

# SEEING FROM THE FUTURE:THE REVERSE PERSPECTIVE AND ESCHATOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN JOHN ZIZIULAS' THEOLOGY

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## Introduction

The reverse perspective – as it characterizes Byzantine iconography<sup>1</sup> – should not be seen as merely an artistic expression by medieval artists; instead, it embodies a profound theological foundation. At the very least, it has significantly influenced Orthodox theological thought, shaping how it understands and perceives the world, historicity, and the concept of the *Anthropos* (ἀνθρώπος). The inversion of theological reasoning can be observed particularly in some modern Orthodox theologians and can be conceived as the language of communication through which theology articulates and conveys its truth. One notable example of such theological discourse can be found in the works of the Metropolitan of Pergamon, John Zizioulas. The Greek theologian proposes eucharistic eschatology as a hermeneutical key that structures his entire theology from the inverted perspective. He represents eschatology not as a linear progression toward the end of time but as a projection from the future that gives existential meaning

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to conventional linear perspective, characterized by focal convergence, Byzantine sacred art employs perspective lines that derive from the depths of the icon and project outward towards the observer, breaking traditional artistic norms and geometric rules. In this structure, the perspective lines end with the observer, who becomes the point toward which the spatial lines are directed.

to what stands before it. This perceptual shift offers a unique framework that breaks the sequential dimension of time, that is, the linear perspective, and inverts the theological scope of Orthodox Christian thought and praxis.

In this theological framework, the future becomes the existential cause of the past and the entire creation, revealing the *inverted mode of causality*, so it is nothing but a future that animates the world and the human being. However, the inverted projection of the *eschata* does not destroy the reality of historicity or humanity but brings them into one metaphysical location, i.e., in the Eucharist. Therefore, the Eucharist encompasses both historical and eschatological dimensions, which paradoxically enable the remembrance of the future. The end is nothing but a locus of cause, a metaphysical momentum in which the separation and fragmentation of time and space are conquered and reconciled. However, when Zizioulas speaks *vis-à-vis* the future, it does not imply a chronology of periods (today and tomorrow) but the totality of time, which, in its very essence, is the eschatological category. In such an understanding, the involvement of the divine in the historical dimension is not an external reality, as one can observe in the Old Testament books, but internal; through the eucharistic mystery, God enters into creation and becomes the very inner experience of the human being. Nevertheless, seeing the things that have to come as the true image of the creation requires perceptual inversion. In this regard, the concept transcends the linearity of time and historicity, breaking conventional chronological notions. It offers profound insights into Christian anthropology and its implications for understanding human existence in relation to the divine and others, while also providing practical relevance for contemporary Orthodox theology.

## The eucharistic eschatology and inverted perspective

The inversion of the eschatological perspective represents one of the most significant theological discourses, proposing a transformation of the entire perceptual system. One is no longer a captive of the past that is subservient to a linear and chronological dynamism towards the world, but by relocating perspective lines inversely, from the beginning to the end, one becomes an “eschatological being”. Such a vision of the world represents an eschatology, not as an apocalyptic ending of the creation but, inversely, as a projection that comes from the future and, through the Eucharist, penetrates every point in time. Thus, as Greek-American theologian John Panteleimon Manoussakis emphasizes, the point of departure for Zizioulas’ theological quest is an attempt to analyze the phenomenology of the interconnectedness between the things to come and the things which are already present.<sup>2</sup> In this vein, by presenting the “eucharistic eschatology” as a hermeneutical key for the exploration of the existential structure of the world, the Greek theologian inverts the theological scope of Eastern Christian thinking, making the *eschata* an essential prism from which the whole creation and historicity should be perceived.<sup>3</sup> The existential meaning of being, for Zizioulas, lies not simply in the history of humanity or present-day realities, but, in its very essence, it is an ontological category. It is the future that validates what comes before it.

Amongst the rich patristic accounts regarding the relationship between the Eucharist and eschatology, Zizioulas gives attention to

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<sup>2</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, “The anarchic principle of christian eschatology in the eucharistic tradition of the Eastern Church,” *Harvard Theological Review* 100, no. 1 (2007): 29-46, at 29.

