

## John Zizioulas' concept of the person: a critical appraisal

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### Abstract

Much of John Zizioulas' treatment of the human being as a person revolves around four crucial concepts: being, otherness, ontology, and freedom. Our critical appraisal of Zizioulas' concept of human personhood emphasizes the importance of creative tension between (ontological) freedom and contingency as understood within the frame of reference of the human being's intrinsic contingency as a finite, created being. According to this concept, the other (another distinct embodied personhood) is neither an object nor competition but rather a gift for one's self who reminds me of one's limitedness, dependence, and deep relatedness. Thus, the other helps the human self realize his/her potential in a mutual sharing of love. We examine Zizioulas' critical stance to the modern notion that 'otherness is necessary for freedom to exist' against the background of his treatment of 'otherness' and 'nature,' as well as 'otherness' and 'new being,' 'Logos,' and 'new nature.' Finally, we lay out Zizioulas' mature ontology of human personhood as a profound albeit mystical account of what it means to be human in our fragmented age.

**Key words:** John Zizioulas, the ontology of personhood, otherness, freedom, relational personalism

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### 1 Introduction

In our article, we wish to introduce John Zizioulas (1931) concept of the person. We will first offer a concise introduction to Zizioulas as a thinker and author. Subsequently, we will look at the core themes of his intellectual deliberations, and finally, we will delve deeper into his reflections on what constitutes the human person, how our insight into this topic should reflect our understanding of transcendence and the world, and what the implications of a robust definition of the human person are for us today. Our main focus will revolve around Zizioulas' two major books related to our topic, *Being as Communion* (1997; originally published in 1985) and *Communion and Otherness* (2006), but we will also refer to some of his minor works.

John Zizioulas is distinguished both as a scholar and as a churchman. He currently serves as titular Metropolitan of Pergamon, which is a high ecclesiastical position in the Orthodox Church. His allegiance is to Bartholomew I., the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. His voice is well-respected in the Eastern Orthodox tradition and beyond. Zizioulas owes his popularity to his amiable personality, ecumenical openness, and incisive theological argumentation. (Ickert, 1998) As a scholar, Zizioulas' journey began at the University of Thessaloniki and the University of Athens. As a young scholar, Zizioulas quickly realized that he was drawn to studying Patristics. His first international experience is linked to his patristics studies at Harvard Divinity School, under the tutelage of the famous Georges Florovsky (1893-1979). After receiving his Ph.D. from his home institution, the University of Athens, his academic career led him to foreign teaching positions: first, at the University of Glasgow and later, at the University of Edinburgh. In addition to these longer-term positions, he held short-term visiting positions at King's College in London, Gregorian University in Rome, and the University of Geneva, Switzerland. His international experience further enhanced his academic genius and increased his ecclesial and theological influence. We can see this based on his ecumenical

relationships and theological contributions to a wide array of topics, including those of the Eucharist, Trinitarian theology, Christology, Theology of creation and its implication for the environmental studies, as well as his views on Ecclesiology. (Paschalides – Torrance, 2018)

Still, among his wide range of theological and philosophical topics, the topic of human anthropology stands out. Coupled with it are his reflections on otherness and freedom. As an Eastern Orthodox theologian, Zizioulas does not shy away from employing mystery and the realm of transcendence in his efforts to speak about freedom, otherness, and the nature of personhood, both divine and human. (Schroeder, 2001: 243-264) He is well-read in current philosophy and theology, but his wealth of knowledge also goes deep into the patristics, namely the Cappadocian Fathers – Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389), and Basil the Great (329-379) – and to Maximus Confessor (580-662) (Collins, 2001). In his incisive treatment of the ontology of the person, he attempts to balance the significance of otherness on the one hand and the importance of unity, on the other, for the communion as the constitutive environment of personhood. (Fisher, 1996; Fox, 2001) Thus, both plurality (representing otherness) and unity share equal ontological priority with each other in Zizioulas' relational ontology. This became obvious already in his seminal *Being as Communion*, a groundbreaking work he published originally in 1985. To the less trained eye, perhaps, it may have appeared that Zizioulas takes preference for unity when it comes to defining the essence of communion. To offset this seeming asymmetry, he devoted his later major work, *Communion and Otherness* (2007), to explain the essential significance of plurality (otherness) for communion.

