

Mapping modern concepts of the person onto the Greek patristic past

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Defining and articulating the notion of personhood is no easy task, to say the least. The question is raised and variously addressed in numerous academic and non-academic contexts: not in philosophy or theology alone, but in the whole range of humanistic, social science, legal, medical, and other scientific disciplines, as well as in popular culture (think, for instance, of the Occupy Protests against, among other things, the legal definition of corporations as persons, or of the recent debacles over the Personhood Amendment proposed in Mississippi). I hope, then, that the topic will be of interest, even if the approach is one of a theologian with a rather narrow focus, namely, the attractions and difficulties of mapping the concept of personhood onto early Christian sources, an activity pursued in particular (though not exclusively) by Greek Orthodox theologians in the twentieth century. I will begin with a quick introduction to what can be termed ‘personalism’ in early twentieth century theology. This will be followed by a presentation of the basic contours of that brand of theological personalism—represented in particular by John Zizioulas and also Christos Yannaras—which explicitly argues for a radical continuity between its notion of personhood and concepts of personality in patristic and Byzantine texts. This will then allow us to consider some of the major problems of constructing a viable contemporary vision of the human being on a Greek patristic foundation.

Loosely defined, personalism denotes any system of thought which advances the concept of person as philosophically ultimate. As a movement in philosophy it has its roots, as Bengtsson has argued, in oppositions to radical Enlightenment rationalism (perceived to open the gates to pantheism, atheism, and fatalism) as well as impersonalist forms of German idealism.¹ The variety of expression and approach amongst personalists, however, renders the blanket term ‘personalism’ rather tenuous. It is predominantly associated with the ‘Boston School’, initiated by Borden Parker Bowne (1847-1910) at Boston University in the late nineteenth century, and the ‘French School’, chiefly associated with the name of the Roman Catholic Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950) and his journal *Esprit*. Perhaps the two most famous products of personalism are, from the Boston School, Martin Luther King Jr, and from the French School, Dorothy Day and John Paul II. Let me turn briefly to Mounier and the French School, as it is here that the clearest interaction with Eastern Orthodox thinkers and patristic scholars took place.

Mounier’s philosophy of the person was a key aspect of the 1930s non-conformist movement in France, the political search for a ‘Third Way’ between communist socialism and capitalism. Mounier wished, on the one hand, to insist on the person as only truly fulfilled through self-emptying love and care for other

¹ See J.O. Bengtsson, *The Worldview of Personalism: Origins and Early Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

persons (against capitalism), as well as on the importance, uniqueness, and irreducibility of every person to the whole (against the threat of collectivism). He expresses the idea thus:

The order of the person...is constituted by a double movement, apparently contradictory, but in fact dialectical, towards the affirmation of personal absolutes resistant to all reduction, and towards the building up of a universal unity out of the world of persons.²

His vision for a political renewal that would bring about this utopia is distinctly left-leaning. While opposed to collectivism, the real enemy throughout his work is the concept of the self-sufficient and atomistic individual, who allows self-interest to govern every action, and so is cut off from authentic personhood (an inherently relational category). Mounier paints the predicament of individualism memorably thus:

On the altar of this sad world there is but one god, smiling and hideous; the Bourgeois. He has lost the true sense of being, he moves only amongst things, and things that are practical and that have been denuded of their mystery. He is a man without love, a Christian without conscience, an unbeliever without passion. He has deflected the universe of virtues from its supposedly senseless course towards the infinite and made it center about a petty system of social and psychological tranquility. For him there is only prosperity, health, common sense, balance, sweetness of life, comfort. Comfort is to the bourgeois world what heroism was to the Renaissance and sanctity to mediaeval Christianity—the ultimate value, the ultimate motive for all action.

The solution to this predicament was the concept of the person, the antithesis for Mounier of the individual. Mounier is among the first to systematically oppose the notion of individuality to personhood in this way, an opposition that is taken up around the same time with equal vigour by the Eastern Orthodox (cf. for instance Vladimir Lossky's classic study entitled *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, first published in 1944). Mounier was himself almost certainly influenced in this way of thinking by Nicholas Berdyaev, an émigré Russian philosopher, and a close collaborator and friend of Mounier's. Berdyaev was influenced by Eastern Orthodox thought, but had a rocky relationship with the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was nonetheless a focal point for meetings between Eastern and Western Christians, and through his efforts many valuable and formative exchanges took place between patristic scholars, theologians, and philosophers of many persuasions throughout the 20s, 30s, and 40s. It is thus not surprising that we find in Mounier an occasional passing allusion to the alleged early Greek Christian basis for his personalist thought, when he writes that:

the notion of the person was gradually defined with greater precision during the trinitarian and christological controversies of the 2nd to 6th centuries, more richly harmonized by the sensitivity of the

² Mounier, *Le Personnalisme* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1949), p. 44.

