority of the Father, it must not be conceived in such a way as to detract from the fact that all three persons are together the cause of the communion in which they exist in relations of mutual and reciprocal constitution.⁴¹

³⁸ C. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (T&T Clark, 1997), xxiv.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, xxiv. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (T&T Clark, 1991), I: 319.

⁴⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 40ff.

⁴¹ Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 196.

For Gunton, the priority of the Father in the scriptural attestation, which was established in creedal thought, “is not ontological but economic” in perspective, and it might relatively imply a form of a “subordination of *taxis*—of ordering within the divine life—but not one of deity or regard.”⁴² God in the perfection of His salvific history at the *eschaton* is fully consubstantial “Father, Son & Spirit” and not just “Father” relating to His beingness in two different manners. After all, Gunton wonders whether Zizioulas’ patro-causal understanding of the ontological Trinity would impact his patrological and teleological implications in relation to the ontological Trinity, because it “endangers [Zizioulas’] own identification of being and communion,” and whether or not “the free communion and mutuality of God risks being subsumed by a cosmological category of causality [and teleology].”⁴³

Gunton opts for a clear and basic trinitarian model as an alternative to Zizioulas’ patro-causal, patro-centric, and linear one. He allows Zizioulas’ invitation for embracing patristic trinitarian legacy to carry him beyond, or even *prior to*, the discourses of the Cappadocians. Gunton opts for an analogy he finds in Irenaeus’ trinitarian discourse: the analogy of the two divine distinguished arms of the divine creating God, which perfect the Father’s creating work eschatologically as two fully consubstantial persons with the Father and equal to Him in being. This Irenaean qualification is employed as a criterial framework in Gunton’s monograph, *The Christian Faith*. There, Gunton develops a trinitarian interpretation of the Christian faith’s dogmatic discourses, including the doctrine of Creation.⁴⁴ In this interpretation, he avoids any linear procession model, and opts instead for a perichoretic dynamic, asserting that “God both maintains and crosses the space [between Creator and creature] by means of the energies of His Son and Spirit.”⁴⁵ He manifests attentive perception towards the particu-

⁴² Ibid., 197.

⁴³ Ibid., xxiii. Here, Gunton invokes a critical point made in Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 291.

⁴⁴ Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 3–19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

larity of the creational agency of every *hypostasis* without drifting into relativistic plurality at the expense of communal unity. For him, there is unity in Creation as there is unity in the triune Creator's communion. It is a unity imaged after the unity-in-particularity that is held in the mediatorial operation of God, conducted through His two arms, the Son and the Spirit. Instead of a patrocentric, linear reductionism towards the processes of *opera ad intra* and *opera ad extra trinitatis*—"from the Father, to the Son, through the Holy Spirit" both in the present and the future—Gunton speaks about a perichoretic dynamic of existence and action, wherein the Father's will is reflected and reciprocated by means of the particular hypostatic wills and actions of the redeeming arm (Son) and the perfecting arm (Holy Spirit). They are all *together*, co-inherently one Godhead and all are equally referential and constitutive of the Godhead in the present and the future alike.

It is such an Irenaean analogical perception of relationality that drives Gunton, in relative distinction from Zizioulas, to centralize the notion of "*perichoresis*" over even "person" and "relation" in his trinitarian scheme. "*Perichoresis*," for Gunton, is the ultimate disclosure and demonstration that, beyond mere linear causality, "God's being is based on the reciprocal interpenetration of Father, Son, and Spirit"; so much so that what we have here is "ordered and free inter-relational self-formation."⁴⁶

IV. Towards a Postlude

Between 2000 and 2005, I pursued research for the Master of Arts and first Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology degrees at King's College University of London. I was privileged to participate in, and contribute regularly to, Gunton's weekly Systematic Theology Seminar, which was attended every Tuesday morning by doctoral students of Systematic Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Ethics, Historical Theology, and Biblical Studies.

⁴⁶ Awad, *God Without a Face?* 197.

It was in that seminar that I had the chance to meet and listen to lectures from some of the most prominent and influential theologians, most of whom were Gunton's close interlocutors and friends throughout his professional journey. One of these memorable and impressive lecturing visitors was John Zizioulas.

It was sometime during 2002 when John Zizioulas came over to King's College to read in our seminar a paper on his most favorite subject (as he personally stated that day): The Cappadocian Fathers' theology and the trinitarian ontology of personhood. Besides the highly thought-provoking and impressively educative and inspiring content of his lecture, what remains carved into my memory on that unforgettable encounter was Zizioulas' benevolent, graceful, modest, and even pastoral embrace of the attendants, who were sometimes over-zealous and blunt in their inquiries and overtly critical of his ideas.

Those who, like me, got the chance to converse with Colin Gunton and John Zizioulas over their theological discourses might find themselves differing with them regarding aspects of the theology of the Trinity. One, nevertheless, cannot but confess that both walked in the shoes of Gregory Nazianzus, who centralized the idea of "reciprocity" in his understanding of the triadic, perichoretic trinitarian Godhead, and, more significantly, imaged and incarnated this logic in his own personal character, making his personality an incarnation of the idea of God's triune reciprocity.⁴⁷ Following his footsteps, Gunton and Zizioulas not only imaged this perichoretic Trinity in their relations with the students, but the relation between them (a long-standing friendship) was one of perichoretic interlocution that was demonstrative of the "unity-in-particularity" logic which characterized the cross-pollinational interaction between the two theologians of the Trinity. In terms of application, Gunton fully endorsed this logic in his trinitarian thought throughout his theological biography. Zizioulas, on the other hand, toward the latter part of his career started

⁴⁷ See Najib G. Awad, "Through You, Man Lives Endowed with Reason': Gregory Nazianzen's Trinitarian Thinking as a Window to His Personal Character," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 127–142.

to more attentively tend to the dimension of “particularity,” and to using that theme to amend his over-emphasis on the causal centrality of the Father alone.

One notices this development textually in Zizioulas’ last collection of essays that were published in 2006 titled, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies on Personhood and the Church*. Zizioulas’ attention to particularity in his own writings, then, took place almost twenty years after the publishing of his magnum opus, *Being as Communion*. The title, *Communion & Otherness*, mirrors the evolution in Zizioulas’ thought towards centralizing “otherness,” or particularity, in his understanding of the dynamic of communion between the three *hypostases* in the immanent Trinity. Here we find that Zizioulas employs the notion of “otherness” to qualify his old patro-causal ontology. He states frankly that “a person, such as the Father, is inconceivable without relationship to other persons,” and declares his readiness to “elevate particularity and otherness to a primary ontological status.”⁴⁸ “Otherness,” Zizioulas clarifies, is now conveyed as inclusive and never exclusive, so that “the Other is identifiable as particular not in *contrast* with, but in *relation to*, all Others with whom this particular Other is ontologically related.”⁴⁹ The language of otherness and particularity is now employed to speak about the *hypostasis* of the Father as well: “The Father denotes a particular *hypostasis* which is ‘other’ while being relational, that is, inconceivable apart from his unity with the ‘other’ divine persons.”⁵⁰

Has Zizioulas followed Gunton’s replacement of patro-causality with perichoretic causality without reservation? He did not do this, nor did Gunton follow Zizioulas’ thought literally. Both authors maintained their theological particularities and intellectual distinctions, which in itself demonstrates the profound cross-pollination between them—for without distinction there is no cross-pollination or reciprocity. Maintaining an extent of distinction manifests in Zizioulas’ attention to particularity. In *Com-*

⁴⁸ Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

munion & Otherness, Zizioulas reveals clearly that his mitigation of the character of his patro-causal logic was pursued vis-à-vis serious engagement in an open, reciprocal, and cross-pollinational interlocution with Gunton's take in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.⁵¹

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, this work has not sought to study at full length the impact of Gunton on Zizioulas, nor the similarity and nuances in Zizioulas' discourse in relation to his interaction with Gunton's thought. Suffice it to end this essay by saying that in the interlocution of these two giant trinitarian theoreticians of the past few decades, we have the profound lesson that to study the Trinity theologically means to image the Trinity as such in one's personal reasoning and theologizing activities and manners. Colin Gunton and John Zizioulas certainly did this in their interlocutions with each other.

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⁵¹ See Zizioulas' referral to, and correspondence with, Gunton's approach in Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, 124, 136–137, 145–146, 154.

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

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

Tracing Similarities and Divergences: Introductory Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(a) Apophaticism versus Eschatology

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(b) Transcending the Limitations of Nature versus Transcending Nature

Since John Zizioulas' understanding of the person/nature divide has become perhaps the single most important basis for critique against his system (see, for example, Nikolaos Loudovikos' response¹³), and since Yannaras is quite often thought of as maintaining exactly the same divide (as, for example, Loudovikos¹⁴ and Larchet¹⁵ have argued), something which a closer inspection of his work would relativise, an accurate comparative reading of Yannaras and Zizioulas on this subject would require a special and long treatment of its own, surpassing the length of this article. Here we can only dare to attempt a very short allusion to the subject, merely in order to identify it as a point of divergence and to support our exposition of further points of divergence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(c) Human Love versus Metaphysical Eros

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 50.

²² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 52.

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁴ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 52.

²⁵ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 71–72.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁹ Zizioulas, “Personhood and Being.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Metropolitans John of Pergamon and Kallistos of Diokleia: Animals and Their Place in This World and the Next

CHRISTINA NELLIST

Abstract

This article examines the teachings of Metropolitan John of Pergamon (Zizioulas) and Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia (Ware) on the place of animals in this world and the next. It begins with an examination of their views on the proper interpretation and exercise of human dominion before investigating their views on the inclusion of non-human creatures in the future Kingdom of God. It explores how both metropolitans challenge anthropocentric and hierarchical interpretations inherited from early Greek and Western philosophical frameworks. It outlines their views on the place of animals within the Orthodox tradition of the care of creation that integrates theological reflection, liturgical recognition, and moral responsibility. It concludes with a call from both metropolitans for the need for serious Orthodox engagement and education at all levels on the subject of “creation care” understood at an academic level as ecotheology and animal theology. It is suggested that

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the metropolitans' teachings offer a holistic vision of creation care that situates the Orthodox tradition as a corrective framework to earlier damaging Christian and philosophical teachings, addressing contemporary challenges regarding animal and environmental suffering while remaining faithful to Scripture and patristic teaching.

