

Patristics and the Postmodern in the Theology of John Zizioulas*

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Abstract: This review article argues that, in contrast to the older movements of Sophia mysticism and neo-Palamism, associated with the names of Soloviev and Florovsky respectively, a new book by Zizioulas represents the emergence of a new school of Eastern Orthodox theology. Like the older movements, this newer, more personalist movement seeks to bridge the gap between Orthodox thought and the contemporary world. Where sophiology and neo-Palamism attempted to speak to the theology and culture of western modernity, Zizioulas addresses the more post-modernist themes of identity and otherness.

IN THE ENCYCLOPAEDIC *Handbuch der Ostkirchenkunde*, Bernhard Schultze notes the existence of two major schools of thought emerging from an Orthodox background since the late nineteenth century.¹ These are – or were, in the case of the first, for it is unclear whether there are any serious contemporary exponents today – the Sophiology movement of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian theology, and the Palamite or neo-Palamite movement, since the 1930s. The first takes its origin in the romantic-mystical speculations of Vladimir Soloviev and his disciples, the second in the neo-patristic *ressourcement* of Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky and John Meyendorff. But there have been hints, ever since Christos Yannaras'

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1. B. Schultze, "Hauptthemen der neueren russischen Theologie", in W. Nyssen et al (eds.), *Handbuch der Ostkirchenkunde: Band 1* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1984) 321-389.

Person und Eros,² of a third, more personalist movement in Orthodox thought, emerging from a Greek rather than Russian provenance.

These hints found some support in John Zizioulas' *Being as Communion*,³ and appear to be confirmed in his new book, *Communion and Otherness*.⁴ The book has an ecumenical scope. It has been edited by Paul McPartlan, Professor of Systematic Theology and Ecumenism at the Catholic University of America and a member of the Joint International Commission for Dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church. The foreword is by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. The emergent school is not in opposition to the earlier Palamite school: in dedicating his new book to Georges Florovsky as well as to Colin Gunton, Zizioulas honours both a former colleague and also the key figure in the twentieth century patristic revival that brought Orthodox theology into dialogue as an equal partner with western theological streams. However, basing his own version of neo-patristic theology on Maximus the Confessor rather than Gregory Palamas, Zizioulas succeeds in offering an innovative theological commentary on some contemporary theological and ecclesiological questions.⁵

Like Zizioulas' earlier book, this new book is a collection of essays. This may put some readers off, as may the fact that the essays stretch over more than thirty years, the first having been published in 1975 and the most recent being the three long, completely new chapters. However, the essays show a remarkable consistency of thought over that period, and some of the points made in the older essays – even for those who have previously read them – take on a new significance through their juxtaposition to the newer sections. The book is a continuation and a development of the ideas put forward in Zizioulas' earlier book, but extends them from the ecclesiological focus of that book into the more foundational questions of theological anthropology.

So how does Zizioulas make use of Maximus the Confessor, to enable him to speak to our contemporary situation? This, rather than any examination of Maximus' thought as such, will be the focus of this review article. My interest, in other words, is less in the patristic

2. Christos Yannaras, *Person und Eros: Eine Gegenüberstellung der Ontologie der griechischen Kirchenväter und der Existenzphilosophie des Westens* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982). Significantly, Yannaras also gives more space to Maximus than to any other patristic author, closely followed by John of Damascus.

3. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (New York: St Vladimir's Press, 1985).

4. John D Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London/New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

5. In Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 63 references (most of them in the more recent writings) to Maximus, as compared to 41 to the next most frequently cited author, Basil, and 36 to Gregory the Theologian, in third place. There are only 14 references to Gregory Palamas.

material than in Zizioulas' contemporary theological use of it. But to examine this we need to conduct a close reading of some key themes in Maximus, as presented by Zizioulas. Maximus' project can be seen briefly as to answer the attractions of neo-Platonic (and gnostic) flight of the one to the One, and to offer in their place a full-bodied, incarnational soteriology of participation in the life of the triune God.