<sup>3</sup> Pantelis Kalaitzidis, “Eschatology and future-oriented hermeneutics in contemporary orthodox theology: The case of Metropolitan John D. Zizioulas,” in *The Spirit, hermeneutics and dialogues*, ed. Reimund Bieringer, Peter De Mey, Ma. Marilou S. Ibita, and Didier Pollefeyt (Leuven: Peeters, 2019), 155-180, at 164-165.

the writings of St. Maximus the Confessor, which makes “the radical overturning of the ancient Greek notion of causality”.<sup>4</sup> St. Maximus offers a more existential interpretation of the *cause* and its *effect* by proposing the concept of *inverted causality*. He describes the eucharistic synaxis as an image and symbol of the *eschata* concerning the notion of causality, i.e., “what takes place in the divine Eucharist is an *image and symbol* of what is true”.<sup>5</sup> To some degree, this expression aligns with Platonism, as for Maximus, everything in our perceptual system is “images and symbols” of what is hidden, what is “noetic and spiritual”.<sup>6</sup> In compliance with Plato, the observable and seeable world is an image of a steady and infinite universe. However, what distinguishes Maximus’ understanding from the Platonic view is the future-oriented dimension of the Church, which completely inverts the archetypal vision of Hellenic philosophy. In Christian thinking, the archetype stands at the end of history and projects inversely, validating the events that take place in the Liturgy and all things that are prior to it. Therefore, the eucharistic world stands not in a Platonic ideal state, but in the words of Zizioulas, “in the kingdom which is to come”.<sup>7</sup> This mysterious and, at the same time, paradoxical phenomenon shapes a *novel* paradigm of Orthodox thinking, manifesting the transformative inversion of perceptual direction.

Consequently, through the inverted perspective, the earthly reality is undergoing a kind of transformation, as the projection of the *eschata* allows the human person to witness what Zizioulas calls “the daybreak of that *eighth day*,” a unique liturgical dimension of time experienced in every eucharistic celebration. The *eighth-day* mystery,

<sup>4</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *The eucharistic communion and the world* (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, 2011), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Zizioulas, *Eucharistic communion*, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Zizioulas, *Eucharistic communion*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> Zizioulas, *Eucharistic communion*, 44.

in its very essence, embodies the *eschata*, the reality in which transcendence and immanence are existentially encountered. It is the day when the new reality, a mystical *novum*, begins. Thus, comprehending the reality brought by the future *here and now* requires radical reversal, as Manoussakis calls it, “an inverted intentionality”, perfectly embodied in Byzantine iconography,<sup>8</sup> where the depicted world is an eschatological reality, a true image of the future Kingdom. Such an interpretation of eschatology is exclusively Orthodox. In various cultures, religious traditions, and even Christian circles, eschatology is commonly understood as an apocalyptic closure of creation, where the physical and metaphysical world will become one, or the material world will cease to exist, and a more elevated reality begins. Even in the Abrahamic religions (Judaism and Islam), there is only one static endpoint in the future (the linear perspective). However, in Christian eschatology, the logic of linearity is completely reversed: the end (*the not yet*) is the cause for history itself (*the already*), and at the same time, the already is meant to iconise the *not yet*.<sup>9</sup>

Such an inversion is perfectly expressed in the eucharistic prayer during the ἀναφορὰ (*anaphora*) of orthodox Liturgy (both the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil), which represents, as Zizioulas points out, a “stumbling block” for logic: “Remembering . . . the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand and the *second and glorious coming*”.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the Kingdom is revealed not as an anticipation of the last times but as an existential reality that entirely breaks the linear outlook

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<sup>8</sup> Manoussakis, “The anarchic principle,” 42.

<sup>9</sup> Manoussakis, “The anarchic principle,” 34. In orthodox theology, the phrase “already / not yet” expresses the dynamic character of eschatological reality: the Kingdom of God has already been manifested through the incarnation of Christ and is experienced sacramentally within the Church, yet it remains unfulfilled until its ultimate revelation at the end of time.

<sup>10</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 59.

and inverts the chronological dimension of historicity; otherwise, “how could it be that we remember *the second, glorious coming*”.<sup>11</sup> In this vein, Zizioulas writes that “the Eucharist is a remembrance” of the future<sup>12</sup> that redefines traditional understanding of this phenomenon (remembrance) and consequently reverses the entire perceptual direction where the past events and the whole creation are seen from the inverted perspective. Experiencing this paradoxical phenomenon necessitates a radical reorientation of the entire thought system and an inversion of perspective, without which remembering the future would become a logically self-contradictory and theological utopia.