Keywords: John Zizioulas, Kallistos Ware, Orthodox theology, patristics, dominion, eschatology, souls, ecotheology, animal theology, education

Introduction

This article examines the theological contributions of two of the most significant contemporary Orthodox theologians, Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon and Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) of Diokleia, on the place of non-human animals within creation and the forthcoming Kingdom of God. Although neither theologian devoted the majority of their scholarly output to what is commonly referred to as animal theology, both made influential, and at times courageous interventions on this subject across several decades, which not only strengthen the Western debate, but also add significantly to the corpus of material available on the developing contemporary Orthodox debate in this field.

To set their work in context, the contemporary debate in Western scholarship began circa fifty-five years ago with the work of Godlovitch & Harris in moral philosophy, *Animals, Men and Morals*;¹ via Singer in philosophy, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics For Our Treatment of Animals*;² and of particular relevance for this article, in Christian theology via Linzey, *Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment*.³ Frankly, all other contemporary work in the field of “animal theology” in the West derives from the large

¹ S. and R. Godlovitch and J. Harris, eds., *Animals, Men and Morals: An Inquiry into the Maltreatment of Non-Humans* (Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1971).

² P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics For Our Treatment of Animals* (Avon Books, 1977).

³ A. Linzey, *Animal Rights: A Christian Assessment* (SCM Press, 1976).

corpus of work by Prof. Rev. Andrew Linzey. In Orthodox theology, this type of engagement did not take place in any academic sense until Gschwandtner 2012,⁴ Nellist 2017,⁵ and the establishment of the Pan-Orthodox Concern for Animals Charity by one metropolitan, two priests and one presbyteria.⁶ Since that time, engagement by Orthodox scholars has slowly developed through further work by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware,⁷ Nellist,⁸ and the more recent work of Asproulis,⁹ Goodin,¹⁰ Maroudas,¹¹ and Seppälä.¹²

It is worth noting that Metropolitan Kallistos' engagement with this topic spans nearly sixty years, and predates Linzey by some thirteen years, beginning with his seminal 1963 article "Saints and Beasts: The Undistorted Image,"¹³ *continuing through later interviews and lectures, and culminating in his contributions to volumes in Climate Crisis and Creation Care* published in 2021.¹⁴ Metro-

⁴ K. Gschwandtner, *The Role of Non-Human Creation in the Liturgical Feasts of the Eastern Orthodox Tradition: Towards an Orthodox Ecological Theology*, 2012. Durham E-Theses, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/4424> (Hereinafter *The Role*).

⁵ C. Nellist, *Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and Animal Suffering: Ancient Voices in Modern Theology* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018). (Hereinafter EOCAS.)

⁶ See <https://panorthodoxconcernforanimals.org>.

⁷ Kallistos Ware, "Compassion for Animals in the Orthodox Church," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 10:2, 9–24. Available at <https://www.orthodox-theology.com/media/PDF/2.2019/MetropolitanKallistosWare.pdf>.

⁸ Christina Nellist, "An Eastern Orthodox Perspective on Animal Suffering, Intensive Farming and Climate Change," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 9:3 (2018).

⁹ Nikolaos Asproulis, "Animals and the *Imago Dei*: An Addendum to Christian Anthropology," in *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical perspectives, Ecological Integrity and Justice*, ed. C. Nellist (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 20–37.

¹⁰ David K. Goodin, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!": John Chrysostom and the Anaphora of Creation in the Hallelujah Psalms," in *Creation Care: Eastern Orthodox Christian Perspectives* (forthcoming, Holy Cross Orthodox Press).

¹¹ Filotheos-Fotios Maroudas, "The Dominion as a Fraternal Responsibility to Animals rather than a Supremacy," in *Creation Care* (forthcoming, Holy Cross Orthodox Press).

¹² Serafim Seppälä, "Animals as *ἄλογα*: A Critical Appraisal of a Murky Concept," *Ortodoksia Special Issue: New Approaches to Liturgy and Patristics* (2025), 111–137.

¹³ Kallistos Ware, "Saints and Beasts: The Undistorted Image," *The Franciscan*, Vol. V, Autumn, no. 4 (1963): 143–152. (Hereinafter Saints/Beasts.)

¹⁴ Kallistos Ware, "An Integrated Theology: Compassion for Animals," in *Climate Crisis and Creation Care: Historical Perspectives, Ecological Integrity, and Justice*, ed. C. Nellist (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), 2–19. (Hereinafter AIT.)

politan John's most direct treatment of animals appears in his essay "Man and Animals," originally written in Greek, but not published until its inclusion in *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos* (2021).¹⁵ However, like Metropolitan Kallistos, this is not the first time he taught on this subject, and the author uses teachings from other works that relate to aspects of flawed historical teachings from both Eastern and Western philosophers and theologians on the meaning of dominion and the status of non-human animal rationality and souls.¹⁶

Both metropolitans argue against the dominant Christian teachings that have either mistranslated or misinterpreted the correct meaning of dominion and restricted salvation solely to human beings as a result of an over-reliance on the flawed teachings of early Greek philosophers on the link between language and rationality.¹⁷ This well-documented history has resulted in the elevation and separation of humans from the rest of God's cre-

¹⁵ John Zizioulas, "Man and Animals," in *Priests of Creation: John Zizioulas on Discerning an Ecological Ethos*, eds. J. Chryssavgis and Nikolaos Asproulis (T & T Clarke, 2021), 197–202. (Hereinafter Man and Animals.)

¹⁶ E.g., John Zizioulas, "Proprietor or Priest of Creation?" Keynote Address of the Fifth Symposium of Religion, Science, and the Environment (June 2, 2003). Met. John acknowledges that faculties such as intelligence and language, once denied to non-human animals, are found in many species. See note 42 below. Available at: <https://www.orth-transfiguration.org/proprietors-or-priests-of-creation/>. (Hereinafter Proprietor or Priest.)

¹⁷ Written evidence of the separation of animals from humans is found as early as *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, which describes how humans and animals lived in a pre-verbal state before humans acquired language and the stage before they enslaved and exploited animals. Language is the final differentiation between men and beasts and is important, for historically, it is this supposed lack of language which enabled the dominant Greek philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics to deny animals the ability to think and reason. In light of contemporary scientific research, which allocates these capacities to multiple species of land, air and sea creatures, these ancient assumptions are no longer tenable. See for example, <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/rstb/article/375/1789/20190046/23731/Animal-cognition-and-the-evolution-of-human>. The historical roots of animals as *ἄλογα* have been comprehensively discussed in Western philosophy and theology over the past fifty years. In Orthodoxy, Nellist discusses this at length and conducts interviews with Orthodox bishops on the theme as part of her 2018 work (293–308). The excellent 2025 study by Prof. Seppälä brings the Orthodox discussion up to date. See note 12 above.

ation, which in turn has resulted not only in the marginalization of animals and misuse of the wider creation, but also in the treatment of non-human life as theologically or morally insignificant. Both make it clear that animals are integral to God's economy of salvation and are called to transfiguration alongside humanity. Orthodox believe that the whole cosmos is transfigured by Christ's Incarnation, Death and Resurrection. Salvation is not primarily juridical (being freed from guilt) but ontological: all things undergo a process of healing, restoration, and ultimately participation in divine life (theosis) at the eschaton.

At the same time, the article acknowledges that tensions remain, particularly in Metropolitan John's treatment of souls and human uniqueness, which reflect wider unresolved debates within Orthodox theology.¹⁸ By critically engaging these tensions, this article seeks to clarify their positions and contribute to a more coherent and integrated Orthodox theological vision of animals and their place in this world and the next than is currently the case.

When surveying the limited Orthodox literature relating to non-human animals, one usually finds that they begin with the presentation of the monastic/aesthetic traditions, where the saints are offered as exemplars of Orthodox compassionate action. The metropolitans' works cited above are a good example of this type of presentation. This article takes a different approach and begins with the metropolitans' teachings on dominion and souls, as the author believes these are their most significant contributions to contemporary debates relating to non-human animal and environmental suffering, and to the still thorny subject of whether or not non-human animals will be included in the forthcoming Kingdom. It then outlines their views on the place of non-human animals within the Orthodox tradition of creation care that integrates theological reflection, liturgical recognition, and moral responsibility, all of which, the author determines, can form a new and corrective framework for addressing contemporary challenges regarding animal and environmental suffering.

¹⁸ Serafim Seppälä, "Animals as ἄλογα."

The Place of Non-Human Animals in Creation: Dominion and Its Distortions

Modern Eastern Orthodox scholarship now accepts that the interpretation of dominion as domination is an error,¹⁹ as it fails to recognize God's constraints on human freedom and ignores the blueprint of God as Archetype. Patriarch Bartholomew informs us that this blueprint "by definition predetermines an analogous ethos that is imposed upon us."²⁰ This is an important teaching, which not only supports the premise that our lives/behaviors should reflect the image and likeness of God, but also acknowledges that some historical interpretations relevant to this subject are flawed.²¹ It is also commonly accepted that mistranslations or misinterpretations of dominion have for too long shaped Christian reflection on humanity's relationship with creation. The consequences of such distortions for trillions of non-human animals have been profound, and both metropolitans acknowledge this and engage with the issue in their work.

In Metropolitan Kallistos' 1963 article *Saints and Beasts*, dominion/authority over animals is grounded in the image and likeness of God:

[T]his dominion over the wild creatures which the saints possess reflects the situation of Adam before the Fall. God originally created man to be his vicegerent on earth, to rule over animals and all the universe: this is part of what is signified by the phrase "according to the image and likeness of God."²²

He goes on to warn us, however, that just because we have been given this exalted position of honor among God's created creatures, we are to remember that we are not the Creator but His servant,

¹⁹ Met. Kallistos, EOCAS:161.

²⁰ Patriarch Bartholomew, "Environment and Ethic," in *Cosmic Grace, Humble Prayer: The Ecological Vision of the Green Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. J. Chryssavgis (Eerdmans, 2009), 135.

²¹ Recognition of errors in theological teachings is evidenced throughout the history of the Church.