Greeks than Roman juridicism which, while lending the rigour of its formulae to the Greeks, resisted them deep down.³

We seem, then, to have a nascent sense of recovering lost early Greek Christian concepts and interpreting them for the modern world. This kind of thinking was of course encouraged by the Eastern Orthodox émigrés thinkers in Paris, many of whom had come to perceive their exile from Russia and Eastern Europe following the October Revolution as an opportunity to engage with, and possibly win over, the West using Orthodox categories and methodologies. But it was not only the Orthodox who were looking to the Greek patristic past for theological inspiration. In the French Roman Catholic world, a burgeoning group of scholars were turning to the early church for legitimate ways around the scholastic Thomism that then dominated Catholic thought. While some, such as Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, considered the main task of Catholic theology to be a rescue mission involving the liberation of Thomas Aquinas from his later interpreters and forging a new theology based on Aquinas himself (resulting, in Maritain's case, in an explicit Thomistic Personalism), others, such as Henri de Lubac, Jean Daniélou, and Yves Congar, felt a more urgent need to recover the lost treasures of patristic Christianity.

The representatives of this largely patristic-based revival were denounced as advancing *Nouvelle Théologie*, a term which has since stuck to describe the movement. However, this label should not prevent us from recognizing that it was not isolated from other developments and movements, not least that of personalism. In a programmatic article released shortly after the launch of the influential *Sources Chrétiennes* initiative (which publishes critical editions of patristic texts with facing French translation), Daniélou (one of the founders of *Sources Chrétiennes* together with Henri de Lubac and Claude Mondésert) argued that Greek patristics introduced contemporary society to 'the dramatic world of persons' and the 'concrete universals' characterized by existence rather than intellection.⁴ Again we have the sense that Greek patristics sheds light on themes of existential relevance to humanity, and that it might point to viable answers to burning issues in society.

These developments in the first half of the twentieth century are important to bear in mind when we turn to contemporary Orthodox personalism and its emphasis on patristic precedents: the French Personalist School and its links to Eastern Orthodox thinkers (to which we might add the importance of Martin Buber's 1923 work *Ich und Du*), as well as the *Nouvelle Théologie* movement with its Greek patristic turn and openness

³ Mounier, *Le Personalisme*, p. 14.

⁴ J. Daniélou, "Les Orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse" *Etudes* 249 (1946), pp. 5-21; and see F.A. Murphy, *Art and Intellect in the philosophy of Etienne Gilson* (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 2004), p. 228.

(particularly in the person of Yves Congar) to Eastern Orthodoxy more broadly. An especially important link in the chain here is the little-studied figure of Dimitrios Koutroubis (1921-1983).⁵

An Athenian by birth, Koutroubis was raised Greek Orthodox, but became attracted to the Jesuit Order in the 1940s. He left for the Jesuits in 1946, spending time with the Order in England, and then Lyons (where Daniélou and de Lubac were based), working while he was there on the *Sources Chrétiennes* series. For various reasons, including the influence of de Lubac's work on Greek Patristics, he left the Jesuit Order in 1952, and returned both to Athens and to Orthodoxy. His wide learning and humble disposition attracted a lively following of younger theologians, and he helped establish a significant theological journal in 1964 entitled *Synoro* ('Frontier'). He likewise was the first to translate key texts written by the Russian émigrés theologians into Modern Greek (such as Vladimir Lossky, a key exponent of theological personalism). The English Orthodox theologian and patristics scholar Metropolitan Kallistos Ware considered Koutroubis a 'lay *starets*' or elder ('geronda'). Christos Yannaras was likewise devoted to him, and went so far as to declare: 'the theology of modern Greece is divided into the period before Demetrios Koutroubis and the period after him'.⁶