The dialectics of unity and otherness (plurality) becomes more complex in the ontological realm of divinity, than in the dimension of temporality. Being a good Orthodox theologian, Zizioulas upholds the 'monarchia' of the Father, while carefully defining the relationships of the three Persons living in an eternal, mutually defining communion with each other. However, Zizioulas goes beyond what some might call theological speculations regarding the inner life of the Godhead (the so-called 'Immanent Trinity') and exposes the implications of this foundational 'unity-plurality' dialectics for our understanding of the Church (hence his ecclesiastical considerations) and theological anthropology (which he also considers fundamentally relational). Saint Maximus Confessor serves him as an inspiration for developing his own eschatological ontology. (Knight, 2000) According to Zizioulas, only the eschaton, i.e., the time at the fulfillment of the history of the world brought about by its Creator, can reveal what is ultimately real and what is not. In a sense, such an approach bears some resemblance with the Platonic notion of 'shadows' in contrast to the 'real' entities that are beyond our immediate experience. For Zizioulas, unlike for Plato, however, the tension is not between the concomitant worlds of ideals and phenomena but rather between what is as 'temporal reality' and what will be revealed in the eschaton – hence the term 'eschatological ontology.' (Zizioulas, 2008)

The wealth of Zizioulas' intellectual contribution is vast, and we will not have enough space to come to terms with it in this short paper. Instead, we will focus on his treatment of personhood and examine the threads of his thoughts as they interlace the realm of the divine and the realm of human beings. Much of Zizioulas' treatment of the human being as a person revolves around four crucial concepts: being, otherness, ontology, and freedom. Our critical appraisal of Zizioulas' concept of human personhood emphasizes the importance of creative tension between (ontological) freedom and contingency as understood within the frame of reference of the human being's intrinsic contingency as a finite, created being. According to this concept, the other (another distinct embodied personhood) is neither an object nor competition but rather a gift for one's self who reminds me of one's limitedness, dependence, and deep relatedness. Thus, the other helps the human self realize his/her potential in a mutual sharing of love. We examine Zizioulas' critical stance to the modern notion

that ‘otherness is necessary for freedom to exist’ against the background of his treatment of ‘otherness’ and ‘nature,’ as well as ‘otherness’ and ‘new being,’ ‘Logos,’ and ‘new nature.’ Finally, we lay out Zizioulas’ mature ontology of human personhood as a profound albeit mystical account of what it means to be human in our fragmented age.

## **2 Zizioulas’ Ontology of Personhood**

While theological roots of Zizioulas thinking can easily be traced to Biblical revelation, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Maximus Confessor, philosophically he was influenced by John Macmurray (1998), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1965; Pannenberg was also a theologian), Martin Buber (2012), Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Nikolaj Berdiaeff. What connects these thinkers is their inclination to understand the human person in relational terms and their critique of modern individualism in philosophical conceptions of the human being (with dire ethical consequences).

Zizioulas further develops some of the ideas of these thinkers while also diverging in other emphases. He blames the bishop Augustine of Hippo Regius (354-430) and the early medieval philosopher Boethius (477-524) for planting the seeds of what would later become an individualistic menace permeating the whole Western civilization with its dire consequences for political and social philosophy. Zizioulas should not be viewed as a political or social reactionary, however. Instead, he should be regarded on his own terms as a philosophically well-informed Greek Orthodox thinker who weighs critically on the modern conceptions of individuals as autonomous selves, self-contained, self-directed, and self-constituted ‘I’s’ who above all else value their freedom defined egotistically.