²² *Saints/Beasts*, 150.

and must therefore treat his master's creation with reverence and respect. In the exercise of his stewardship he should continually be guided by the spirit of compassion: power and authority must be tempered by love. We have been endowed with a priesthood and divine authority over the animals—an authority to protect and to cherish them.²³

A more recent reiteration of this is a quote from Metropolitan Kallistos' 2014 interview:

Just as God cares for His creation and loves it, so we, after the image of God, are to care and love creation. This to me is the basic position of the Orthodox Church in regard to animals.²⁴

Here, the metropolitan reminds us of the numerous patristic teachings which inform us that, unlike the god of the Gnostics, the Christian God cares for His creation. This Godly care is neither arbitrary nor oppressive but ontological and relational, and based upon Trinitarian reciprocal love which sustains the well-being of all creatures. There is sufficient coverage within patristic teaching on how we should reflect the image and likeness of God in the lives we lead, and there are likewise numerous contemporary teachings on our spiritual failure to reflect God's image in our daily lives resulting in the sin of environmental degradation,²⁵ so there is no need to repeat that debate here. However, in this field of research it is always prudent to remind ourselves that the early church fathers often gave teachings on the specific or similar themes addressed in this article, and here I am reminded of one such by St. Ephrem the Syrian:

You are not judge in creation, you have not dominion over the earth. If you love righteousness, reprove your soul and yourself. Be judge unto your own sins, and chastener of your own transgressions.²⁶

²³ Saints/Beasts, 152.

²⁴ Kallistos Ware, interview by Christina Nellist, 2014, in EOCAS, ch. 6.

²⁵ E.g., in the writings of Patriarch Bartholomew, John Chryssavgis, and Elizabeth Theokritoff.

²⁶ St. Ephrem, *Three Homilies: On Admonition and Repentance*. CANNPNF 2:13. Catholic Way Publishing, Kindle, 201

In his work *A Theological Approach to the Ecological Problem*, under the section heading “Man’s Alienation from Nature,” Metropolitan John chooses a quote from Francis Bacon to emphasize the important point he is about to make: “I bring you nature and all its progeny that you may bind it to your service and render it as your slave,” and he asks, “Is any more clear proof necessary then as to wherein lies the root of our ecological crisis?” Whilst acknowledging the misinterpretation of dominion, he posits a further question, “Might it not be the dominion of intelligence but rather its misuse that is at fault here?”²⁷ This important point in part echoes a much earlier teaching on our arrogant misuse of God’s creatures by St. Gregory of Nyssa:

Use; do not misuse; so, too, Paul teaches you. Find your rest in temperate relaxation. Do not indulge in a frenzy of pleasures. Don’t make yourself a destroyer of absolutely all living things, whether they be four-footed and large or four-footed and small, birds, fish, exotic or common, a good bargain or expensive. The sweat of the hunter ought not to fill your stomach like a bottomless well that many men digging cannot fill. Our gourmands do not, in fact, spare even the bottom of the sea, nor do they limit themselves to the fish that swim in the water, but they also bring up the crawling marine beasts from the ocean bed and drag them to shore. One pillages the oyster banks, one pursues the sea urchin, one captures the creeping cuttlefish, one plucks the octopus from the rock it grips, one eradicates the mollusks from their pedestal. All animal species, those that swim in the surface waters or live in the depths of the sea, all are thus brought up into the atmosphere. The artful skills of the hedonist cleverly devise traps appropriate to each.²⁸

A particular favorite quote of mine is given even earlier by St. Irenaeus who cites scripture when teaching that we should “not

²⁷ Zizioulas, “A Theological Approach to the Ecological Problem,” in *Priests of Creation*, 190.

²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “On Love for the Poor,” in *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, trans. S. Holman (Oxford University Press, 2001).

use our liberty as a cloak of maliciousness.”²⁹ Both of these teachings indicate, by their use of language, the saints’ views on our misuse of our freedom, which is clearly not in the image and likeness of God. We have therefore teachings not only on the mistranslation or misinterpretation of dominion, but also of our misuse of our role as persons created in the image of God, which both metropolitans believe are major contributors to our ecological crisis and the issue of animal suffering.

In summary, both metropolitans affirm that human dominion over animals and the wider creation is not a license for cruelty, exploitation, neglect, or indifference to animals, but a vocation to exercise compassionate, ascetical service and responsible authority in imitation of God’s care for all things in His creation. Both metropolitans agree that when humans assume authority without moral accountability, they replicate patterns of hubris antithetical to the image of God, such as ruthless tyranny, subjugation, or arrogant indifference. Both emphasize that dominion, rightly understood, must reflect the true image of God: loving, compassionate, and relational. Dominion, they argue, is a liturgical and moral act when exercised with loving tenderness, respect, and ethical responsibility.

The Place of Non-Human Animals in the Forthcoming Kingdom

Of crucial importance to the discussion of the status of non-human animals and their suffering is that both metropolitans accept that non-human animals will exist in the forthcoming Kingdom of God. Isaiah 11:6–10 serves as a foundational text for both, and for Metropolitan John it is important enough to begin his article with the full biblical text:

Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.

²⁹ Irenaeus, quoting St. Paul in Gal 5:13, in *Against Heresies*, 4.37. 4.

Cows and bears will eat together,
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.
Lions will eat straw as cattle do.
Even a baby will not be harmed
if it plays near a poisonous snake.
On Zion, God's sacred hill,
there will be nothing harmful or evil.
The land will be as full of knowledge of the Lord
as the seas are full of water.

A day is coming when the new king from the royal line of David will be a symbol to the nations. They will gather in his royal city and give him honor.

This text depicts a reconciled and restored creation in which violence has been overcome, predation abolished, and human and non-human animals dwell together in harmony in the forthcoming Kingdom. For both theologians, this eschatological vision is not merely illustrative, it is prescriptive. Metropolitan John explains:

These words of the Prophet Isaiah (chap. 11, 1–10) so eloquently express the vision of a world where animals and humans *will* live in complete harmony and reconciliation in the kingdom of God.³⁰

In his discussion on monasticism, he adds two further important points when teaching that whenever this balance is not achieved or is ruptured, the blame is normally attributed to human beings, and that this usually involves some type of sin for which humans are called to repent.³¹ He makes clear that this vision is so important and true to the Orthodox faith and tradition that “This vision has nourished the faith, imagination, and ethos of the Orthodox Church in all facets of its life,”³² and he offers at least three aspects of the life of the Orthodox Church that bear witness to this vision: its monasticism, its worship, and its theol-

³⁰ “Man and Animals,” 197. My emphasis.

³¹ “Man and Animals,” 198.

³² “Man and Animals,” 197.

ogy. In his discussions on worship, he teaches that humans act as representatives of all creation and that the Orthodox Church does not hesitate to extend its blessing and sanctification “to all the natural elements, including animals and plants.”³³

Moreover, human beings act in worship as representatives of all creation. We are its voice and mouth, serving as the link that binds creation to God, while offering it a means of expressing this blessing and praise, as well as elevating all of creation with humankind to what constitutes for the Church the utmost perfection and sanctification: namely, transformation by and union with God.³⁴

In his discussions on ethics we find a further specific teaching: We must move from an anthropomonic ethics to a more cosmic ethics. Human beings are a part of the natural cosmos, and thus their salvation is a part of the salvation of the cosmos.³⁵

As a result of these and many other teachings, Metropolitan John draws our attention to the divine economy which includes all creatures, and where the reconciliation of creation is not limited to human salvation.

Metropolitan Kallistos develops his thoughts on Isaiah’s eschatological vision in his 1963 article in a section titled “Adam and the Creatures in Paradise,” and is equally clear in his conclusion:

Redeemed man is not to be snatched away from the rest of creation, but the rest of creation—beasts, birds, and fishes, plants, stones, fire, and water—will be saved and glorified along with him. The whole created universe, as Saint Paul taught, waits with eager expectation for its redemption and transfiguration (Romans 8:19–22). In God’s Kingdom that is to come, the animals have their place.³⁶

³³ “Man and Animals,” 200.

³⁴ “Man and Animals,” 199–200.

³⁵ Zizioulas, “Ethics or Ethos? A Brief Sketch The Relationship between Ecology and Ethics,” in *Priests of Creation*, 158.

³⁶ *Saints/Beasts*, 151.

He explains that because Christ at his Incarnation took human flesh from the material order and filled it with the Spirit, Christ transfigured and redeemed all matter, “making it glorious.”

We await not just a new heaven but a new earth; and in that new earth man will exist, not in a vacuum, but surrounded by animals and the rest of God’s creation. Between man and beast there will be again, as in the beginning, harmony, and universal friendship.³⁷

In his mind, eschatological fulfilment is perceived as a shared destiny. Some fifty-three years later in a 2014 interview³⁸ he reiterated this teaching when stating that the accounts in the Bible of the age to come make it quite clear that non-human animals will be there. “The ox and the ass, the lion and the lamb will go together. The usual view is to say that they will not be the same animals, but how do we know? And here he asks a highly pertinent and challenging question: “Do we have any right to say that animals do not possess immortality?” Candidly he goes on to state that he knows of no authoritative Orthodox teaching that excludes animals from the future life. On the contrary, he teaches that Scripture and tradition provide “good reason to believe that animals will exist in the future Age after the Second Coming of Christ and the general resurrection... Isa 11:6.”³⁹ He too, explicitly questions theological assumptions, particularly in Western traditions, that salvation and eternal life are reserved for rational human beings alone. Orthodox tradition, as both metropolitans interpret it, provides no basis for such exclusion; rather, it envisions a comprehensive restoration of all created beings. This eschatological affirmation obviously raises questions concerning the status of non-human animal souls; questions that have long preoccupied Christian theologians and philosophers. However, those questions must not obscure the fundamental point of both metropolitans here: that Scripture affirms the presence of animals in the forthcoming Kingdom, regardless of how one conceptualizes the soul.

³⁷ Saints/Beasts, 151.

³⁸ EOCAS, ch. 6.

³⁹ EOCAS, ch. 6.

The Need for Difference: Separation and Souls

Separation

As previously noted, both metropolitans believe that distortions of the concept of “dominion” constitute both a theological and spiritual error. Both also acknowledge the problematic influence of Platonic and Aristotelian thought on early Christian philosophy and theology and observe that the historically dominant philosophy, with its emphasis on rationality, led to the privileging and separating of humans over non-human creatures and in turn, to the claim that only humans possess immortal souls.