### **The remembrance of the future and the theology of inversion**

With regard to the remembrance of the future, the Greek theologian offers a unique prism, namely the Last Supper event, through which the *kenotic* self-offering of Christ and its inverted dynamic can be explored. It is an existential point, so to speak, a meeting point of history and meta-history, where the earthly Jesus reveals his divinity before the apostles by sharing the heavenly meal. Thus, the Last Supper event is by no means a social act but, in its very essence, manifests the reality of the second glorious coming. Traditionally, in the history of Israel, the Passover meal was led by the head of a household who uttered the speech that was an essential element of this ceremony. This aspect can be seen in the New Testament, however, in a completely different manner that links the Supper to the Eucharist. The bread that was blessed and broken by Christ was given to the disciples as his body; likewise, the blessed cup was given to the twelve as his blood or ‘the new covenant in his blood.’ Apostles received the

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<sup>11</sup> Manoussakis, “The anarchic principle,” 38.

<sup>12</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 58.

bread and blood of their Lord – “do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Unlike the Passover meal (which has a sacrificial quality), in the Last Supper event, two points are missed: (i) the butcher of the paschal lamb; and (ii) the eating of the butchered lamb since Christ is who gives himself as a sacrifice and substitutes the paschal lamb.<sup>13</sup>

Christ as the paschal lamb is a new reality, a new paradigm that completely inverts the perceptual system of the New Testament world. The Passover meal for the people of Israel was a memorial feast of the mighty deeds of God that happened in the past (specifically, it was the remembrance of Exodus); however, in the Last Supper, the “remembrance” itself belongs not to the past but the future. Zizioulas calls it an *imminent reality* that is the future-oriented horizon of this new world – this is a ‘memorial’ of God’s mighty acts that will come to pass. Consequently, the Last Supper event became the commemoration of God’s sacrifice that occurred on the following day and everything that stands in the hereafter, including the Kingdom of God, where Christ will share a paschal meal with his apostles.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, what is essential in the christological sense is that the eucharistic communion and the act of remembrance are not related solely to the mighty deeds and words of Christ (those that have already happened and those that will take place in the future) but to his person.<sup>15</sup> Christ did not invite his disciples to recall past events but to remember him as a person, not to “remember merely ‘my words’ or ‘my actions’ but to remember ‘me’”.<sup>16</sup> It is essential that Zizioulas relates the act of remembrance to the person of the Incarnate Son since it is the hypostasis of Christ who holds together the whole history of salvation, from its beginning to

<sup>13</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 26-27.

<sup>16</sup> Luke Ben Tallon, “Introduction” to J. D. Zizioulas, The eucharistic communion and the world (Edinburgh: Bloomsbury, 2011), x.

the end, and brings it into the eschaton. Therefore, the remembrance of the risen Christ differs from another kind of remembrance that is directed toward the past, as in liturgy, the Church remembers the eschatological “risen one who *is to come*”.<sup>17</sup> It is, therefore, a mysterious remembrance of the future as Christ himself embodies the eschaton.

The future events that existentially penetrate the present reality constitute not only the core of the Last Supper event but also reveal a deeper anthropological horizon. In this eschatological framework, the act of remembrance acquires a dual function: it reconfigures time and space, while simultaneously reshaping the human person. Consequently, the *Anthropos* is no longer defined by linear historicity but is understood as a being-in-becoming, whose identity is oriented toward the future and grounded in relational openness to the divine. Through participation in the Eucharist, the human person enters the eschatological reality established by Christ, embodying a future mode of existence marked by *kenosis* and communion, one that reveals the true nature of humanity created in the image and likeness of God. This quintessential principle of the eschatological ontology entirely eliminates the linear outlook and perceptual direction towards the *eschata*. The linearity of the world is what Zizioulas considerably opposes in his theological discourse. The New Testament realities are nothing but a metamorphosis of the whole history of salvation, meaning the world is rendered as the heavenly Supper. That is why Zizioulas stresses (sometimes overstresses) the Eucharist as the only location for contemplating the divine reality, which unfolds inversely from the future. Accordingly, the sacrifice of Christ as the new Paschal Lamb carries not merely a commemorative or recursive meaning, as it was in the Old Testament tradition, which related only to the liberation from the slavery of the people of Israel and was re-enacted during

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<sup>17</sup> Tallon, “Introduction,” x.

each celebration of the Jewish Passover. In this new paradigm, the eucharistic mystery, in its very essence, is the future *here* and *now* – “the sacrifice of the *perfect, eschatological* Paschal Lamb”.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, for Zizioulas, the sacrifice of the paschal Lamb is integral to the self-giving life of Christ, offering a framework for understanding Christian anthropology through the lens of *kenosis*. In this vein, the act of self-emptiness provides profound theological insight and serves as the existential foundation of the human being, who, as *imago Dei*, is called to reflect the sacrificial nature of the one who died on the cross for the sake of others. This understanding of the *Anthropos* presents humanity as a dynamic progression toward the future, receptive to the eschatological projection that enables the attainment of the new reality of the eschatological mode of existence, implying an openness toward both the divine and others.