The Western philosophical category of an ‘individual,’ according to Zizioulas, is fundamentally dissimilar from the traditional patristic understanding of a ‘person.’ (Melissaris, 1999) The notion of personhood goes beyond any individualistic frame of reference, and it most certainly should not be defined as “a complex of natural, psychological or moral qualities which are in some sense ‘possessed’ by or ‘contained’ in the human individuum” (Zizioulas, 1975: 407). Of course, each person maintains his/her uniqueness as their intrinsic quality, but this uniqueness is not guaranteed by any property of the substance or nature, according to Zizioulas (1997: 47)

“Personhood is not about qualities or capacities of any kind: biological, social or moral. Personhood is about hypostasis, i.e. the claim to uniqueness in the absolute sense of the term, and this cannot be guaranteed by reference to sex or function or role, or even cultivated consciousness of the “self” and its psychological experiences, since all of these can be classified, thus representing qualities shared by more than one being and not point to absolute uniqueness.” (Zizioulas, 1991: 45)

Zizioulas’ next distinction between the Western conception of the term ‘individual’ and the notion of a ‘person’ is that individuals can be enumerated, whereas persons are unique, sacred, and thus devoid of the possibility of being enumerated. Zizioulas then continues to offer a balanced view on the human person’s distinctiveness and uniqueness on the one hand and their relationality and fundamental contingency (or ‘heteronomy’) on the other. Macmurray’s two-volume seminal work entitled *Persons in Relation* (1998) seems to have had considerable influence on Zizioulas. While in his first volume, Macmurray wished to recalibrate the center of philosophy from thought to action, his second volume makes the case that his/her personal relationships substantially determine each human agent’s personal life. The human agent’s ‘I’ is thus never alone but rather always in this constitutive relationship of ‘I/You,’ which is mutually formational.

Before Zizioulas gets to the human ‘I’ as a person, however, he first carefully explicates the personal, or rather ‘tri-personal’ nature of the divine being. “The

concept of the person with its absolute and ontological content was born historically from the endeavor of the Church to give ontological expression to its faith in the Triune God.” (Zizioulas, 1997: 36) In his seminal work *Being as Communion* (1997), he writes: “God as Father and not as substance, perpetually confirms through ‘being’ His free will to exist. And it is precisely His Trinitarian existence that constitutes this confirmation: the Father out of love—that is, freely—begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit. Thus God as person—as the hypostasis of the Father—makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God.” (Zizioulas, 1997: 41) The Father, in Zizioulas’ view, is the *fons divinitate*, i.e., the fountain spring of the Godhead. Moreover, the Father’s personhood is both hypostatic and ecstatic, meaning that the Father is free from the necessity of nature to accomplish that which He freely wishes. “As person, the Father is not simply the divine essence, but through a personal freedom as love constitutes the very life of God as trinitarian.” Thus, “to be person ... is to be constituted as unique and irreducible in relations of freedom and love.” (Papanikolaou, 2011: 252) What follows is arguably the best summary of Zizioulas’ core argument on this topic by one of his most renowned interpreters and followers, Aristotle Papanikolaou:

“A relational ontology of trinitarian personhood means, for Zizioulas, that freedom is at the heart of ontology insofar as ‘being’ means to be free from the ‘given.’ For created existence, this means to be free from finitude and death that are inherent to created existence. To be is to exist in an eternal relationship with the loving God and only through such a relationship is created existence ‘free’ to be eternally in loving union with this God. But in order for God to give this freedom from the ‘given,’ Zizioulas argues that God’s mode of existence, *tropos hyparxeos*, must itself be free from necessity and must be freely constituted. This freedom within God’s very being is the condition for the possibility of the freedom of created existence from the ‘given’ of its own nature, and this freedom within God’s being can only be affirmed, according to Zizioulas, through the principle of the monarchy of the Father.” (Papanikolaou, 2004: 603)

Overall, what we can see and appreciate in Zizioulas treatment of the topic of personhood in general and the divine Trinitarian personhood, in particular, is the constitutive nature of relational ontology. (Wilks, 1995) When speaking of human personhood, Zizioulas emphasizes the importance of creative tension between ontological freedom (*autonomy*) and contingency (*heteronomy*). As God’s good creatures, humans are invited to embrace their freedom of temporal, limited, contingent creatures who are essentially and ontologically different from God and yet relationally constituted as persons by being included in the Trinitarian communion of love. We may call this the ‘qualified freedom of a contingent creation.’ As God’s creation, the human agent is dependent on God for a sense of ultimate fulfillment, which is attained by adopting a vision of reality and a corresponding moral outlook that enacts the adopted vision of reality. This has far-reaching ethical, social, and environmental/ecological implications (Skira, 2003).