In the age of the Church Fathers, theology was profoundly influenced by Platonism. This inevitably resulted in some ecclesiastical writers considering humans as rational beings possessing an immortal soul and thus surpassing animals and the material world to the extent that the salvation of the world brought by Christ was regarded as being confined to human beings alone.⁴⁰

Metropolitan John informs us that this type of human exceptionalism is evident in the writings of highly influential theologians such as Origen, Evagrius of Pontus, and Augustine of Hippo (and thus Aquinas) and resulted, he argues, in a hierarchical worldview in which animals were generally regarded *at best*, as morally and soteriologically inferior. Metropolitan John notes that whilst dominant Western theological developments reinforced this anthropocentrism (and here he identifies Augustine, Boethius, Aquinas, Kant, and Descartes) he reminds us that another, though less influential tradition was available in mainstream Greek patristic thought, and within the official position of the Church, which did not coincide with this position:

[In] the fourth century, Methodius of Olympus reacts strongly to Origen’s philosophy. Furthermore, Athanasius of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor and others speak of “deifi-

⁴⁰ “Man and Animals,” 201.

cation” (*theosis*) as communion with the God of all creation.⁴¹

Furthermore, Metropolitan John goes on to situate these historical philosophical and theological errors within a broader epistemological critique, arguing that human arrogance, coupled with insufficient scientific knowledge and understanding, fostered, and still fosters, persistent misconceptions about animal capacities, rationality, and moral status:

The emergence of Darwin was needed to provide a critical blow to this arrogant stance by humanity over and against the animals as well as the rest of creation by substantiating how human beings are organically connected to animals, being separated from them—even with regard to conscience and reason—only in degree and not in kind.⁴²

To avoid further flawed philosophical and theological distortions, Metropolitan John is clear that the Church and its clergy ought to engage more thoroughly with contemporary science regarding the nature and capacity of non-human beings that demonstrates the continuum between them and humanity—one of *degree* rather than *kind*, in terms of non-human rationality, consciousness, and behavior—rather than as the very criteria used to separate humans from non-human animals these past millennia. These teachings draw our attention to our common ontological interconnectedness and inherent relationality, which provides an Orthodox corrective to what has gone before, and frames the Christian vocation to serve as God’s representatives as one of nurturing, protecting, and active participation to ensure the flourishing of creation, rather than its domination and dismissal.

It is clear thus far, and without any detailed discussion of whether or not non-human animals are ensouled or the type of soul they are allocated by humans, that both metropolitans believe that non-human animals will be in the forthcoming King-

⁴¹ “Man and Animals,” 201.

⁴² “Man and Animals,” 201–2. His reference here is to Charles Darwin, *The Desert of Man*, I, 1898:193.

dom of God, that they participate in the liturgical and moral economy of salvation, and that they share in the ultimate reconciliation of creation. One may hope that the teachings above would have a positive effect upon their colleagues, and thus their subsequent teachings—especially in the realm of bioethics.

Souls

The eschatological inclusion of non-human animals in the writings of Ware and Zizioulas raises important questions regarding the soul, and in particular the nature of the non-human animal soul. An initial point to make here is best put in the form of a question, and is one that is rarely voiced: Who among us has declared that God has revealed to them His heart or mind on this matter? One is also hesitant to voice the obvious but challenging points that there is no universal consensus on the location of the “soul,” or theological or philosophical proof of the alleged differences in it, should it exist (here I refer to the ancient Greek tripartite system of souls, with its ungodlike consequences that derive from these differentiations for the unborn but soon to be aborted foetus, and for non-human animals). Yet, despite this great and universal ignorance, we are in the main happy to continue to refuse one specific type of soul to the vast majority of the world’s created beings.

In his 2014 interview Metropolitan Kallistos gave the following teaching on this subject:

Just to say animals have no souls is inadequate, in fact so many of the characteristics that are human are now found to some extent among the animals... In fact any attempt to make a very sharp delineation in light of modern research into animal behavior and intelligence, doesn’t entirely work... To say animals don’t have reason is also questionable. Again, there is much research in this field... So it seems to me that you cannot make a sharp distinction here either... To me it

is unsatisfactory to say animals have no souls and we should avoid making such an assertion.⁴³

He characterizes debates over non-human animal souls as a “red herring” that distracts from the primary theological imperative, which is the recognition of non-human animals as eschatologically significant participants in God’s plan.

As previously noted, in the 1990s Metropolitan John criticized Christian teachings that overemphasized the importance of the “immortal” soul which led to the marginalization of non-human animals and the material world:

Thus the human being was singled out from created nature as being not only a higher kind of being, but in fact the sole being that mattered eternally—apart, of course, from the angels who, owing to their spiritual and immaterial existence, were of an even higher value than human souls. The Kingdom of God in St. Augustine’s vision of the last things has no place at all for nature; it consists of the survival of spiritual beings, the eternal souls.⁴⁴

He deserves credit for his keynote address in 2003, where he acknowledged contemporary scientific insights into non-human animal cognition, behavior, and capacities which he states discredited those damaging historical teachings. He also acknowledged that the majority of philosophers now recognize that animals have almost everything required to possess a “rational soul” as defined by those early philosophers and theologians.⁴⁵ However, tensions arise when he subsequently appears to continue this “arrogant” tradition (although he does try to distance himself from it by qualifying his point) when asserting that only humans possess souls in the *fullest sense*,⁴⁶ *defined here as existential free-*

⁴³ EOCAS, 178.

⁴⁴ Zizioulas, “Preserving God’s Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology,” in *Priests of Creation*, 100.

⁴⁵ Zizioulas, “Proprietors or Priests of Creation?” Baltic Symposium (June 2, 2003) in *Priests of Creation*, 146–7.

⁴⁶ My emphasis is to note yet another change in the alleged criteria for animals to enter “heaven.”

*dom and the desire for immortality. This time,*⁴⁷ for him the “most important thing” is not the intellect, which he acknowledges is also found in non-human animals, but freedom:

As for the difference between humans and animals, the most important thing is not so much the intellect, which to a degree is also recognized in animals, but the freedom that only human beings possess in its ultimate, existential form, by experiencing the limitations of personal existence while expressing in diverse ways—including language, art, and tragedy—the desire to transcend these limits by seeking immortality. In this sense, and only in this sense, human beings alone possess a soul.⁴⁸

Here we see exposed the crux of the problem of non-human souls—the constant desire for humans to be acknowledged as different from the other animals, be it within philosophy or theology. And so whilst acknowledging the harmful historical failures of a similar ilk, Metropolitan John opines that human beings again possess something different/unique—and on this occasion this is existential freedom in a manner not fully mirrored in non-human creatures. This is the criterion – “only in this sense” do we find the uniqueness of the human soul. That may be so, but the forensic question to ask here is: Where is the proof or evidence for statements such as these? I return to my opening question: Who among us has declared that God has revealed to them His heart or mind on this matter? Indeed both metropolitans have made this latter point:

Do we have any right to say that animals do not possess immortality? I think this is a subject where we can simply say, we do not have a clear revelation on this point in Scripture. I cannot recall anywhere where it says animals cannot sur-

⁴⁷ He has previously suggested that the ability to create was the characteristic par excellence of humanity. See “Toward an Environmental Ethic,” in *Priests of Creation*, 166–7 and “Preserving God’s Creation: Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology,” 120–121.

⁴⁸ “Man and Animals,” 202. My emphasis.

vive into a future life, so why shouldn't we leave that to God's mercy and say that we don't understand about this?⁴⁹

The Orthodox Church has not assumed an official position on these developments.⁵⁰ Personal opinion then, is the matter at hand, and considering the devastating ramifications for billions of creatures, one would hope this would be informed opinion. Despite the teachings above, the question of whether or not animals enter "heaven" is still asked today, and from considerable experience the author believes the all-too-frequent answer from our clergy is likely to be "No." I have earlier written a more detailed exposition on this elsewhere,⁵¹ but to make the point and add context, I will provide just one apposite example of a teaching by Fr. Stanley Harakas who was influential in the world of Orthodox ethics. This is an excerpt from a 2016 short article entitled "Concerning Animals and Pets in Orthodox Tradition."⁵² He opines the following under the subheading "Why Pets Do Not Go To Heaven":

So, when St. John of Damascus speaks about Jesus' Incarnation (the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, taking on human nature), he contrasts the human mind as the image of God, with "the soul of an irrational animal." He says in his Exposition of the Orthodox Faith: "Therefore, God the Word, wishing to restore that which was in His own image, became man. But what is that which was in His own image, unless mind? So He gave up the better and assumed the worse. For mind is the borderland between God and flesh, for it dwells indeed in fellowship with the flesh, and is, moreover, the image of God. Mind, then, mingles with mind, and mind holds a

⁴⁹ EOCAS, 303.

⁵⁰ "Man and Animals," 201–2. Specifically in his discussion on souls in the section "The Theological Tradition."

⁵¹ EOCAS, ch. 9.

⁵² <https://catalog.obitel-minsk.com/blog/2016/12/concerning-animals-and-pets-in-orthodox>, accessed February 20, 2026.

place midway between the pureness of God and the denseness of flesh. For if the Lord assumed a soul without mind, He assumed the soul of an irrational animal.”

In a second subheading that reinforces his opinion “The Kingdom of God is For Human Beings” he gives this opinion:

The Kingdom of heaven, then, is for human beings. *We have no evidence anywhere* in the Scriptures or in the Tradition of the Church to support the idea that animals, which do not have a “rational soul,” are destined for heaven—or, for that matter, for hell. Only human beings face that double potential destiny. In the meantime, let us enjoy our pets, but not at the expense of our responsibility for our fellow human beings. [My emphasis.]

This explanation and teaching not only ignores the biblical and patristic texts outlined earlier by both metropolitans and a great deal besides, but also various ecclesial texts that we shall explore presently concerning non-human animals recognizing, worshipping, praising, and crying out to God, which as a priest this commentator would have known. Not only do we see that the influence of Greek philosophy spoken of earlier is alive and well and overriding the contemporary science that this teacher and ethicist ought to have been familiar with, but we also find evidence of another problematic teaching: the hierarchy of concern—that is, let us care about animals, but not too much. The suggestion here seems to be that if we care and are compassionate toward non-human animals, as Scripture informs us God is, then in some causal way we will diminish our care and compassion for humans.

