

Introduction

General Aspects of the Figure and Thought of Zizioulas

A Brief Sketch of the Main Biographical and Bibliographical Details

The Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas, probably the most important Orthodox theologian of our time,¹ was born in 1931 in Macedonia, completed his studies at the Universities of Thessaloniki and Athens, and continued his education at Harvard. The intellectuals he met during his studies included Georges Florovsky (1893–1979), John Meyendorff (1926–92) and Paul Tillich (1886–1965). He is deeply committed to ecumenical activity, working with the Faith and Order Commission of the Ecumenical Council of Churches and, more recently, as co-president of the International Joint Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. He is also an active academic lecturer in Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Athens and Thessaloniki. In 1986, while still a layman, he was appointed Metropolitan of Pergamon by the Patriarch of Constantinople and received all the priestly grades up to episcopal ordination on 22 June of that year.

Zizioulas' theological literary output, which unfolds over a period of about fifty years, begins with his doctoral thesis, written under the guidance of Georges Florovsky, entitled: 'The Unity of the Church in the

¹. Cf. W. Kasper's Preface to *Comunione e alterità*, the Italian translation by M. Campatelli and G. Cesareo (Rome: Lipa, 2016) of *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. by P. McPARTLAN, with a Foreword by R. Williams (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006).

Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries' (in Greek, 1965).² His output continued with the publication of numerous essays, articles for journals and papers given at conferences. In some cases, these writings have been collected and published in order to provide a more unified presentation of his thought. Among the most significant essays may be mentioned: 'From Mask to Person: The Contribution of Patristic Theology to the Concept of the Person' (in Greek, 1976);³ 'Hellenism and Christianity: The Meeting of Two Worlds' (in Greek, 1976);⁴ and the entry 'Orthodoxy', which he edited for the *Encyclopaedia of the Twentieth Century* (1980). With regard to the present study, mention may be made of 'The Father as Cause: Person Generating Otherness' (2006); 'On Being Other: Towards an Ontology of Otherness' (2006); 'Trinitarian Freedom: Is God Free in Trinitarian Life?' (2012); and 'Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor' (2013). With regard to collections of articles or academic lectures, I would mention: *L'être ecclésial* (1981), published with some modifications in English as *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (1985); *Creation as Eucharist: A Theological Approach to the Problem of the Environment* (in Greek, 1992);⁵ *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (2007); *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* (2009); *The One and the Many: Studies on God, Man, the Church, and the World Today* (2010).

². Ἡ ἐνότης τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἐν τῇ εὐχαριστίᾳ καὶ τῷ ἐπισκόπῳ κατὰ τοὺς τρεῖς πρῶτους αἰῶνας (Athens, 1965). English translation by E. Theokritoff as *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross, 2001).

³. «Ἀπὸ τὸ προσωπεῖον εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον: Ἡ συμβολὴ τῆς πατερικῆς θεολογίας εἰς τὴν ἐνοίαν τοῦ προσώπου». English translation by N. Russell under the title 'From Mask to Person: The Birth of an Ontology of Personhood', Part I of Chapter 1, 'Personhood and Being', in *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 27–49.

⁴. «Ἑλληνισμός καὶ Χριστιανισμός, ἡ συνάντηση τῶν δύο κόσμων», in K. ΠΑΡΑΡΡΙΓΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ, *Ἱστορία τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ Ἔθνους*, vol. 6 (Athens: Eleftheroudakis, 1976, 2003).

⁵. Ἡ Κτίσις ὡς Εὐχαριστία: Θεολογικὴ προσέγγιση στὸ πρόβλημα τῆς οἰκολογίας (Athens: 1992).

Zizioulas' Theological and Philosophical References⁶

In framing the figure of Zizioulas, the first aspect to consider is his place in the strand of theological tradition known as the *neopatristic synthesis*, that is, the theological trend that saw in Florovsky its initiator, and that proposes to reconsider the teaching of the Fathers, especially the Greek Fathers, on the basis of the foundational role for doctrine that tradition recognises in their teaching.⁷

Having said that, it should be acknowledged that Zizioulas' theological and philosophical sources are manifold. As far as the *theological sources* are concerned, there is a strong link with modern Orthodox theology, especially Russian, which came to him directly from Florovsky and indirectly from Christos Yannaras.⁸ The influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky,

⁶. For an in-depth exposition, see CHIAPETTI, «*La libertà di Dio è la libertà del Padre*», ch. 1.