### **Orthodox anthropology and inverted mode of causality**

There is no dichotomy and binaries but oneness and unity of everything that came to be from *ex nihilo*; therefore, the human being in its totality unites the immaterial and material elements of creation and, as an image of God, becomes a true citizen of *eschata*. In this regard, Zizioulas stresses the “eucharistic vision of the world”, which excludes the physical and metaphysical separation, and sees the whole creation as a “cosmic liturgy”.<sup>19</sup> Such a holistic view leaves no space for dualism, i.e., there is no dichotomy between sacred and profane, body and soul, but as the Greek theologian points out, in

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<sup>18</sup> Zizioulas, Eucharistic communion, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Yik-Pui Au, “The eucharist as a cultural critique: A construction based on the eucharistic theology of John D. Zizioulas,” in The Eucharist as a countercultural Liturgy: An examination of the theologies of Henri de Lubac, John Zizioulas, and Miroslav Volf, ed. Yik-Pui Au, Lai Pan-Chiu, and Luther E. Smith (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), 59-88, at 78-79.

the Divine Liturgy, the human being and the rest of creation are firmly bonded,<sup>20</sup> manifesting the future eschaton, from where the entire created universe takes its *cause*. Without an inverted projection of the last time, it is impossible to perceive and understand the essence of Genesis. Therefore, Zizioulas' future-oriented hermeneutics is at work here since he explicitly states: "Things are not by virtue of what they were but by virtue of what they *will be* in the age to come".<sup>21</sup> It is not the past, but the future that determines the visible as well as the invisible world,<sup>22</sup> and this is precisely what the inverted mode of causality implies.

The concept of being, which is the cornerstone of Zizioulas' theological discourse, equally concerns physics and metaphysics since the *Anthropos*, in its Christian sense, finds its origin in the *eschata*. As theologian Miroslav Wolf points out, for Zizioulas, viewing the human person merely as an individual reflects the limited reality of biological hypostasis, which is bound by necessity and lacks true ontological freedom. In this case, their 'biological nature' or 'substance' is given priority, i.e., "the individual is a 'personality' understood as a complex of natural, psychological or moral qualities ... centered on the axis of consciousness".<sup>23</sup> Such a vision locates the human being in the "law of necessity"; that is to say, the "cause-and-effect" determines one's existence, which strictly sets the distance (this distance limits the human being in time and space) between the human and the rest of creation (as well as God). Unlike an *individuum*, personhood is by no means a self-enclosed reality, but the human being as a person is a relational being, i.e., progressive towards communion. This ecstatic dynamism,

<sup>20</sup> Yik-Pui, "The Eucharist," 79.

<sup>21</sup> Tallon, "Introduction," x.

<sup>22</sup> Tallon, "Introduction," x.

<sup>23</sup> Miroslav Wolf, *After our likeness: The Church as the image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 81.

for the Greek theologian, affirms the reality of personal free will, and through freedom, the human being as a person transcends the limits of the self. From an eschatological perspective, being is not determined by the constraints of history or the natural order.<sup>24</sup> True personhood, however, is rooted in freedom and stands in contrast to “biological hypostasis”, which is given through the biological birth. By contrast, the human being acquires “ecclesial hypostasis” through spiritual birth in Baptism.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, for Zizioulas, what Baptism activates, the Eucharist, as an authentic image of the Kingdom, fulfills.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, as some scholars have observed, the scope of becoming a person is, to some degree, limited in Zizioulas’ theology since one cannot achieve the state of personhood apart from the Church. Thus, the particularity of a person is unsubstantiated<sup>27</sup> and leaves no room to conceive it beyond the ecclesiastical framework. For this very reason, it is overly exclusive, as specific conditions (Baptism and the Eucharist) are necessary to be a person.<sup>28</sup> This limitation invites critique. If ecclesial hypostasis is essential for true personhood, how can theology engage with the realities of religious pluralism or inclusivity? What function can be given to the socio-historical aspects of constructing personhood? Or how might Zizioulas’ framework be expanded to account for the personhood of non-Christians or those who cannot fully participate in ecclesial life? These questions highlight the need for a broader, more inclusive theological approach that rec-

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<sup>24</sup> Volf, *After our likeness*, 81-82.