Such teachings not only exemplify the problems in the debate on non-human animal souls, but also that the supposed qualifying criteria for entry into the forthcoming Kingdom change. Yet alongside these changing criteria – language, rationality, creativity, etc., there are sufficient and readily available scientific studies that show the existence of said differences in numerous species of animals. These “lines in the sand” are continually redrawn/refined as science continues to disprove various separationist claims. I am not the first to make this point. Theokritoff (2009) informs us of

this unfortunate tendency within this particular Orthodox debate which tends to “draw a sharp distinction between personhood, on the one hand, and the relationships, individuality, and consciousness to be found in animals on the other.”⁵³

As Theokritoff has observed, Orthodox discussions of personhood and animal life “tend to be vehement,” “somewhat circular,” and “frequently show little interest in what is actually known about animal behaviour.”⁵⁴ More fundamentally, the emphasis on souls as passports to heaven distorts the Orthodox understanding of salvation. If non-human animals are affirmed as participants in the forthcoming Kingdom, and souls are required for “entry” then either they possess souls in some meaningful sense, or souls are not the decisive criterion or metaphysical distinction for eschatological inclusion.

There is an obvious response to both of the problems ascribed to Harakas, but certainly not to him alone, and it is this: one of the tenets of Eastern Orthodox Christianity is that Tradition must not contradict Scripture. As both metropolitans clearly affirm, despite the Harakas misrepresentation, there is scriptural evidence of animals in the age to come and there is certainly significant patristic teaching on this point to counter Harakas’ opinion. To offer just three examples: St. Irenaeus’ acknowledgement that “all things” are recapitulated in Christ;⁵⁵ St. Basil of Seleucia’s teaching that Christ saved the world and liberated the earth, and recounts all the benefits of salvation including the principle of purification for the world and a “renewing of nature”;⁵⁶ and St. Cyril of Jerusalem’s acknowledgment that “the whole world was ransomed” by Christ’s Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection.⁵⁷

⁵³ Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), 240.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 240. There are numerous works dealing with this subject, e.g., C. Allen and M. Bekoff, *Species of Mind: The Philosophy and Biology of Cognitive Ethology* (MIT Press, 1997), and B. Rollin, *The Unheeded Cry: Animal Consciousness, Animal Pain, and Science* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁵⁵ St. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Irenaeus: Against Heresies*, 2.2:5.

⁵⁶ Basil of Seleucia, *Third Homily on Pascha, Sources Chrétiennes* 187:215.

⁵⁷ St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Homilies* 13:2.

I conclude this section with the obvious answer to the continuing quest to define the difference between the human creature and non-human animal creatures—and that answer is revealed in Scripture and is a long-established teaching within the Orthodox tradition—via this teaching on difference by Metropolitan John:

For theology, God is crucial in order to know what the human being is. The human being must emerge as something different, as a different identity with regard to the animals, with regard to the rest of creation, and also with regard to God. Thus man is a link between God and the world. This is what is expressed in theological terms through the concept of the “image and likeness of God.”⁵⁸

Herein lies the answer to difference: humans are made in the image of God and that is not said of any other creature. Who we believe our God is will define who we are. Personally, I have never been able to understand why this is insufficient.

To conclude what might be a rather challenging section for some, it can be stated that both metropolitans advance the opinion that non-human animals will take their rightful place in the forthcoming Kingdom of God, and that they believe their teachings are true representations of the Orthodox tradition of an all-loving and relational God who saves all things, despite dissenting voices. For both metropolitans, whether non-human animals do or do not have souls, or what type of souls they are, does not alter this outcome. As Metropolitan Kallistos notes, the debate over non-human animal souls is a “red herring.” What matters, he insists, is not assumptions, speculative metaphysics, and separationist theology but fidelity to the biblical and liturgical vision of creation’s redemption.⁵⁹

Both are clear that the denial of immortal souls to non-human animals has historically been used to justify exploitation, cruelty, and exclusion, the consequences of which for animals is unneces-

⁵⁸ Zizioulas, “Proprietors or Priests of Creation?” 148.

⁵⁹ EOCAS, 165–168.

sary suffering, fear, and isolation from their God; outcomes which are incompatible with the Christian proclamation of an all-loving and just God, and of course, His image.

I will add one final note. If animals matter in this life and the next, then this is an inconvenient truth with profound consequences for the many and varied vested-interest groups who abuse animals in order to profit/prosper, and for the wider human population regarding the treatment of non-human animals and human soteriology.

The Place of Non-Human Animals in the Life of the Church: Worship and Sanctification

A further point of convergence between Metropolitans John and Kallistos is their affirmation of the Orthodox tradition which teaches that non-human animals are co-communicants, albeit in ways distinct from humans, within the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.

In his discussions on the liturgical life and saints as exemplars of a partially restored prelapsarian state, Metropolitan John gives the following teaching:

The respect and love toward animals are nevertheless not confined to certain extreme examples or “eccentric” ascetics but actually permeate the Orthodox Church generally in its daily life as well as in the way in its daily prayer and praise.⁶⁰

Unlike Western theological traditions that often separate the sacred and the profane, or restrict participation in the divine economy to human beings, both metropolitans proffer an Orthodox vision which affirms that all creation, human and non-human alike, participate in the glory of God, and is capable of receiving sanctification and intercessory prayers. To buttress this point Metropolitan John points to Holy Saturday which includes the Vespers of Resurrection, as an example of Orthodox integrated theology. Quoting Prophet Daniel (3: 1–23), we are informed that

⁶⁰ Man and Animals, 199.

all created beings, “both animate and inanimate, indeed including the animal kingdom and the natural environment,” glorify God and celebrate along with humanity.⁶¹ By framing non-human animal participation in worship as normative, Metropolitan John again challenges the anthropocentric bias that treats non-human life as morally and spiritually irrelevant. He states that “the Orthodox Church does not hesitate to extend its blessing and sanctification to all the natural elements, including animals and plants.”⁶²

It is clear from his teachings that these blessings are not merely symbolic; they indicate an ontological reality in which the sanctifying grace of God touches all creation and reflects the Orthodox Church’s refusal to divide reality into sacred and profane realms. Matter itself is called to transfiguration.

Metropolitan Kallistos reminds us that prayers for non-human animals are part of the Orthodox book of blessings and intercessions, known in Greek as the *Evchologion*, and in Slavonic as the *Trebnik* or Book of Needs. He teaches that Orthodox intercessions encompass “the entire created order and this too, is another fundamental element of an integrated Orthodox Christian theology.”⁶³ These prayers clearly indicate the Orthodox recognition that non-human animals matter to God, that their suffering is worthy of intercession, and that divine grace can be invoked on their behalf. Numerous patristic teachings on worship and praise by creation exist and here both St. Gregory Nazianzen and St. Ephrem speak to the point:

All things cry out about you
 Those, which speak,
 Those, which cannot think;
 For there is one longing, one yearning,
 That all things have for you. (Rom. 8:22–23)⁶⁴

⁶¹ “Man and Animals,” 199.

⁶² “Man and Animals,” 200.

⁶³ AIT, 8–9.

⁶⁴ Gregory Nazianzen, “Hymn to the God,” in *St. Gregory Nazianzen: Selected Poems*, 4th ed., trans. J. McGuckin (Sisters of the Love of God Press, 2005), 7.

In the twenty-third year, let the ass praise Him, that gave its foal for Him to ride on, that lost the bonds, that opened the mouth of the dumb, that opened also the mouth of the wild asses.⁶⁵

Other patristic texts indicate that creation has a voice that cries out to God and has human characteristics ranging from fear to joy.⁶⁶ This style of commentary exists until today. Metropolitan Kallistos often retells the following account from the monks of the holy mountain of Mount Athos:

An elder is distracted in his morning prayer by the dawn chorus of frogs from a nearby marsh and sends his disciple to tell them to be quiet until the monks have finished the Midnight Office. When the disciple duly transmits the message, the frogs reply, “We have already said the Midnight Office and are in the middle of Matins; can’t you wait till we’ve finished?”⁶⁷

St. Anastasius of Sinai teaches that not only did creation rejoice, but also that it did so when it learnt of its “transformation from corruption to incorruption.”⁶⁸ St. Gregory Nazianzen taught that Christ sanctified everything He touched: Christ “sleeps in order to bless sleep,” “weeps in order to make tears blessed,”⁶⁹ and explicitly links Christ’s baptism with the sanctification of the baptismal waters.⁷⁰ We have therefore a tradition originating in the

⁶⁵ Ephrem the Syrian, *Nineteen Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh* (Catholic Way Publishing, Kindle, 2014), 13:27.

⁶⁶ Andrew of Crete, *On the Dormition of Mary: Early Patristic Homilies*, ed. B. E. Daley (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 145–146.

⁶⁷ Elder Joseph the Hésychaste, “Letter 57,” in Elizabeth Theokritoff, “Creation and Salvation in Orthodox Worship,” *Journal of Religion, Nature & the Environment*, Vol. 5. 10 (Jan 2001): 97–108.

⁶⁸ Anastasius of Sinai, “Joie de la transfiguration: D’après les Pères d’Orient,” *Spiritualité Orientale* 39. Coune, D. M. (Ed.) Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine (1985:163), cited in K. Gschwandtner, *The Role*.

⁶⁹ Gregory Nazianzen, “On the Words of the Gospel,” in *Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen, Sometime Archbishop of Constantinople* (Catholic Way Publishing, Kindle, 2014), 37.2.

⁷⁰ Gregory Nazianzen, “The Third Theological Oration. On The Son,” in *Select Orations*, 29.10.

early Church and lasting until today of all creation knowing God, calling to God and blessing and praising God. Certainly, it would appear from some of these texts that they have the capacity to do so independently of humans,⁷¹ and as such speak to an animal's individual integrity and agency. Whilst the author realizes that this suggestion will be problematic to some, it rests in the belief that to deny the possibility of such actions would place limits on God and thus be akin to the heresies the Fathers fought so hard to refute.