⁷. Florovsky presented his programmatic line in a paper delivered at the 1936 Athens Congress on Orthodox Theology, first published in H.S. ALIVISATOS (ed.), *Procès-verbaux de premier congrès de théologie orthodoxe à Athènes, 29 Novembre - 6 Décembre 1936* (Athens: Pyrsos, 1939), pp. 238–42, and later as G. FLOROVSKIJ, 'Patristics and Modern Theology', *Diakonia* 4 (1969), pp. 227–32. It is characterised first of all by what Florovsky calls polemically the 'Babylonian captivity' into which Orthodox theology had fallen after the patristic era, that is, the influence of a Western theology of neo-scholastic stamp more attentive to the metaphysical foundation of doctrine than to the contribution of the Fathers (cf. G. FLOROVSKY, *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky: Volume 4: Aspects of Church History* [Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987], pp. 157–82; and *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky: Volume Six: Ways of Russian Theology Part Two* [Vaduz: Büchervertriebsanstalt, 1987], p. 301).

⁸. In his writings Zizioulas refers several times to Yannaras (albeit also with critical notes); Yannaras likewise shows a good knowledge of Zizioulas' thought (cf. N. RUSSELL AND C. YANNARAS, *Metaphysics as a Personal Adventure: Christos Yannaras in Conversation with Norman Russell* [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017]). Zizioulas is also influenced by the modern Greek Orthodox theology of Nikos Nissiotis and especially of Yannaras, a theology that can be called Greek personalism, as distinct from French personalism, in that it affirms the ontological primacy of the person. Cf. B. PETRÀ, 'Personalist Thought in Greece in the Twentieth Century: A First Tentative Synthesis', *Greek Orthodox Theological*

Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov and Vladimir Lossky is strongly present, as can be seen in various ways in the dialectical relationship between the *person* – identified with freedom – and *nature* – identified with necessity – and in the attribution of ontological priority to the former.⁹ On the other hand, Zizioulas rejects the formulation of the person as an *absolute ego* (typical of idealism) or as an *individual* (typical of existentialism).

In the *philosophical sphere*, Zizioulas sees Martin Buber as the modern thinker who has focused most on a relational ontology of the person,¹⁰ free from the ontological primacy of nature or the intentionality of consciousness, although the attribution of this primacy to the relation – the *between* – is a point from which Zizioulas distances himself, proposing instead – in line with his patristic reading – the *person*. With Michael Theunissen, one can also see the difficulty in determining *exactly* what meaning Buber gave to the *between*, making its ontology difficult to assess and understand.¹¹ Zizioulas, rather, sees in Emmanuel Lévinas the one who – again among modern philosophers – has recognised most fully the value of otherness, although not on an ontological level because of his *totalitarian* vision of ontology, that is, his inability to combine otherness with communion.¹²

Review 50, nos 1–4 (2005), pp. 1–48; N. ASPROULIS, ‘Nikos Nissiotis, the “Theology of the ’60s”, and the Personhood: Continuity or Discontinuity?’, in A. TORRANCE AND S. PASCHALIDIS (eds), *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition: Early, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 161–73; «Τὸ εἶναι τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Ἀπόπειρα θεολογικοῦ διαλόγου», *Synaxē* 37 (1991), pp. 11–36, at p. 16.

⁹ In line with Papanikolaou (cf. A. PAPANIKOLAOU, ‘From Sophia to Personhood: The Development of 20th Century Orthodox Trinitarian Theology’, *Phronēma* 33, no. 2 (2018), pp. 1–20), I argue below that this is attenuated in Zizioulas.

¹⁰ Cf. ‘On Being Other: Towards an Ontology of Otherness’, in *Communion and Otherness*, p. 47.

¹¹ He points out that, according to Buber, the ‘between’ resides neither in the ‘I’ nor in the ‘you’ nor in a third party extraneous to the ‘I’ and the ‘you’, nor in a third party as a unity of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ (cf. M. THEUNISSEN, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986], p. 277).

¹² Cf. ‘On Being Other’, pp. 47–50.