<sup>25</sup> Paul McPartlan, “John Zizioulas” in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Avis, Paul (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 470.

<sup>26</sup> Roland Millare, “Towards a common communion: The relational anthropologies of John Zizioulas and Karol Wojtyla: Towards a common communion,” *New Blackfriars* 98, no. 1077 (2017): 599-614, at 605.

<sup>27</sup> Volf, *After our likeness*, 181.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Russell, “Reconsidering relational anthropology: A critical assessment of John Zizioulas’ theological anthropology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5, no. 2 (2003): 168-186, at 182.

onciles Zizioulas' focus on eschatological ontology with contemporary ethical and social realities. In particular, the anthropological implications of his ecclesial exclusivity risk narrowing the ontological horizon of personhood to those who participate in the sacramental life of the Church, thereby leaving unanswered the question of how divine relationality operates outside this framework. One way forward might be to conceive relational personhood as grounded not only in ecclesial boundaries but also as the universal *imago Dei*. If all humans bear the image and likeness of God, relational personhood could extend beyond the Church. Such an understanding would not diminish the ontological centrality of the Church, which remains essential in Zizioulas' vision; rather, it would situate it within a broader anthropology that affirms the dignity and potentiality of every human being as inherently oriented toward communion. This perspective emphasizes that *Anthropos*, by their very nature, are created for communion, regardless of their cultural, social, or religious affiliations.

However, it may be argued that Zizioulas lacks a functional apparatus for engaging the complexity of personhood outside the ecclesial context. The Greek theologian holds a view that the way to activate the "ecclesial hypostasis" in order to attain "absolute ontological freedom" is to partake in the coming Kingdom of Christ.<sup>29</sup> The reason for such an understanding lies in the fact that, for him, every concept or entity (whether it is theological or social, or both) must be seen from the perspective of eschatological ontology, that is, everything that comes into being must be seen in light of its ultimate fulfillment. Consequently, the essential prism to understand Christian anthropology and creation as a whole, for Zizioulas, is the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church. However, looking forward or conceiving eschatology as a

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<sup>29</sup> David L. Cann, "The eucharist as a 'true ontology' of the person: A study of the eucharistic ecclesiology of John Zizioulas," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 21, no. 1 (2021): 19-31, at 23.

present reality, that is to say, to *foretaste* and witness the future, is not a cognitive act – something achievable through reasoning or logic that characterizes the “biological hypostasis” – but it can only be experienced through *kenosis*.

### **The inverted anthropology: the dynamism of transformation**

Accordingly, the openness of the human person toward the divine movement is a key theme in Zizioulas’ theological quest. In this regard, the Greek theologian challenges the socio-cultural as well as the psycho-philosophical definition of anthropology by offering an explicit distinction between *individuum* and personhood. The point of departure of Zizioulas’ anthropology is the absolute freedom of the created being, without which the human person becomes a slave of divine necessity. Accordingly, “the life of breath” God gives to the human person is not individual sovereignty or only the life-giving substance but *Rūaḥ* (רָאֵחַ), the breath of unconditional love and freedom. This foundational perspective of human freedom sets the stage for Zizioulas’ broader engagement with scientific perspectives, particularly in relation to evolutionary theory and the human distinction from other living beings.

In this vein, when addressing the freedom of the human person, Zizioulas engages with Darwin’s theory of evolution and biological science more broadly, which classifies the human being as merely another animal. Before Darwin, most scholars considered the main distinction between humans and animals to be rationality and self-awareness; however, through his theory of evolution, Darwin demonstrated that animals possess these same capacities, albeit to a lesser degree. For Zizioulas, however, the primary distinction between the human person and other creatures is that an animal cannot shape a world of

its own. In contrast, the human being has both the capacity and the inclination to reinterpret reality and attribute meaning to it. Therefore, unlike animals, humans are co-creators with God; however, they do not possess the ability to create *ex nihilo*, that is, out of nothing. Instead, the human person is bound to use pre-existing materials. This impulse is an essential aspect of the human being, moving the person to reshape nature and to reject the given world in order to construct one that reflects their own design. For this reason, creative art, especially in its contemporary expression, seeks liberation to disrupt the established forms handed down through tradition.<sup>30</sup> Animals can also learn and apply the laws of nature, sometimes even more effectively than humans, and are capable of solving the problems they encounter in their environment. However, only human beings can create culture, civilization, industry, and art, although God gives the material used in this creative process. Every genuine work of art bears the mark of personal presence, since simply replicating the external world as it exists cannot be regarded as art. This creativity of the person is by no means limited to rationality and intellect but arises from something entirely different, as Zizioulas emphasizes: "It is freedom".<sup>31</sup> Such a creative and free orientation of the human being finds its ontological grounding in Zizioulas' concept of personhood as hypostasis, which stands in direct contrast to the notion of the individual. The ability to transcend the given world, to reinterpret and reconfigure it, is not merely a cognitive act, but, for Zizioulas, an ontological possibility rooted in the eschatological nature of personhood. This possibility is realized not in isolation but through communion, where freedom is expressed not as autonomy but as relational openness. Accordingly, the person is

<sup>30</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in christian dogmatics* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 96-98.