### **2.1 ‘Otherness’ of the Other as a Gift**

The question of ‘otherness’ is a sensitive one, and Zizioulas devotes much time to carefully incorporate a sound understanding of otherness in its relation to freedom. (Harrison, 1998) He criticizes the generally accepted notion that otherness is necessary for freedom to exist. According to this views, “if there is no absolute, ontological otherness between God and the world, there is no ontological freedom allowing each of these two ‘beings’ to be themselves and thus to be at all.” (Zizioulas, 1994: 19) This would mean that God needed the created world to be himself, which would imply that the world exists necessarily for God to be God. Such a view ignores the existence of an important ontological dividing line between Creator and creation,

the ontological abyss that separates eternity from temporality. The contrary is true, according to Zizioulas. Human agents as persons are free because they are not part of the divine being. The human person's being is not necessary but contingent, which is something we ought to embrace as a gift, not as a fateful limitation. One of the most significant implications of this situation is that there is no divine karma, fate, a necessity that controls human life.

The chasm between transcendence and immanence was bridged, according to Zizioulas, by the event of the divine Logos' incarnation – hence the importance of Jesus' earthly life both ontologically and catechetically (as a moral example to follow). The divine being is eternally unified in his communion of love – an eternal, perfect fellowship of three distinct and yet mutually constitutive (relationally constitutive) persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. The otherness present in the divine Godhead is not exclusive of limiting but rather constitutive to other persons of the Trinity. Similarly, otherness is constitutive to human beings as unique, sacred persons. The human agent becomes a person precisely because of the context of loving and caring relationships into which one is born and wherein one is nurtured. Memory is crucial in the process of emerging personhood because it enables the human person to remain part of a meaningful story/narrative, sustained and developed by a historically embodied, living tradition that embodies human culture, including its rituals, values, and behavioral patterns. (Zizioulas, 1985)

Freedom should be understood ontologically as an opposite to ontological necessity, according to Zizioulas. Humans do not exist necessarily, but rather are contingent beings. As such, they exercise the freedom to embrace that which is ontologically other than them. The true essence and content of freedom is, in fact, to be here for the other in the freedom of unconditional love (understood in human societies as charity). Freedom should not be understood negatively as freedom from something, but rather freedom for something, namely for the other who needs our spontaneous acts of charity and good will. The other is not an object, nor a competition, but rather a gift for the human person's self. This is a helpful reminder of one's limitedness, dependence, relatedness; in addition, the other helps me realize my potential in a mutual sharing of love.

Naturally, human agents as persons do not experience this perfect harmony of love enacted by concrete acts of freedom very often. The problem can be traced to the existing conflict between the human being and his nature (*ousia*). A terminological clarification is in order here. The term 'hypostasis' (personhood) signifies the particular, whereas the term 'nature' (*physis*) is common to all humans. Personhood and nature correspond to two basic ontological principles: particularity and generality. Person and nature are experienced in tension (conflict) on the ontological level. It is crucial to understand that this conflict is not on the level of consciousness but ontology. The Greek fathers made it an ontological matter, removing it from the level of consciousness, according to Zizioulas. This conflict takes place in the human body. Here it is important to realize that we do not "have" bodies; we "are" bodies as embodied souls. (Chirban, 1996) Our bodily constitution is derived from the bodies of others. Hence, the conflict cannot be resolved outside the body, as we are necessarily bound to our bodies.