We need to consider the meaning of the terms *nous* and noetic, both very common in Maximus' writings. Thunberg⁶ cites Lossky to the effect that these terms, as used in the Orthodox church fathers generally, are best translated as person and personal. We do not have to limit these terms to the domains of the cognitive or the psychological; in fact that would be a diminution. Logos can be understood as linked with intelligence,⁷ mind – as by Parmenides. Being is then understood as contemplation, and ultimate being is to be approached through contemplation. There is, of course, a whole tradition of mystical theology based on the idea of unity with God through contemplation. The problems Zizioulas discerns in this are that, first, as Levinas has demonstrated, this knowledge-based ontology is totalitarian – it involves the denial of otherness; and second, union with God tends to involve leaving behind the material world. Zizioulas draws on Maximus' exploration of Logos as a personal principle, and therefore a basis for an ontology of communion, that is, a notion of being that involves otherness at its core.

Maximus leads his reader through a dynamic of stages on life's way, in which step one is from potential being (*to einai*) to good, or actual, being (*to eu einai*), step two (or we could say, the diversion) is the risk of a "fall" from good being (*to eu einai*) to evil (or inauthentic) being (*to pheu einai*),⁸ and step three is from good being (*to eu einai*) to eternal being (*to aei einai*). Zizioulas takes us through the same dynamic in language that speaks more clearly to the postmodern mind by making several distinctions in the concept of otherness: between difference and division, and then between otherness as difference and otherness as uniqueness.⁹ The emphasis underlying this progression, and standing at the end of it, is for Zizioulas the belief that personhood must be understood ontologically. Zizioulas' contemporary use of this

6. Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund: Håran Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1965) 119.

7. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 20.

8. On this usage by Maximus in a rhetorical wordplay providing a negative counterpart to *to eu einai*, see I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena", in A. H. Armstrong (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) 421-533.

9. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 40.

patristic schema, which is my primary focus here, can be followed in a similar three steps.

First, the distinction between otherness as difference and otherness as division. Difference in nature leads to division, and this destroys communion, and leads ultimately to death. Difference, however, is in itself good (*to eu einai*), and communion cannot exist without it. Difference is in fact presupposed by communion; communion cannot exist without difference, or otherness. Division, however, is the degeneration of difference, and leads to decomposition. For communion we need distance, space, and therefore otherness, but division is in fact the rejection of otherness. Zizioulas' notion of hell is the opposite of Sartre's well-known quip – hell is not other people, but isolation from the proper otherness of communion. Further, otherness is not moral or psychological, but ontological: we can never grasp completely *what* another person is, but only say *who* he/she is.¹⁰ This means that otherness is inconceivable without relationship, and that it generates relationship. The doctrine of the Trinity posits otherness as constitutive of being. The otherness between God and created being is an absolute otherness (there is to be no confusion of natures, to follow the Chalcedonian definition). Otherness as difference, whether trinitarian otherness within God or the otherness of Creator and creation, is always a personal otherness, and held in a perfect communion. Once otherness becomes division, as it does in the relationship between God and humanity, it has entered a “fallen” state of existence (*to pheu einai*).

By aspiring to be like God, Adam – representing the archetypal human being – rejects the other as constitutive of his being and, in a metaphorical assertion of the human condition, declares himself to be the ultimate explanation of his own existence.¹¹ Here self takes priority over other, and otherness and communion no longer coincide. Philosophy still tends to start with self as logically prior to the other. It is Adam's primaeval rejection of otherness that is his downfall, a fall into self-love (*filautia*). Zizioulas finds this insight of Maximus lacking in some of the key contemporary writers, notably Levinas and Lacan, for whom he believes desire springs not from relationship with an other, but from a lack, a deficiency, or deficit in the self.¹² (I shall refrain from commenting on whether this reading by Zizioulas does justice to either Levinas or Lacan.) God, as our ultimate other, is the destination of our desire, the place where desire finds its *stasis*, its rest.

10. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 5. This idea is succinctly echoed in a new work by a Melbourne novelist, in which a primary school child understands herself, after a disturbing incident, to have been treated purely instrumentally: “whatever this is, it's not personal, it has nothing to do with who she is, it's just *what* she is....” (Deborah Forster, *The Book of Emmett* [Sydney: Vintage, 2009] 82).

11. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 43.

12. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 50.

This is an act of communion in which self is not negated but endorsed in life. Desire is not an act of the will, or of the self, but rather a call from the other, and ultimately, a gift from the other. To be a person, in this view, involves being other and also being relational – so it affirms rather than rejects its other. Self exists in being affirmed as other, by an other – as opposed to existing by standing in contrast with, or over against, an other. Love, in this view, is a gift from an other, and it affirms me in my otherness. Fear of the other can only be overcome by love, so that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).¹³

Nature stands in contrast to person, in referring to the generic or the “in common”, the *what*, rather than the particular, the *who*. Nature is a generalisation that comes into being after the particular, but finds its most authentic expression only when it is “in Christ”, that is, in the hypostasis of the Logos. This, for Zizioulas, is the limitation of ethics: ethics generalises, but otherness excludes generalisation.¹⁴ Christ’s teachings are not, for Zizioulas, centred on some abstract notion of justice but on the uniqueness of the human person, the *other* person – who is therefore to be accepted and loved.¹⁵ God is love; that is to say, love is not simply an attribute or act of God, but is constitutive of God.

Secondly, the distinction between otherness as difference and otherness as uniqueness. This distinction takes otherness to a new, more personalised, plane that corresponds to Maximus’ good being (*to eu einai*). Difference in the end can be defined adjectivally in terms of general attributes. It can describe what a thing, or indeed a person, is – what sort of thing or person. But it cannot encapsulate the person him-/herself; the person is unique, and beyond descriptors. Person is, as Zizioulas has previously argued, a, or *the*, primitive concept, the concept that cannot be reduced to other categories.¹⁶

Otherness is characteristic of God’s relationship to the world. The gulf of this otherness needs to be bridged, for our salvation to be attained, precisely because the gulf is real.¹⁷ It is not the otherness of necessity, for God creates in freedom, or freely creates being. This being is being in the fullest sense – our creaturely being is just as real as God’s being, but it is being that is other than Godself. So the being of creation is located not in nature (the result of necessity) but in personhood (the result of freedom). If this creaturely otherness from

13. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 55.

14. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 67.

15. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 153.

16. Zizioulas’ point here corresponds to Derrida’s understanding of ethics as beginning with respect for “absolute singularity”, and prior to that, Levinas’ statement that “ethics as the conscience of a responsibility to the other...does not lose one in the generality; far from it, it singularises, it posits one as a unique individual” (Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995] 78). I am grateful to Mark Brett for this reference.

17. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 19.

God is reduced to a function of substance, the relationship between God and the world is mediated through either ethics or psychology, either extrinsic commandment (the requirement of obedience) or intrinsic feeling (the catch-cry of pietism).¹⁸ Maximus, according to Zizioulas, was the first to relativise these pseudo-mediations of God's presence, and to step, in effect, "beyond good and evil".¹⁹ Maximus locates the root of evil in self-love, not in a moralistic sense, but as the failure of a relational interaction.²⁰ The antidote to this is *askesis*, self-emptying, not for its own sake, but again as a relational interaction – directed to love.

Thirdly, our communion with God must be understood in ontological terms. This gives rise to an ontology of personhood: we are called to personhood through participating in the life of God, something that corresponds to Maximus' eternal life (*to aei einai*). So it is a *person* who connects God to creation. Zizioulas proposes this in opposition to any substantialist notion, like the analogy of being. Neither modalism nor Arianism, according to Zizioulas, could tolerate real otherness: both sought to homogenise. Later, Zizioulas will argue that the real point is not merely to tolerate, but to welcome and accept otherness. Tolerance of otherness is the modernist quest. It can be seen as a minimum requirement of civilised life but is hardly a point of access to the kingdom of God, or to participation in the life in Christ.