<sup>31</sup> Zizioulas, *Eucharistic communion*, 163-168.

defined not by separation from others, but by the capacity to enter into communion that reflects the very essence of perichoresis of the Triune God, in which each divine hypostasis exists distinctly yet wholly in one another, without division or confusion. It is in this light that Zizioulas develops his theological anthropology.

Consequently, the essential feature of the concept of personhood that Zizioulas holds is a hypostatic element, i.e., the human being as a “hypostasis of nature” is an opposite concept to individuality. He discerns two basic qualities of individuality: (i) isolation and (ii) repeatability. Regarding the latter, an individual who does not possess the hypostasis of the fullness of nature is not free but remains subject to it, deriving identity from the shared and repetitive characteristics proper to the human essence. Concerning the former, an individual is an isolated being, as his or her identity is constituted in opposition to others; therefore, “the individual is a static reality” who cannot transcend limited qualities in order to enter into communion with “God and others”.<sup>32</sup> Thus, anthropology here is limited, as individuality leads to selfishness, causing the person to become self-oriented, which in turn completely restricts openness. According to Zizioulas’ theological premise, one may argue that, contrary to the *individuum*, which acquires identity from a particular socio-cultural context, the human person receives identity from the eschatological future, from the Trinitarian God. Consequently, in the case of personhood, the human being is no longer a central agent but one who receives what is given from the divine. This understanding leads Zizioulas to affirm an anthropology centered on relational personhood and receptiveness, which, in its essence, is the *open anthropology*, representing a mode of inversion, or the *inverted anthropology*. It inverts anthropology by grounding hu-

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<sup>32</sup> Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, apophaticism, and Divine – human communion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 137.

man identity not in the past or in given nature, but in the eschatological future that validates and fulfills the relational and existential capacity of the human being. This reversal sets the foundation for Zizioulas' ontological distinction between individuum and person.

Consequently, for the Greek theologian, in its very essence, personhood is the "openness of being". There is a continuous dynamism that breaks the limits of the "self" and leads one towards true freedom.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, human individuum is a psychological condition<sup>34</sup> that brings the illusion of freedom, which itself turns to arrogance, that is, the preference for one's own position. However, what Christianity brought into history was a new aspect of human existence: the concept of personhood. However, personhood is not social or psychological but an ontological category, and since human beings share a common nature, one becomes a relational being. This understanding brings a new anthropological criterion, the universalization of personhood. Contrary to individuality, one is no longer captive to his or her socio-cultural context; however, as far as the human person is in communion with God and others, being, in its very essence, is universalized. The universalization of personhood, that is, the openness and receptiveness toward the utter other, is what requires relinquishment and abandonment of the individual attributes, which is the *kenotic* mode of existence.

Consequently, the concept of *kenosis* becomes an essential paradigm for Zizioulas in order to make understandable what open anthropology implies in its more profound sense, especially with respect to freedom and equality.<sup>35</sup> This is further illustrated by the way God

<sup>33</sup> John D. Zizioulas, "Human capacity and human incapacity: A theological exploration of personhood," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (1975): 401-447, at 408.

<sup>34</sup> Zizioulas, "Human capacity," 407-408.

<sup>35</sup> Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 152-153.

engages with the other, i.e., his or her creation, through the Incarnation of the Son, which is a *kenotic* mode of divine revelation. Therefore, *kenosis* becomes the only way “that befits the Christian in his or her communion with the other – be it God or one’s neighbour”.<sup>36</sup> For Zizioulas, human openness and communion with others are the way to the cross, embodying a self-sacrificial act of emptying oneself. Human *kenosis*, in its very essence, is the imitation of Christ, who became flesh and lived a self-giving life for the sake of human salvation. According to the way Zizioulas understand anthropological openness, *kenosis* becomes “an act of freedom and reception,” that is, the self-emptied person is free from self-constraints to accept the otherness. Such reception of personhood is in line with the Chalcedonian principle of Christology – the Incarnate Son is free to “receive the utterly other, created being and death”.<sup>37</sup>