Invoking the teaching of Maximus Confessor, Zizioulas reminds us that nature is and must be understood in a positive sense. Maximus Confessor comes with the term '*logos physeos*' (Zizioulas, 1994: 24) – telos of nature. Nature exists in the hypostasis of the Logos. It means that nature is so ordered that it complies with the will of its Creator. Eastern fathers, such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, or John of Damascus, distinguished between the terms 'image' (*eikon*) and 'likeness' (*homoiosis*) in explaining the act of man's being created in God's image. Accordingly, we are born in the image of God but must grow into His likeness. God is a community of love

(agape) – this community of love then defines the human as a person, gives the person his identity, helps one experience uniquely his/her self as the self-giving self in love for the other. The other here is taken not only as nature (as a WHAT) but as a person (a WHO), a particular being. Otherness is understood as uniqueness (on the level of personhood) rather than as difference (natural or moral category).

“What matters ontologically is not ‘what’ one is but the very fact that he or she *is* and is *not someone else*. The tendency of the Greek Fathers to avoid giving any positive content to the *hypostasis* of the Trinity, by insisting that the Father is simply not the Son or the Spirit, and the Son means simply not the Father and so on, points to the true ontology of *hypostasis*: that someone simply *is* and *is himself* or *herself* and not someone else, and this is sufficient to identify him or her as a being in the true sense.” (Zizioulas, 1994: 111)

The human self then is not a self-referential thinking and feeling subject but a radically contingent, relational self.

Otherness is also perceived by Zizioulas as *Eros*. It is a movement, an ecstasy of being, a free movement that moves to the other and is received by the other. In this process, however, their ontological integrity is maintained. Relational ontology implies here, among other things, that there is no self without others. Otherness is established only in true communion, and uniqueness is constituted by this communion. At this point of Zizioulas’ reasoning, we arrive at the core question: What does it mean to be a person? We are reminded again that personhood is not a quality but rather a state of being. A human being first “is” and then he/she “acts.” The question should be answered in a narrative fashion, which enables one to see the roots of who he both culturally and genetically. Throughout the process of answering this question, the limitedness of human being, his contingency, must be openly acknowledged and embraced, as well as his uniqueness, unrepeatability, and, therefore, his irreducibility. The self is not self-sufficient, self-referential, absolutely free in its autonomy. Furthermore, if we define love in ontological terms, love must replace the ontological role of being (*ousia*).

“This point acquires tremendous existential significance when placed in the context of ordinary human life. In relationships of genuine love, which are the proper context for the ‘experience’ of an ontology of personhood, one does not - and should not – identify the other with the help of their qualities (physical, social, moral, etc., i.e. in terms of WHAT), thus rejecting or accepting the other on that basis as a unique and irreplaceable partner in a relationship that matters ontologically.” (Zizioulas, 1994: 111)

Zizioulas encourages humans to participate in the otherness of others as they enact their own unique, relational personhood. This is best achieved in the context of an embodied communion of love. For Zizioulas, such communion can be found in the Church (Zizioulas, 2001; 2006), Christ’s Body present here in the temporal reality, which at the same time spans across the ontological divide into divine communion of love. In Zizioulas’ words, “The monarchy of the Father, and, hence, a relational ontology of trinitarian personhood, is rooted in the experience of God in the eucharist understood as the event of the Body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Papanikolaou, 2004: 603)

## **2.2 Criticism of Zizioulas’ Ontology of Human Personhood**

While Zizioulas is respected in the ecclesiastical circles and among patristic scholars, there is also criticism leveled against his philosophical/theological reasoning. (Jiang, 2014; Lazic, 2002; Turcescu, 2002; Russel, 2003) In his critical paper on Zizioulas patristical exegesis and his concept of human personhood, Lucian Turcescu (2002) opines that “Zizioulas has not convincingly exegeted the Cappadocian theology of person, especially that of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea” but uses instead

“nineteenth- and twentieth-century insights which he then foists on the Cappadocians.” Turcescu further claims that Zizioulas is “in error when he contends that the Cappadocians did not understand a person as an individual or when he credits them with having had the same concerns we moderns have when combating individualism today.” (Turcescu, 2002: 537) Another criticism against Zizioulas is articulated by Rodljub Lzic, a Serbian scholar who takes issue with Zizioulas’ pro-ecumenical approach to theology. Lazic (2002) accuses Zizioulas of tainting his theological argumentation with his desire to advance ecumenical relationships with other traditions. (cf. Weinandy, 2002)