Being that takes its origin from personhood (as opposed to substance) possesses a *tropos*, a capacity for modification and innovation.²¹ Thus we have an ontological and theological basis for an apprehension of human creativity. Contrary to George Steiner,²² Zizioulas concludes that human creativity is not exercised against God, but is God-given and expresses the free, because personal, basis of creaturely being. Otherness is a gift. Adam is called by God out of merely animal existence, and it is this call by God – not any notion of substance ("human nature") or characteristics (for example, rationality) as in the classical definitions – that best describes the emergence of humanity.

The worst enemy of otherness is death, because death homogenises. This is why death is the "last enemy" (1 Corinthians 15:26).²³ The death that is the outcome of the fall means the death of the body. Christian anthropology cannot imagine human identity without the body.²⁴ The body is the vehicle of otherness and also of communion. At the same time it establishes our personal identity, our who-ness. The other is not

18. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 20.

19. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 200, n. 85.

20. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 84.

21. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 40.

22. George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991).

23. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 40.

24. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 61-62.

another thing, *allo*, but a personal other, *allos/allê* – and I owe it to my other to *be* other to him/her. So there can be no absolute priority of the other at the expense of my own personal identity. We should not simply, therefore, take self-denial as a basis for ethics, for if I were to negate my self, I would deprive you (my other) of me (who is your other).²⁵ Otherness affirms self as a secondary product of communion, rather than as its starting point, but it affirms self nonetheless – and ultimately in a more satisfying way. Each person is unique, on the basis of being in the image of God,²⁶ that is, on the basis of a unique relationship, but not on the basis of particular natural or moral characteristics. Again, we have to do here with a move from otherness as difference (a moral or natural category) to otherness as uniqueness, which belongs to personhood: uniqueness is a matter of identity, and that depends on relationships.²⁷

For Maximus, otherness is constitutive of the whole created universe, just as it is constitutive of the being of God as Trinity.²⁸ The universe is ontologically grounded *personally*, that is, in a person, the person of Christ, the Logos. Otherness and communion coincide in Christ, and this conjunction triumphs over death. While death prevails, self and nature claim ontological priority over personhood. Death places a horizon on human experience, beyond which we cannot see. This is why personhood cannot be extrapolated from experience but must be received from an other. Death is, once again, the “last enemy”. Against the neo-Platonic or gnostic flight of the one to the One (which for Zizioulas actually means death), life is engagement with otherness. The model for this is the life of the Trinity, which is never reducible to one.

The Palamite “essence/energies” distinction is another way of trying to resolve this problem of the relationship between God and creation.²⁹ It has the advantage of positing an ontological connection (neither ethical nor psychological) between God and the world, so as to respect both communion and otherness. Zizioulas,³⁰ however, judges it to be less than fully satisfactory because it affords less room for trinitarian thinking. In this regard he can to some degree accept the criticisms of Palamite theology offered by Dorothea Wendebourg and, following her, Catherine LaCugna.³¹ Zizioulas emphasises the difference between person and energy, a difference that he acknowledges may become obscured in an over-emphasis on energy at the expense of

25. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 68.

26. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 70.

27. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 69.

28. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 31.

29. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 26-27.

30. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 28-29.

31. For LaCugna’s dependence on Wendebourg, see D. Reid, “The Defeat of Trinitarian Theology – an Alternative View”, *Pacifica*, 9:3 (1996) 289-300.

person. While this is a generous concession to the critics of Palamism, I do not feel entirely persuaded by it. The Palamite distinction between act and being should logically safeguard the notion of person, or for that matter of God, as more than act or energy.³²

Zizioulas³³ thus guides us through a reading of Maximus in several discrete steps. Unity is brought about not by nature or necessity, but personally. This means that the important thing for identity is not what things are, but their way or manner (*tropos*) of being. A person's manner of being can change (unlike nature, which is fixed), and so his/her relation to God can move into a relationship of communion. Finally, the one cannot precede the many, but the many plays a constitutive role in the one, just as persons – both divine and human – are constituted by otherness.³⁴ This in turn of course has ecclesiological implications.