The liturgical recognition of non-human animals also aligns with the personalist ontological understanding of the cosmos as inherently relational and sacramental. Early Church fathers repeatedly affirm that creation, in its entirety, bears witness to God's glory and participates in His providential care. Importantly, this theological framework also functions as a critique of broader cultural and philosophical assumptions that have marginalized non-human animals. By integrating non-human animals into worship and recognizing their capacity for sanctification, Orthodox theology challenges utilitarian, anthropocentric, and hierarchical frameworks that have historically justified exploitation. The liturgy is not merely ceremonial; it is, or ought to be, transformative. It helps shape human perception, ethical responsibility, and spiritual imagination, all of which underscore the Orthodox Church's holistic vision of salvation. To engage fully in Orthodox worship is to participate in the moral and ontological affirmation of non-human creation, rather than the separationist/substantialist ontology of the past centuries.

The Place of Non-Human Animals in the Christian Life of Image and Likeness: Love, Reverence, and Respect for Animals

Central to both Metropolitan John's and Metropolitan Kallistos' theological vision is the conviction that love, reverence, and re-

⁷¹ Theodoret makes this same point. Theodoret of Cyrillus, *De Providentia* 5:33. Sep-pälä, 2025, 123.

spect for animals constitute an essential expression of Orthodox faith and practice. This affirmation is rooted in the ascetical, liturgical, and biblical traditions of the Church, which for both, functions, or ought to function, as a corrective to anthropocentric and utilitarian assumptions that have historically minimized or ignored the moral and spiritual significance of non-human life. As His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew states in his Encyclical for the 1st of September 2020:

The struggle for the protection of creation is a central dimension of our faith. Respect for the environment is a praise in practice of the name of God, while the destruction of creation is an insult to the Creator, completely incompatible with the basic assumptions of Christian theology.

The central theme to love, reverence, and respect all creation, including non-human animals, in Metropolitan John's theological anthropology emerges most clearly in his reflections on Orthodox monasticism, where he draws attention to the lives of the great ascetics who exemplified a restored relationship between humanity and the non-human world. He emphasizes that the great ascetics did not merely abstain from harming creation, they actively cultivated a relational ethos in which every creature was recognized as bearing the imprint of God. He reinforces this point by citing the teaching of Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov), who famously stated that as one draws nearer to God, one's capacity for love expands to encompass the entirety of creation: "The Spirit of God teaches the soul to love every living thing so that she would have no harm come to even a green leaf on a tree, or trample underfoot a flower of the field."⁷² This teaching emphasizes the transformative and universalizing effect of genuine communion with God: moral and ascetical formation expands the circle of love to include all living beings, without diminishing the special role or responsibilities that humans bear. These ascetics, Orthodox tradition proclaims, provide living evidence that the alienation between humans and non-human animals introduced

⁷² Archimandrite Sophrony, *St. Silouan the Athonite* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991), 469 ff.

by the Fall is neither absolute nor irreversible. The cultivation of such love is understood as part of the Church's spiritual pedagogy, moving both monastics and laypersons toward a holistic vision of creation care.

Metropolitan John makes an important contribution to the theological debate on non-human animal suffering and care in his commentary on *Laudato Si'* when directly confronting the common accusation that such concern for non-human animals reflects sentimentality or emotional excess. He rejects this charge decisively, arguing instead that those who are the exemplars in this field offer love and compassion that arises from loving hearts and the deep spiritual conviction that we share “an organic unity and interdependence that makes us share a common fate just as we have the same Creator.”⁷³ Crucially, he insists that this vision is not merely symbolic or deferred entirely to the future but rather functions as the way humans ought to relate to non-human creation in this life. He further argues that when humans fail to embody reciprocal love and care toward animals, the fault is not morally neutral, but constitutes sin and carries soteriological consequences: “whenever this balance is not achieved, the blame is normally attributed to human beings as a sin for which they are called to repent.”⁷⁴

This insistence that failures in human–animal relations are matters of repentance rather than ethical optionality marks a significant departure from approaches that all too often treat animal suffering as morally peripheral. In an interview he gave for the book, *The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis*, he states the following:

Any insult to the creation of God, either by disturbing its natural laws and the damage or extinction of its species, or by the misuse of natural resources, is for the Church an insult to God himself and, therefore, a sin.⁷⁵

⁷³ <https://ec-patr.org/en/21/06/00/00/a-comment-on-pope-francis-encyclical-laudato-si/>.

⁷⁴ “Man and Animals,” 198.

⁷⁵ John Zizioulas, “The Role of Eastern Orthodoxy in Addressing the Climate Crisis:

Metropolitan John's teachings align with a broader Orthodox understanding of sin as relational rupture, not only between humans and God, but also between humanity and the rest of creation. He is clear that if we sin against nature—against non-human animals—there are soteriological consequences for the human.

Metropolitan Kallistos already alluded to these points in his aforementioned 1963 article. He identifies three recurring characteristics exhibited in the lives of Orthodox saints: a vivid sense of affection and compassion for animals, reverence and respect toward them, and dominion through the image of God.⁷⁶ Authority, in this context and as noted earlier, is not coercive but restorative; it seeks to establish harmony rather than domination. He reiterates that these qualities are not marginal eccentricities or sentimental, but essential expressions of deep spirituality: “The power of the saints over the animal world is thus an instance of inaugurated eschatology”⁷⁷ and exemplifies the Orthodox understanding of our role in God's creation. These qualities flow directly from the Orthodox reading of Genesis, in which the whole creation, including non-human animals, is declared good, sacred, and worthy of reverence and respect:

The world is God's creation, and it is a good and beautiful world. Therefore, the question of animals and how we treat them, links up with our view that animals are part of God's creation and just as we should treat the whole of creation with reverence and respect, so we should more particularly treat the animals with reverence and respect.⁷⁸

For Metropolitan Kallistos, how humans treat animals is inseparable from how they understand God, since all creatures are sacred and bear the imprint of the Creator. If the world is God's

Interview,” interview by Nikolaos Asproulis in *The Orthodox Church Addresses the Climate Crisis*, eds. Theodota Nantsou & Nikolaos Asproulis (WWF Greece & Volos Academy Publications, 2021), 35.

⁷⁶ Saints/Beasts, 147.

⁷⁷ Saints/Beasts, 151.

⁷⁸ EOCAS, 162.

creation, then non-human animals are not disposable resources but fellow creatures—a “Thou, not an It”⁷⁹ whose existence glorifies the Creator. Reverence toward non-human animals thus becomes a type of litmus test of theological integrity, not a contemporary innovation or sentimental affectation; it is rooted in the same Orthodox theological anthropology that underpins human virtue and ethical responsibility. In this framework, reverence toward non-human animals is humanity’s theological obligation and calling to reflect the image of God. In other words, ethical praxis and liturgical life are mutually constitutive: to fail ethically in relation to non-human animals is simultaneously to fail spiritually.

Thus, both theologians stand firmly within the wider Christian Ecotheological and Animal Theology framework and give legitimacy not only to calls for Eastern Orthodox theological discussions on the subject of non-human animal/creation’s suffering but also to the sin at the core of that suffering as frequently articulated by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew:

In this way we will cease whatever we do that furthers the wrong treatment of animals and encourage the individual and social repentance that will bring to animals and all things living the blessings and grace which is due all life.⁸⁰

Both metropolitans also agree with Patriarch Bartholomew that eucharistic worship cannot be separated from ethical and ascetical practice: the way humans live, consume, and respond to creation’s vulnerability reflects the authenticity of their worship.⁸¹

Of equal importance, is Patriarch Bartholomew’s teaching that we are to respond to nature “with the same delicacy, the same sensitivity and tenderness, with which we respond to a human being in a relationship.”⁸² This extension to the normative understand-

⁷⁹ EOCAS, 110.

⁸⁰ Patriarch Bartholomew, “A Rich Heritage,” Address at the Environmental Symposium, Santa Barbara, November 8, 1997, in *Cosmic Grace*, 190.

⁸¹ Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*. (Doubleday, 2008), 98–103.

⁸² Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, “On the Theological and Spiritual Insights of Pope John Paul II,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: Theological and Spiritual Exhortations of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew*, ed. J. Chryssavgis (Fordham University

ing of caring relationships might seem a contemporary fashion, yet as both metropolitans demonstrate, this would be a misreading of Eastern Orthodox tradition. Both theologians argue that this ethic of care extends beyond ascetic or monastic contexts to all Orthodox Christians. Prayer, blessing, and ethical responsibility toward non-human animals are not optional, they are essential to the realization of an integrated Orthodox theology of creation.

Rather than excluding non-human animals and reflecting the distorted and fallen image of contemporary societies, when we expand our love and circle of moral concern to encompass all living beings, humans participate more fully in the divine image and thus contribute to the restoration of creation in accordance with God's original plan. Both also agree that the leaders of the Eastern Orthodox Church have a significant role to play in reducing that suffering.

Education and Engagement: Or Lack Thereof

This closing section takes us into the future and could have profound implications for all of God's creatures, including ourselves, if enacted. Both metropolitans call for greater engagement by the Church and call for education at all levels. In his 2014 interview, Metropolitan Kallistos responded to social science research which identified a gap between Orthodox theory and practice in relation to care for creation, especially for the non-human animal creation.⁸³ The outcome of this research was not a surprise, for as far back as 1976 the Russian philosopher Tatiana Goricheva identified problems between Orthodox theory and praxis with regard to the treatment of animals:

Treatment of animals is an area where there is a disturbing gulf between the implications of our theology and tradition, and the attitudes and behaviour typical of Orthodox societies.⁸⁴

Press, 2011), 297.

⁸³ EOCAS, ch. 5.

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Theokritoff, *Living in God's Creation*, 238.

In 2012, Gschwandtner made a similar point:

It is not clear, however, that these apparently so positive features of Orthodox thought and attitudes have led to greater sensitivity to the environment in its practice or to any clearly articulated ecological theology.⁸⁵

A more current teaching on this point is from Metropolitan Kallistos:

So, from the tradition of the Orthodox Church, we have plenty of examples of close mutual understanding between humans and animals. The trouble is whilst we have all this in theory, we do not sufficiently apply it in practice.⁸⁶

So what do the metropolitans teach on this final subject? The following are just a few examples.