In our opinion, the latter criticism can be disregarded as a poorly informed one, stemming from the author’s lack of understanding of Zizioulas’ core arguments. The former criticism has more grounds, at least in some respects. Turcescu may have a point in questioning the possibility to derive a mature conception of personhood, understood in relational terms, from Gregory of Nyssa. It is also possible to argue that the distinction between the notion of ‘individual’ and the term ‘person’ as applied by Zizioulas is foreign to the Cappadocian Fathers. However, we believe that Zizioulas’ main arguments stand. Moreover, we side with Papanikolaou’s assessment of the legitimacy of Turcescu’s criticism, according to which “Zizioulas’ development of his relational ontology of trinitarian personhood relies least on the thought of Gregory of Nyssa” but rather on “Gregory of Nazianzus,” as Aristotle Papanikolaou (2004: 602) rightly argues.

### **3 Conclusion**

Zizioulas’ fundamental starting point in his treatment of the ontology of the human person is his conviction of realism of divine-human communion, which constitutes a personal ontology. However, some critical questions deserve further deliberation in this respect. Can personal ontology in general be based on this presupposition of the realism of divine-human communion? Can the monarchy of the Father, perceived as constitutive to the Trinitarian communion of the Godhead, be accepted as the sole ground of a personal ontology? (Wilks, 1995) These seem to be the main issues in Zizioulas’ relational ontology of the human person. Also, how do we communicate in our uniqueness with the Divine Other? Wherefrom comes the alienation among persons? How do we define the ontology of virtue?

For Emmanuel Levinas, it is the virtue of heteronomy: thou shalt not resist the other (thou shalt not kill the other). Zizioulas attempts to transcend Levinas’ position by filling it with a more positive conception. There is a problem in Levinas’ notion, namely that the radicalization of the other in Levinas paralyzes us. As a philosopher, Levinas wants to remain a Jew. Here he is bound by deep underlying metaphysical presuppositions the most significant one being that there can be no communion in God and, ontologically speaking, with God, as He is the absolute Other. Martin Buber (2012) has a way of breaking out of Levinas’ impasse. He does it via a philosophical clarification that moves forward when it is willing to engage texts that are mythical/religious (non-discursive) – in such instances, philosophy engages the texts imaginatively. We believe that the ensuing lesson from such critical reflections is that we must move beyond propositional metaphysics. The experience of transcendence may be a common basis for an imaginative discourse across cultures, philosophies, and religions, providing we stay open to engage mythical/religious texts imaginatively and step outside of the so-called ontological immanentism (i.e., a materialistic, monistic framework).

In any case, reading Zizioulas’ text requires an exercise of imagination and trust on the side of the reader, or else it is incommunicable to readers from other backgrounds, even to Christians without a certain mystical experience of the love of the OTHER. But trust and imagination constricted to the dimension of philosophical deliberations

will only get us so far. As Papanikolaou (2004: 603) provocatively reminds us, “in the end, it is not a philosophy that justifies or influences the theological, trinitarian understanding of personhood; only a trinitarian theology that affirms the monarchy of the Father can ground and justify the philosophical notions of person in terms of freedom, uniqueness, and relationality.”

But there is something to be said concerning the kind of relational ontology that Zizioulas proposes. Catherine LaCugna fittingly reminds us that we should not overemphasize the constitutiveness of mutual relations. Even if we still want to affirm the fundamental relationality of each human person as an ontological category, such heteronomy cannot conclusively define who the human person is. Relationality and individuality must be balanced in a carefully construed dialectical relationship. Each person has his/her uniqueness, individuality, and intrinsic value (and, therefore, autonomy). (LaCugna, 1991) A failure to acknowledge this important fact would ultimately lead us to deny the individual human rights and dignity of each unique human person. (Flynn, 2010)

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