*Zizioulas' Eucharistic Epistemology*¹³

Zizioulas' epistemology is characterised by a strong eucharistic sense. This is because Zizioulas is convinced that trinitarian reflection in the patristic tradition starts from the experience of ecclesial life that is inaugurated by baptism and centred on the Eucharist.¹⁴ In line with the eucharistic theology of the eastern Fathers, Zizioulas understands the Eucharist as a *synaxis* and precisely as an eschatological manifestation of the Kingdom of God.¹⁵ From this emerges a conception of knowledge that presents the following connotations: it originates in the *prolexis* of the ecclesiological-eschatological experience, and therefore is communal; it is founded in the being of the Son, inasmuch as the Church, and with it creation, are incorporated in him; it has as content the knowledge proper to the Son that is knowledge of the Father,¹⁶ and therefore of the *person*, as particularity – ontological reality – established in relation.¹⁷

If, for Zizioulas, the reality of divine-human communion makes it possible to speak of *ontology* and *person*, it imposes at the same time an *apophatic* attitude: the person, indicating a unique particularity and

¹³ For an in-depth exposition, cf. CHIAPETTI, «*La libertà di Dio è la libertà del Padre*», ch. 2; for a general overview by Zizioulas himself, cf. *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 9–39.

¹⁴ Cf. 'Truth and Communion', ch. 2 of *Being as Communion*, pp. 67–122; originally published as 'Vérité et communion dans la perspective de la pensée patristique grecque', *Irénikon* 50 (1977), pp. 451–510 (republished, revised by the author, as 'Vérité et communion: fondements patristiques et implications existentielles de l'ecclésiologie eucharistique', in *L'être ecclésial* [Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1981], pp. 57–110).

¹⁵ Cf. 'Ecclesiological Presuppositions of the Holy Eucharist', in *The One and the Many*, pp. 61–74, here at p. 62; originally published in *Nicolaus* 10 (1982), pp. 333–49. His reflections reveal the influence of Alexander Schmemmann; cf. A. SCHMEMMANN, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987).

¹⁶ The Eucharist is understood as a movement of the return of creation in the Son to the Father. Cf. *Communion and Otherness*, p. 149; the text takes up, with modifications, an unpublished paper presented at King's College London, under the title 'The Father as Cause: A Response to Alan Torrance', London, 1998.

¹⁷ Zizioulas notes how in the liturgy of both Basil and Chrysostom the Father is understood as the only truly existing one (cf. «Τὸ εἶναι τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τοῦ ἀνθρώπου», pp. 18, 22).

pertaining to the uncreated sphere although it is also implemented in creation, cannot be defined by means of a positive qualitative content.¹⁸ In relation to this, one can only identify the elements that describe it, which are *hypostaticity*, *ecstasiticity*, *freedom*, *causation/causality* and the *mode of hypostatisation of nature*.

For Zizioulas, this knowledge must also constantly measure itself against the antinomy of created reality and thought;¹⁹ finally, due to the fact that it is rooted in the eucharistic *synaxis*, as mystical experience of the Church *par excellence*, as manifestation of divine-human communion, it is attested on an experiential-communal, mystical-ecclesial level,²⁰ which reveals the limits of the cognitive possibilities of the logical rationality of the individual and opens up to that 'visionary language'²¹ proper to a true and proper 'eucharistic mysticism'.²²

*An Outline of the Notion of Personhood: Philosophical Considerations on Human Existence*²³

Zizioulas' intra-trinitarian reflection on the Father is conducted at a theological level and, in particular, focuses on the notion of *person/personhood*,²⁴ to which the notions of freedom, causality, communion

¹⁸. Cf. 'On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood', in *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 99–112, here at p. 112 (first published in C. Schwöbel and C.E. Gunton (eds), *Persons, Divine and Human* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), pp. 33–46).

¹⁹. Personal reality is not understandable from our 'experience of fragmented time'. See 'Trinitarian Freedom', in MASPERO AND WOZNIAK (eds), *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology*, p. 202). Cf. I. HAUSHERR, 'Ignorance Infinite', *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 2 (1936), pp. 351–62, here p. 357; C. YANNARAS, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, ed. by A. Louth, trans. by H. Ventis (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005).

²⁰. Cf. 'The Church as the "Mystical Body" of Christ', in *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 289–96.

²¹. *Ibid.*, p. 296.

²². *Ibid.*

²³. For an in-depth exposition, cf. CHIAPETTI, «*La libertà di Dio è la libertà del Padre*», Introduction.