A final figure I need to mention here who links the earlier context with contemporary Orthodox personalist thought is Fr Georges Florovsky (1893 – 1979).⁷ One of the younger Russian émigrés theologians, Florovsky was involved with almost every major personality in twentieth century theology. He was one of the founding members of the World Council of Churches and was an internationally renowned church historian and Slavist. Having emigrated to the United States in 1949, he took a position at the St Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary in New York before moving to Harvard University to become Professor of Eastern Christian Studies. His final professorship was held here at Princeton University, where his extensive archive is now located. He is perhaps best known for coining and developing the term 'neo-patristic synthesis' to describe the task of Eastern Orthodox theology in the modern world. By this he wished to express a patristic-based Christianity (the Christianity of our fathers) which can speak the language of each generation creatively, rationally, and coherently, but also faithfully. In the realm of personalist theology, his most significant contribution was to train the pre-eminent representative of Orthodox personalism active today, Metropolitan John Zizioulas.

⁵ For more on Koutroubis, see the obituaries in *Sobornost: Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 6:1 (1984), pp. 67-77.

⁶ C. Yannaras, "The Master Builder", *Sobornost: Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 6:1 (1984), p. 72.

⁷ For more on Florovsky, see A. Blane, *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual and Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary Press, 1997).

An Orthodox theology of the person, and its claims of patristic precedent: the case of Zizioulas

I have tried to hold off theology proper as much as possible, but the time has come to deal with some of the concrete issues and ideas involved in Orthodox personalist thought. Only then can a meaningful assessment of its patristic roots or lack thereof be offered. I will limit myself to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, a bishop of the Patriarchate of Constantinople, and probably the most influential spokesperson for Orthodox theology in the West. Together with his work under Fr Georges Florovsky at Harvard, he was professor of Systematic Theology at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow for many years followed by teaching positions at King's College London, Thessaloniki, and the Pontifical Institute in Rome. While his views are not identical with those of other Orthodox personalists (such as Vladimir Lossky or Christos Yannaras), his thought can safely be considered representative.

The human predicament

We cannot understand Zizioulas' theology of personhood without first understanding how he views the human predicament. Several themes come into play here, the most prominent of which are individualism and division, necessity and freedom, and human nature and death. Each will be looked at in turn, followed by a brief examination of how patristic theology is brought in to provide a solution.

i. Individualism and division

Human nature and the human being in itself, according to Zizioulas, is fraught with a vast yet tragic potential. Although bearing the imprint of the divine image, and sown with the seed of divine knowledge, the aspirations of the human heart continuously face defeat and ruin. In the depths of her soul, the human person is drawn to communion with God, with others and the world, and yet together with this impetus is 'another law', a law of selfish individualism, what Zizioulas calls 'a pathology built into the very roots of our existence...the *fear of the other*'.⁸ He writes of this condition: "This individualized and individualizing Adam in us is our original sin, and because of it the "other," i.e. being existing outside ourselves, in the end becomes our enemy and "our original sin" (Sartre)".⁹ In this occurrence, our fear of the other is shown to be a fear of otherness and 'we come to the point of identifying difference with division'.¹⁰ For Zizioulas, the person in communion is by no means undifferentiated from other persons: the problem is not difference, it is contradiction and division.

⁸ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 1.

⁹ J. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 107.

¹⁰ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 2.

Such a vision of the human being as inherently selfish and in constant fear of the other is bound up with a strong notion of humanity as fallen. On the fall, Zizioulas has this to say: ‘the fall consists in *the refusal to make being dependent on communion*’, and elaborates that because of the fall, ‘the world consists of *objects*, of things whose ontological status one has to recognize before one can relate to them’.¹¹ By this he means that even our basic epistemology as human beings is distorted by the primordial passion of individualism, which makes knowledge cognitive rather than relational. He further draws out the implications of this distorted approach to knowledge: ‘since the possibility of knowledge appears to precede the act of communion (love) and to be independent of it, it becomes possible for man to dissociate his thought from his action and thus to falsify truth. Man thus becomes a *hypocrite* [ὕποκριτής], and it is indeed only man, i.e. a person, that is capable of hypocrisy’.¹² By dissociating thought and life, knowledge and communion, cognition and relationship, Zizioulas accuses particularly Western thought of compounding the effects of the fall instead of striving to be free of its effects: ‘[the] introspectiveness [of the West] is essentially nothing other than a confirmation of our fallen existence, of the domination of selfhood’.¹³