There is a need for more education, and we are up against the basic problem that all too many people, clergy, and laity, think as Christians that this does not matter; that the treatment of animals is not a moral issue. But as soon as you say that animals are part of God's creation and we humans have a God-given responsibility towards creation, then at once, one sees that it is both a moral and spiritual question. That is why the Ecumenical Patriarch was so right to insist that the misuse of creation is a sin but all too many people do not see it that way.⁸⁷

There is need for education here at every level and we should start not with the people in theological seminaries, but we should start much earlier with the children. That the normal catechism teaching given in our Church Sunday School classes should include teaching about the creation and about compassionate and Christian treatment of animals ... Then certainly later on when priests are given training, the courses the clergy are given should include teaching on the envi-

⁸⁵ Krina Gschwandtner, *The Role*, 8.

⁸⁶ AIT, 4.

⁸⁷ Kallistos Ware in EOCAS, 164.

ronment... We should encourage those who have this area of responsibility to educate the children and educate the priests so that they in turn can educate their people.⁸⁸

Metropolitan John makes similar points and reminds us of how the Christian teachings discussed above need to be addressed in order to create meaningful change:

The ecological problem, therefore, although being a problem of science and therefore to a large degree of ethics, education and state legislation, is also a theological problem. As it is evident that certain theological ideas have played an important role in the creation of the problem, so it must be the case too that theological ideas can influence the course of events in the reverse direction... Without a worldview that involves what we may call a liturgical attitude to creation, it will be impossible to reverse the alarming situation the world is facing today.⁸⁹

The first obvious thing that must follow without delay is a program of education of the clergy in the first place and also at public schools of all degrees. Ecology must permeate all sermons, all Sunday schools, of theological and scientific literature and so forth, wherever and as much as possible. We've been unparadoxably incompetent and insufficient in this regard.⁹⁰

The Church cannot be faithful to her mission today without a serious involvement in the protection of God's creation from the damage inflicted on it by human greed and selfishness.⁹¹

Both metropolitans call for more engagement and more education, and echo calls from past decades, yet the lack of engage-

⁸⁸ EOCAS, 171.

⁸⁹ Zizioulas, "Preserving God's Creation, Lecture II: Positive Elements from Tradition," in *Priests of Creation*, 106–7.

⁹⁰ Zizioulas, "Conclusion: 'From Here to Where?'" in *Priests of Creation*, 224–5. First published in *Sacred Commerce: A Conversation on Environment, Ethics, and Innovation*, eds. John Chryssavgis and Michele Goldsmith (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2014), 97–104.

⁹¹ Zizioulas, "Foreword," in *Cosmic Grace*, viii.

ment by the vast majority of Orthodox Universities and Seminaries remain unchanged. In 2019 Patriarch Bartholomew convened the Halki III Summit to discuss this problem and to encourage engagement, yet at the IOTA conference in Volos in January 2023 a question on what progress had been made was met with silence from the panel, all of whom were at Halki. In a keynote speech by Nellist at a conference on “Ecology as an Academic Discipline” at the end of 2025, the audience was informed that in the vast majority of cases, Orthodox institutional lack of engagement and education on the subject remained largely unchanged. She also asked why and suggested that this question ought to be put to the institutions to answer. Metropolitan Kallistos attempts an answer regarding this lack of engagement (that goes deeper than one which may offer the dubious excuse of lack of curriculum space), and may well feed into the mindset of those who are responsible for offering Orthodox education to our children, students, and seminarians:

I think we have to admit that this is not a priority in the minds of some bishops and priests and they might say we are concerned with humans and to that my answer is it is not a matter of either/or, you should be concerned with humans *and* animals. The one does not exclude the other.⁹²

Two rather challenging questions to end this section might be: Are our academic and seminary institutions examples of sacred space that ought to reflect the image of an all-loving God in their teachings? If so, are they?

In Conclusion

Metropolitans John of Pergamon and Kallistos of Diokleia were friends and stand together as towering figures in contemporary Orthodox theology. Both helped to bring Orthodoxy into the modern world by engaging with contemporary topics that others ignored until it was fashionable to do so. They were champions of

⁹² EOCAS, 161.

freedom of thought in modern scholarship, arguing against teachings that were inherently flawed and based on bad science. In a Church that is perceived to be deeply conservative and traditional, this took great courage. Their reflections and teachings in this article and elsewhere shed light on a critical dimension of Orthodox theology: the moral, eschatological and liturgical significance of non-human creatures.

A central contribution of both metropolitans is their eschatological orientation. Animals, they affirm, will participate in the reconciled Kingdom of God, coexisting with humans in harmony and peace. Metropolitan John stresses that love and respect for animals are essential expressions of the Orthodox faith, imagination, and ethos, all of which are grounded in biblical teachings such as Isaiah's vision of a future Kingdom of God where harmony and reciprocal love and care are restored. This vision is most clearly expressed in the monastic life but is applicable to all Christians.

Metropolitan Kallistos agrees that Isaiah's vision of the forthcoming violence-free Kingdom is an integral part of our Orthodox theology and tradition. For him, the love and fellowship between the saints and non-human animals is a partial anticipation of the situation that will prevail at the Last Day—an instance of inaugurated eschatology. This provides hope that this restored relationship is achievable in this life if we truly exhibit the image of an all-loving and compassionate God. He too discusses love, reverence, and respect for non-human animals in the context of dominion, emphasizing our responsibility as Image to enable the flourishing of all creatures.

Both reframe human dominion as a vocation of care rather than domination, aligning moral responsibility with eschatological hope. Both are clear that dominion rightly understood is one of authority grounded in reciprocal love, rather than the present situation where the majority seem to have forgotten the true image and display the ruptured and distorted image of dominator and ruthless tyrant of nature, causing untold suffering and environmental destruction. For both metropolitans failure to embody this vision and ethos constitutes a sin that requires repentance.

Metropolitan John's engagement with historical philosophical distortions bravely engages contemporary scientific insights, par-

ticularly from evolutionary biology and ethology. He highlights Darwin's work as a corrective to the human-centric hierarchy, demonstrating the continuum between humans and non-human animals in terms of intelligence, consciousness, and problem-solving capacities. Metropolitan Kallistos also acknowledges and accepts the theological implications of emerging scientific evidence that indicates complex cognition, ethical decision-making, and forms of creativity in non-human species, which undermine the rationale for exclusionary claims regarding "immortal" souls. In this context, Metropolitan John stresses that while humans possess existential freedom in an extreme form, manifested in his opinion in self-reflection and the desire to transcend mortality, this distinction does not diminish the moral or eschatological significance of non-human life.

Metropolitan Kallistos' insistence on moral and ethical inclusivity also challenges anthropocentric and hierarchical paradigms that have historically marginalized non-human life. He too, bravely argues that debates over whether animals possess immortal souls are a "red herring" that diverts attention from the more pressing ethical and theological imperative: the recognition of non-human animals as morally and eschatologically significant. He emphasizes that biblical and Orthodox tradition, properly understood, allows for the inclusion of non-human animals in the Kingdom of God regardless of philosophical assumptions about the nature or existence of their souls. The ethical implications of this discourse are profound. The denial of immortality to non-human animals, (as exemplified by the Harakas article above, or the ancient teachings of Plato and Aristotle) has historically facilitated cruelty, neglect, exploitation, and theological indifference, as it provided a theological justification for treating these creatures as morally and spiritually irrelevant. By contrast, the recognition of non-human animals' moral and eschatological significance, whether or not coupled with the attribution of immortal souls, offers a corrective framework which demands compassion and ethical engagement.

Their work emphasizes that non-human animals are neither incidental nor instrumental in the divine economy. They chal-

lenge entrenched assumptions and recover a deeply patristic vision of creation as beloved, sacred, and destined for transfiguration. By asserting the eschatological significance of non-human animals, they provide a long-overdue corrective to the flawed philosophical and theological teachings of the past concerning the place of animals in this world and the next. Their teachings on non-human animals take us back to earlier periods of the Church before the grip of flawed Greek philosophical teachings strangled any theological debate on souls and salvation for the wider creation. By engaging with both biblical and patristic sources, as well as contemporary scientific insights, these masterful theologians offer a holistic vision of Orthodox Christianity that if followed, is spiritually transformative. The Orthodox vision that they offer is a long-overdue corrective that provides a theological foundation for contemporary creation care and animal ethics within Orthodox praxis.

Both metropolitans continually call for more Orthodox engagement and education on what is generally referred to now as ecotheology and animal theology, but which at their core is what Orthodoxy understand as reflecting the Image and Likeness of God in our lives. Both acknowledge that Orthodox engagement is lacking and well overdue and let us hope that this article reminds those with that responsibility to respond to the numerous calls from them, and many others besides, over these past decades.

Their desire to speak the essential truth of the gospel—of the universal love of God—was paramount in their lives. Their integrity cannot be questioned. Metropolitan John’s words, echoed by Metropolitan Kallistos elsewhere, offer a fitting final statement:

Still, these particular characteristics of human beings do not give them any right to despise or any authority to diminish animals. On the contrary, human beings are obliged to embrace animals and all creation with affection and compassion in an effort to deliver them from the corruption and mortality that torment creation in its entirety (cf. Rom. 8:20–21).⁹³

⁹³ “Man and Animals,” 202.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nikolaos Asproulis

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Appendices with Comments



Working Committee of the Faith and Order Commission (WCC),
Eliot College, Canterbury, August 4–8, 1969.
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Participants included John Zizioulas (Assistant Secretary, 1967–1970), John Deschner, Paul Verghese (later Paulos Mar Gregorios), Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury, Fr. John Meyendorff (Vice-Chairman of the Commission), Chrysostom Constantinidis, Vice-Chairman of the Commission (later Metropolitan of Efessus), Professor S. Agouridis, etc.

Βογορόδικα βενεδικτίνκι, деталι, Ζαδάρ.
XIII/XIV v.
Madone des Bénédictines, détail Zadar
XIII/XIV s.

September 15, 1961

Dear Father Florovsky,

As you will note, I am attending the International Byzantine Congress at Ohrid, which seems to be a very interesting experience. I regret that you are not here with us, but I hope that you are enjoying a pleasant summer in the State of Washington.