²⁴. The term 'personhood', or 'personal being', translates προσωπικότητα (cf. «Ἀπὸ τὸ προσωπεῖον εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον: Ἡ συμβολὴ τῆς πατερικῆς θεολογίας εἰς τὴν ἔνοιαν τοῦ προσώπου», in L. SIASOS [ed.], *Ἱμάτια Φωτὸς Ἀρχήτου*:

and nature are connected.²⁵ However, Zizioulas, who in deference to the Church Fathers to whom he refers – Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Maximus the Confessor – attributes particular importance to the link between the trinitarian mystery and man, shows (without being exhaustive) how even from the philosophical point of view the existentialist matrix of these notions may be enriched by what may be learnt from theological reflection.²⁶

In relation to the problem of human existence, Zizioulas starts by distinguishing two possible philosophical approaches. According to the *substantialist approach*, man is an *individual*, i.e. a being considered as

Διεπιστημονική του προσώπου [Thessaloniki, 2002], pp. 73–123, here p. 73; originally published in *Χαριστήρια εις τιμήν του Μητροπολίτου Χαλκιδόνοϋ Μελίτωνος* [Thessaloniki, 1977], pp. 287–323). The English edition (trans. by N. Russell) renders *προσωπικότητα* as ‘personhood’ (‘From Mask to Person: The Birth of an Ontology of Personhood’, in *Being as Communion*, pp. 27–65, here p. 27). The French edition (trans. by A. Tsatsis) uses the more psychological term ‘personnalité’ (‘Du personnage à la personne: La notion de la personne et l’hypostase ecclésiale’, in *L’être ecclésial*, pp. 23–55, here p. 23); the Italian edition (trans. by D. Varasi) renders *προσωπικότητα* by the more general term ‘dimensione personale’ (‘Dalla maschera alla persona: la nozione di “persona” e l’ipostasi ecclesiale’, in *L’essere ecclesiale* [Magnano, Biella: Qiqajon, 2007], pp. 23–69, here p. 23).

²⁵ Cf. ‘Appendix: Person and Individual – a “Misreading” of the Cappadocians?’, in *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 171–77.

²⁶ I think I have indicated sufficiently that in Zizioulas there is an existentialist approach, which directs his theological reflection without, however, leading it to clash with dogma (cf. CHIAPETTI, «*La libertà di Dio è la libertà del Padre*», ch. 1). In this sense, if we distance ourselves from Lucian Turcescu (cf. L. TURCESCU, “Person” Versus “Individual”, and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa’, *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 [2002], pp. 527–39), we mitigate Aristotle Papanikolaou’s judgement (cf. A. PAPANIKOLAOU, ‘Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise? Response to Lucian Turcescu’, *Modern Theology* 20, no. 4 [2004], pp. 601–7). I recognise, however, with Papanikolaou and Ilarion Alfeev, that in the Fathers there is a certain ‘existentialist’, or rather ‘personalist’, dimension (cf. PAPANIKOLAOU, ‘From Sophia to Personhood’, p. 19; I. ALFEEV, ‘The Patristic Heritage and Modernity’, paper delivered at the ninth International Conference on Russian monasticism and spirituality, Bose Monastery, Italy, 20 September 2001, translated by H. Bos, at: <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/11/1/2.aspx> (accessed 12 March 2021)).

a self-subsistent substance, endowed with a capacity to evaluate, control and dominate reality. According to the *personalist approach*, man is a *person*, i.e. a being constituted in relation to *another*, endowed with a creative capacity, which consists in *ontological freedom*, i.e. the exercise of the faculty to imprint on created reality a personal, and therefore relational, mode of existence.²⁷ In particular, man is a *person* in terms of *hypostaticity* (unique particularity) and *ecstaticity* (movement of communion towards the other).²⁸ Ecstaticity is then to be understood within a process of *personal-causal derivation* which ontologically constitutes the person in relation both to the cause and to all other beings possessing the same nature, so that we can speak of the *person* as a presentation, a mode of being, of *nature in its totality*,²⁹ and in this sense a *hypostatic fullness*.³⁰ The existence of the person – as an ontological datum, and therefore not dependent on the type of approach – is marked by the necessity of his nature, which is manifested eminently in death, as the disappearance of his being and therefore of freedom (or at least of his possibility of existence).³¹ Thus, in Zizioulas, we see the affirmation of the *dialectic* between *person* and *nature*, relative – in theological terms – to *this state of creation*, the resolution of which – again in theological terms – is the very content of the salvific economy and, even more profoundly, of trinitarian existence.³²

²⁷ This is the case with art and history; cf. 'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood', in *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 206–49, here at pp. 215–22, originally published in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (1975), pp. 401–48.

²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 213.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*

³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 112.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 227.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 237–47.