Such an understanding of the *Anthropos* is deeply rooted in patristic thinking, which, for Zizioulas, is the foundation of Western understanding of personhood. Perhaps modern personalism theories share some conceptual insights from Christian theology; however, they differ significantly from it as well as from each other. As French philosopher Jacques Maritain writes, “there are, at least, a dozen personalist doctrines, which at times have nothing more in common than the word *person*”.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, what Zizioulas proposes regarding the concept of personhood is to overcome a linear, self-enclosed perspective by prioritizing the act of self-emptiness to be receptive toward the inverted projection of the *eschata*. Certainly, such an understanding has theological presuppositions and cannot be attained

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<sup>36</sup> Zizioulas, John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and otherness: Further studies in personhood and the Church* (London: Clark, 2006), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 153.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Maritain, “The person and the common good,” *The Review of Politics* 8, no. 4 (1946): 419-455, at 420.

without a mystical union with the divine; that is to say, for Zizioulas, there is no personhood outside the Church. However, as mentioned above, the Greek theologian does not have a conceptual apparatus to see the notion of personhood apart from Christian understanding, since the existential structure of the human person can only be seen in the light of the Triune God. Even if this is so, Zizioulas gives insight into responding to the present socio-cultural, political, racial, gender, and sexual issues from a purely theological perspective that challenges the modern human. In its very essence, the *inverted anthropology* does not isolate one from the rest of the world but fosters inclusiveness and allows one's standpoint to be capable of accepting otherness by providing space for it.

Consequently, Zizioulas' anthropological discourse, as it implies the inversion of the entire perceptual system, excludes a judgmental attitude toward others. That is the essential perspective from which one should treat and see other human beings. Hence, the *inverted anthropology* can be seen as a hermeneutical prism or theological instrument to deal with extremely sensitive issues related to human identity, which challenge the contemporary Orthodox Church (as is the case for most religious institutions). Applying this example in this theological quest will assist in seeing more clearly the various forms of discrimination, such as homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, etc., as the product of self-enclosed, or so to speak, linear anthropology. Excluding humans on the basis of their identity means giving priority to one's own standpoint to judge equal beings. However, from the perspective of the *inverted anthropology*, the *Anthropos* is seen in its ontological dimension as an image and likeness of God rather than in its genital preferences.

In general, any form of phobia that infects social and ecclesiastical life and mindset enhances religious extremism and fundamentalism,

which eventually destroys an ontological image of the human person by diverting one's attention to false dilemmas. The strict moral division between the righteous and the sinners, likewise, the advocacy of strict conformity to social life and religious rules, raises violent intolerance and abuse toward others. Thus, the meaning of the term phobia as an irrational fear and aversion of the different (as defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, USA)<sup>39</sup> in theology, can be translated as a lack of love or absence of God in one's life, as well as the total anthropological closure toward otherness. That is the rejection of what comes inversely, i.e., the divine perspective, by giving priority to one's own. That is why Zizioulas' open anthropological discourses stress the ascetic dynamism of self-transformation, i.e., κένωσις, which gives the human person the capacity to be receptive towards the inverted movement of the divine projection.

## Conclusion

The reverse perspective of Orthodox theology reveals a unique theological insight in which all of creation undergoes an existential metamorphosis that demands the eternal transformation of being itself. Only through this interminable dynamism can one overcome the one-dimensional, static mode of thought and disrupt the linearity of logic or common-sense rationality. This movement transcends a lethargic, fossilized worldview and opens a new horizon in which the metaphysical structure of the world is perceived through the lens of the cross from a self-giving perspective. While Zizioulas' eschatological ontology contributes significantly to articulating the theological inversion, particularly in relation to personhood, it also reveals internal limitations.

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<sup>39</sup> Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-5, Fifth edition (Washington, DC: APA American Psychological Association, 2013), 190.