My summer has been very busy and a little troublesome, since I had to persuade ten Professors to read my doctoral dissertation, as soon as possible (I am sorry to say that I have

not been successful with any one of them as yet). In the meantime I keep touch with St. Maximus' works and I hope to devote the whole of next year to this project exclusively. I plan to return to Dumbarton Oaks next Fall. Before I go there I shall stop in Cambridge for a short time to see you. I am so much looking forward to that! The exact time of my departure for the U.S.A. will depend on how things will develop with my thesis in Athens.

Please, pray for me. I remember you very often and wish to thank you for your love and assistance in so many ways.

Ἅγιος Θεοφάνης and all of my Professors send you warm regards.

Yours μετὰ βαθύτατου σεβασμοῦ
John D. Zizioulas

September 15, 1961

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Ὁ Ἅγιος Θεσσαλονίκης and all of my
professors send you warm regards.

Yours μετὰ βαθυτάτου σεβασμοῦ

John D. Zizioulas

Editor's Note: This 1961 letter from Zizioulas to Florovsky is of significant historical value, offering insight into the early stages of his doctoral research. It reveals Zizioulas' frustration with the administrative delays at the University of Thessaloniki regarding his thesis defense. Crucially, it confirms that his work on the Church's unity preceded his decision to study St. Maximus the Confessor under Paul Tillich. The mystery of his 'lost' dissertation under Florovsky remains; despite archival searches, only a single page survives. Theories range from the manuscript's loss by Florovsky to the topic's prior coverage by Philip Sherrard. Ultimately, Zizioulas shifted his focus to the University of Athens under Professor Gerassimos Konidaris, though the influence of Maximus and his time at Dumbarton Oaks remained pivotal. Finally, the correspondence highlights the profound spiritual and personal bond between the two men.

THIRD UNOFFICIAL CONSULTATION BETWEEN THEOLOGIAN
OF THE EASTERN ORTHODOX AND ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES

June 29, 1970

Dear Professor Florovsky,

We are glad that you have agreed to take part in the third consultation between Oriental and Eastern Orthodox theologians to be held in Geneva (Le Cénacle) from August 16-21. We hope that you have received in the meantime our previous letters giving instructions as to how to reach the place of our meeting, the time of its beginning and its conclusion, as well as the basic points of the programme.

As the time of the meeting is approaching it would help us to make the final practical arrangements if we had a word from you concerning the following two practical questions.

In the first place it would be very helpful for us to know it as soon as possible in case your original plans to come to the meeting have, for some reason or other, changed in the meantime. If we do not hear from you on this matter within the next one or two weeks, we shall assume that you are coming to the meeting.

It will also be very helpful for us to know it in advance in case your travel arrangements have to be settled and subsidised here in Geneva. If that is the case an immediate reply from you would be necessary. In case we do not hear from you on this matter we shall assume that all your travel arrangements are in order.

Looking forward to hearing from you or seeing you at our meeting,

Yours sincerely,

(On behalf of the Preparatory Committee)

Absent
K.C. Joseph

J. D. Zizioulas
J.D. Zizioulas

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June 29, 1970

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Absent

K. C. Joseph

John D. Zizioulas

Editor's Note: Dating from John Zizioulas' tenure as Secretary of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (1970–1973), this correspondence addresses administrative and logistical concerns regarding an informal consultation held at the Cénacle in Geneva between August 16 and 21, 1970, which was held “in an atmosphere of openness and trust which has been built up thanks to the two previous conversations at Aarhus (1964) and Bristol (1967)” (cf. The official summary of the meeting, accessible at: <https://orthodoxjointcommission.wordpress.com/2013/12/15/geneva-1970/>)

Very Rev Professor Thomas F Torrance
37 Braid Farm Road
Edinburgh EH10 6LE
Tel (031) 447-3050 3224



Dec. 10, 1986

Dear John,

It is high time I wrote to send you warm congratulations and good wishes on your becoming a Metropolitan! I always said that you must either get married or become a bishop - "a man under authority"! Now it has happened. I wonder what the Lord has in store for you? Your writings are greatly appreciated in different parts of the world, which whets appetite for much more from you. I hope that episcopal duties will not hinder that!

What a sad and tragic loss the death of Nikos Nissiotis is - just in the prime of his work and significance in the ecumenical world.

I have been abroad a lot lately, not least with a wonderful visit to China where the Church flourishes - now over 50 million strong!

God bless you richly,

With every good wish for a holy and joy-filled celebration of the

Incarnation,

Tom

*Glas.
30.1.87*

Dec. 10, 1986

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Tom

Editor’s Note: The correspondence in question originated from the distinguished theologian, the Very Rev. Professor Thomas F. Torrance (1913–2007), a Scottish Protestant theologian and Presbyterian minister, who maintained a close intellectual and personal bond with John Zizioulas during the latter’s tenure in Edinburgh. Contrary to persistent rumors suggesting a fractious relationship between the two scholars, the letter conveys profound mutual respect and underscores Torrance’s recognition of the late Metropolitan of Pergamon’s significant theological and ecclesiastical legacy. Furthermore, the document illuminates Torrance’s extensive engagement with prominent figures of contemporary Orthodoxy, notably the esteemed ecumenist Nikos Nissiotis (1924–1986), whose life was tragically cut short in a car accident during the summer of that same year.

It is important to highlight Torrance’s deep interest in Eastern Orthodoxy, both in the tradition of the Greek church fathers and in direct interactions with modern Eastern Orthodox theologians. John Zizioulas was likewise introduced to the English-speaking world by Torrance. Before relocating to Glasgow, Zizioulas worked as Torrance’s assistant in dogmatics at Edinburgh from 1970 until 1973.

Christi Auferstehung (Höllenfahrt)
Ausschnitt, russisch, 16. Jahrhundert
Ikonenmuseum Reddinghausen

My dear Father,

Χριστὸς Ἀνέστη!

May I send you my
Easter thoughts and best
wishes on this great day
of the Church and request
your blessing and prayers
to the Risen Lord for me.

Μετὰ σεβασμοῦ

John Zizioulas

Nr. 56 — Verlag Aurel Bongers Reddinghausen

P.S. Did you receive my letter?



Ἔτη πολλά!
on your Name-day.

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the Church and request your blessing and prayers to the Risen Lord for me.

Μετὰ σεβασμοῦ

John Zizioulas

P.S. Did you receive my letter?

On the right page:

Ἔτη πολλά!

on your name day

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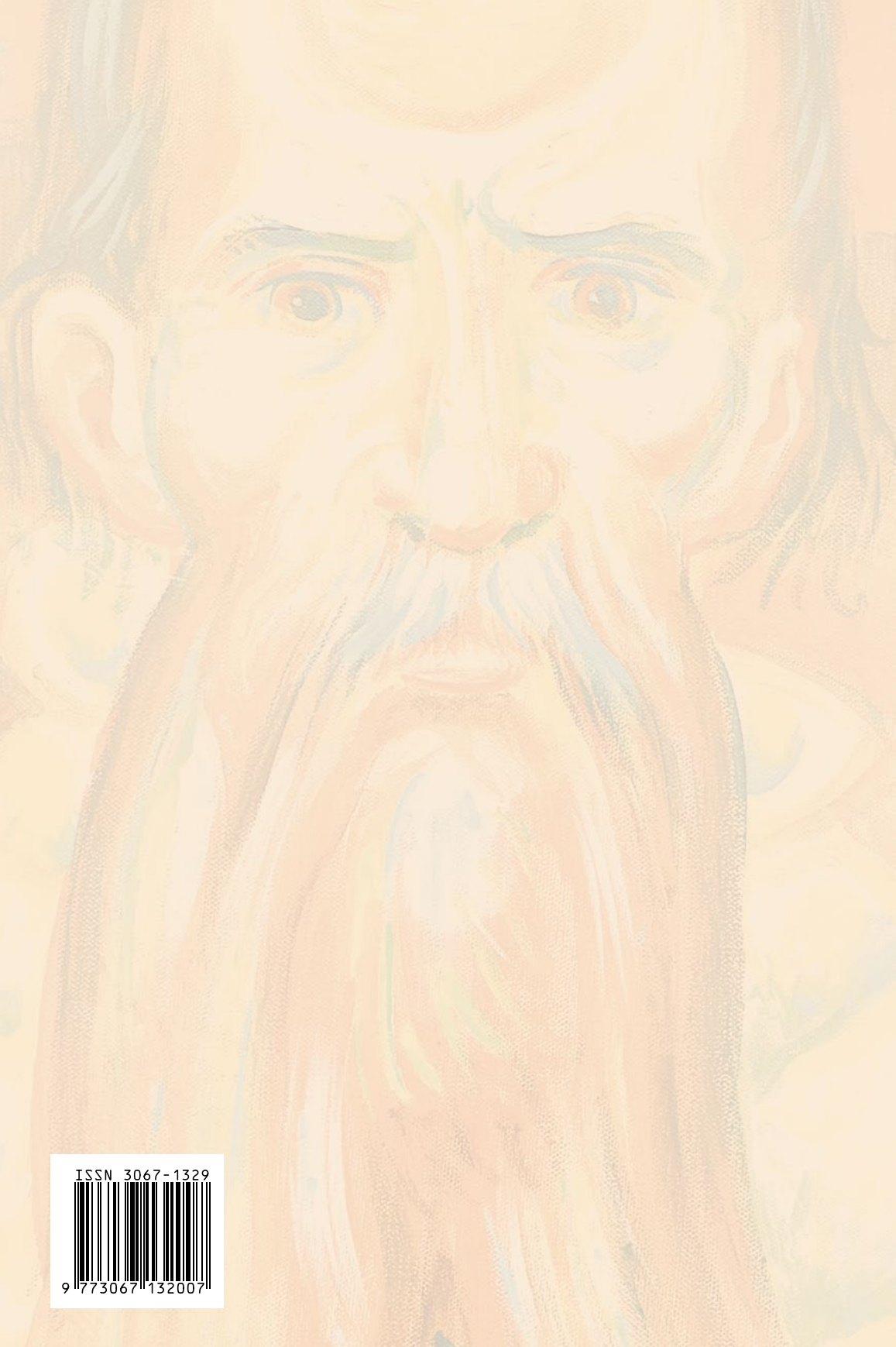
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