What is new about the Zizioulas approach? All this is brought into a critique of the contemporary depersonalisation of human beings. This depersonalisation stems ultimately from any definition of being, including personal being, in terms of act or substance. Persons can be reduced to their functions, and to their generic characteristics, and on this basis marginalised or rejected. This sort of marginalisation or rejection is as characteristic of contemporary corporate culture as it is of the more obviously objectionable stereotyping of persons on the basis of natural characteristics: gender, ethnicity, ability, and so on. Because even postmodern philosophers do not, according to Zizioulas, completely escape the starting point in the self, they are unable to counteract this depersonalisation. The only antidote is to understand being on the basis of personhood:³⁵ the way persons relate to other persons. And the basis of this personalism cannot be extrapolated from normal human experience: its underpinning lies solely in the personal relations within the Trinity and the anthropological perspective that sees humans as being in the image of the triune God.

The characteristics of the two previously mentioned schools of Eastern theology are that each in its own way attempted to speak to the concerns of the day, in particular the questions of broadly ecumenical theology within the culture of modernity. Sophiology drew on the wisdom traditions of biblical and eastern Christian thought to speak to the late romanticism and aestheticism of the 1880s and 1890s.³⁶ Its primary theme was the beauty of holiness. That concept of

32. See D. Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theology* (Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1997).

33. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 23.

34. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 38.

35. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 94-95.

36. See especially Paul Valliere, "Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with Modern Civilization", in J. D. Kornblatt and R. E. Gustafson (eds.), *Russian Religious Thought* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996) 176-92.

beauty, which spoke to the artists of the *belle époque*, died in the trenches of the Great War. The Palamite revival provided an Orthodox response to the *ressourcement* of the French Catholic theology of the day, the return to the patristic sources. The Orthodox patristic revival, announced by Florovsky at the Pan-Orthodox Congress of 1936, was – especially as presented by Vladimir Lossky during the 1940s and 1950s – an articulate apologia for Orthodoxy to a western audience. In a similar way, Zizioulas’ proposal for a personalist concept of being both strikes at the heart of older substantialist ontologies, and speaks, but by no means uncritically, to a postmodern mindset.

Two final questions. Do one or two writers constitute a new school of theology?

And if so, why would this new school be relevant? To the first I would say, possibly not – except that the influence of John Zizioulas is clearly to be seen elsewhere in Orthodox theology, for example in the recent Anglican-Orthodox Agreed Statement.³⁷ Zizioulas has even more recently joined the official international Roman Catholic-Orthodox dialogue, and his potential influence there remains to be seen. To the second question, we need to recognise that the theology, and theological anthropology, developed by Maximus and his predecessors were ideas they developed for a reason. Their concern was soteriology. What must we say about God, and about Christ, to safeguard this radical and all-encompassing vision of a reign of God and a world made new? To avoid anything less than the full-bodied incarnational and cosmic scope of salvation offered by the good news? Answer: we have to be very careful not to compromise what we say about Jesus Christ. This insight of Maximus is as relevant today as it was then, and the high value that his interpreter John Zizioulas gives to the human person is as relevant today as it ever was, if not more so. This is because the God-given value of the human person is no longer something that can be taken for granted; it must be defended. Its only lasting defence will not be on the basis of some now questionable Enlightenment humanism, but on the basis of a bold and carefully articulated Christology.

37. *The Church of the Triune God: The Cyprus Agreed Statement of the International Commission for Anglican – Orthodox Theological Dialogue*, 2006 (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2006).