Zizioulas' future-oriented hermeneutics contains certain constraints which, to some extent, do not fully overcome the linearity of the theological scope. In this regard, two main points are worth noting. First, Zizioulas confines the concept of the person by asserting that true personhood cannot be attained without spiritual birth (Baptism) and communion with Christ (the Eucharist). This framework narrows the theological horizon and restricts openness toward those outside the Church. If personhood depends on participation in these sacraments, how can theology maintain an inclusive stance in pluralistic societies, where diverse religious traditions coexist and interact? In religiously plural communities, the evident interdependence between different religions plays a significant role in shaping society's daily life. Theology is therefore not called to exclude others but demands a commitment to fostering harmony. Yet Zizioulas locates authentic personal existence solely within the sacramental life of the Church, leaving little space for such engagement. Second, his theological approach remains focused on the Christian other in communion with Christ, without addressing the reality of communion with non-Christian others. As theologian Aristotle Papanikolaou correctly observes, "communion or unity requires real difference, otherwise, the unity is less a union than an absorption into sameness".<sup>40</sup> In this vein, Zizioulas seems to lean toward an ecclesiocentric exclusivism, where only the Church defines authentic existence. Indeed, otherness is not "sameness" but the realization of ontological communion with gender, religious, or ethnic others – "there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Despite these critical remarks, one can see the entire constellation of Zizioulas's thinking that proposes a unique theological language,

<sup>40</sup> Papanikolaou, *Being with God*, 139.

so to speak, the iconic language as well as a system of perception, which challenges the linearity of rational or linear causality. Instead of a one-sided perspective, the future-oriented hermeneutics emphasizes a new mode of existence, transforming the temporality of time and history into the *meta-reality* of the eschaton. To some extent, Zizioulas' theological discourse expresses religious inclusivism, as seeing the world in its finality allows one to perceive humanity as the image and likeness of God beyond specific identities. This anthropological inversion calls for a radical reorientation of human self-understanding. It suggests that true personhood is realized not through self-assertion or individual achievement but through openness to the divine and to others. This perspective offers a theological basis for advancing an inclusive and egalitarian framework within the Orthodox Church and beyond. While Zizioulas' approach remains limited, particularly in its strong emphasis on the ecclesial context for personhood, he nonetheless provides a transformative account of human existence that invites further dialogue and critical engagement, especially in relation to its practical relevance to contemporary social challenges.

Taken together, these reflections raise broader questions about the relevance of Orthodox theology within a secular and pluralistic world. Today, Christianity no longer occupies the same significant place in people's everyday lives as it did in centuries past. This alienation stems from the fact that the Church is often perceived as merely one institution among many, bound by strict policies and a law-based theology that seems outdated and even obstructive to constructing an egalitarian and non-discriminatory society. This raises critical questions: What makes the Church modern? How can it harmonize with the requirements of novelty? The answer is straightforward: the Christian Church should reflect the *kenotic* dynamism of Christ. According-

ly, the Greek theologian calls for a metamorphosis of the human being through the inversion of perceptual direction. This metamorphosis is nothing other than the interruption of the eschatological cause, bringing the *εἰκών* of the future into the world. The inverted mode of causality provides a solid framework for understanding how this theological phenomenon operates within the physical dimension to transcend creation. Without this perceptual inversion, it becomes impossible to grasp the transcendent dynamism of the eschaton or to participate in the reality that is yet to come, the remembrance of the future and the anticipation of the second glorious coming.

## **SEEING FROM THE FUTURE: THE REVERSE PERSPECTIVE AND ESCHATOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN JOHN ZIZIULAS' THEOLOGY**

**Aleksandre Gabunia\***

### **Abstract**

The article explores the concept of the reverse perspective, also known as inverted perspective, in Orthodox theology, analyzing its theological and anthropological dimensions through the lens of John Zizioulas' Eucharistic eschatology. By exploring the reverse perspective with Zizioulas' theological framework, the study demonstrates how his future-oriented hermeneutics redefines the notion of causality. It positions the eschaton as the existential foundation for comprehending creation, historicity, and the *Anthropos*. Through the perspective of eucharistic eschatology, Zizioulas renders the Eucharist as the locus where historical and eschatological realities encounter, enabling a transformative reorientation of human existence. The article examines how this theological approach shapes Orthodox anthropology, particularly Zizioulas' emphasis on relational personhood and kenosis as central to the human being. It also addresses the limitations of Zizioulas' ecclesiocentric anthropology, particularly its grounding of personhood in sacramental life, which leaves little space for engaging religious pluralism and socio-historical complexity. Despite these limitations, the article highlights the broader significance of Zizioulas' theological legacy, linking the reverse perspective with practical

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and theological implications for contemporary Orthodox theology. By bridging theological inquiry with anthropological reflection, the article provides a nuanced understanding of how the inverted perspective and eucharistic eschatology reshape the perception of human existence in relation to the divine and the other.

*Keywords:* *reverse perspective, Orthodox theology, John Ziziulas, eucharistic eschatology, inverted causality, anthropology.*