ii. Necessity & Freedom

Another key facet of the human predicament for Zizioulas is the relationship between freedom and necessity. The human subject has a conscious sense of freedom, and Zizioulas strongly supports the view that freedom is integral to the *imago Dei* in each one of us (following Gregory of Nyssa and other patristic authors). However, this freedom, like the thirst for communion, is thwarted when confronted with the reality of the human situation. Freedom is circumscribed by uncontrollable circumstances, by the givenness of creation, and ultimately by the necessity attached to existence itself. This freedom expresses itself via ‘the creation of new identities through sounds or words or colours, etc.’,¹⁴ i.e. through artistic and creative endeavor. But faced with the confines of this world, the freedom of man continually pushes the boundaries, attempting to create something entirely new and free of all constraints. A prime example of this, says Zizioulas, is the development of modern and abstract art, which he diagnoses as an attempt (perhaps unconscious) to create something truly free of all formal constraints. In the end, however, even this expression of freedom falls short: man remains incapable of fully overcoming the constraints of the world through his free will, since the world is not a product of his will (*ἴδιον θέλημα* – using Maximus the Confessor). The result of this realization, according to Zizioulas, can be a dangerous one: having reached the limits of freedom in our life, and finding no way of being truly and completely free, ‘human freedom can prove itself ultimately only through the

¹¹ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 102.

¹² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 104.

¹³ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 46.

¹⁴ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 40n78.

annihilation of what exists'.¹⁵ This preoccupation with the tragic end of freedom in human life is shot through Zizioulas' work. He sees the most sophisticated description of it not in a patristic text, but in Dostoevsky's novel *Demons* (or *The Possessed*), where the character Kirilov, an intellectual revolutionary, brings the dilemma of freedom versus necessity to its frightening, albeit logical, conclusion: in order to escape the 'necessity of being' and find true freedom, Kirilov decides he must assert his free will over existence itself, and so kill himself.

While Zizioulas naturally does not advocate suicide, he is adamant that the problem faced by Kirilov is a real one, and that his solution is a tragically plausible one. The person is fulfilled for Zizioulas in God-given freedom, so while suicide is the antithesis of such fulfillment, Zizioulas is equally insistent that this freedom cannot be undermined if true personhood is to be found. Thus while laws which limit personal freedom in the interest of greater order and harmony may be needed in this world, they cannot, in themselves, lead to true personhood: 'humanism', he writes, 'proves unable to affirm personhood'.¹⁶ The reality for all human beings of Kirilov's conflict between freedom and necessity forces humanity, in its own interests, to relinquish the full import of its freedom through law and regulation, in order simply to preserve itself. Zizioulas puts it this way: 'this existential alarm, the fear of nihilism, is so serious that in the last analysis it must itself be regarded as responsible for the relativization of the concept of the person'.¹⁷ Christos Yannaras is likewise preoccupied with this theme. He claims that when man accepts morality as an authoritative or conventional code of law, 'he wears a mask of behavior borrowed from ideological or party authorities, so as to be safe from his own self and the questions with which it confronts him',¹⁸ and elsewhere describes the result of a legalistic, external system of ethics: 'Man's ethical problem ceases to be an existential one, a problem of how to be saved from natural necessity—from space, time, the passions, corruption and death. It becomes a pseudo-problem of objective obligations which remain devoid of existential justification...the problem of salvation is obscured by a shadow that torments mankind, that of a 'law' which leads nowhere'.¹⁹

iii. Human nature and death

The third, and most important, aspect of the human predicament for Zizioulas is tied up with human nature and death. We saw that freedom itself for Zizioulas is challenged by the necessity inherent in human nature: nature has a givenness to it that seemingly cannot be resisted or overcome. The reason this is such a tragic reality is that, in the end, the inevitable direction in which nature pushes the human subject is death. In the

¹⁵ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 235.

¹⁶ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 43.

¹⁷ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 43.

¹⁸ Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), p. 15.

¹⁹ Yannaras, *Freedom of Morality*, p. 27.

world taken 'as it is', death appears to be the ultimate value, and for this reason Zizioulas can praise Heidegger's philosophy of 'being-towards-death' (*Sein-zum-Tode*) as the best philosophy can do 'without reference to a beyond'.²⁰ He argues in a Heideggerean vein that 'whether we are aware of it or not—usually we are not—death *conditions* our entire being and lies at the root of all that we do and think'.²¹ As creatures, we are, as it were, wired for death from the beginning. Having come from nothing we hang helplessly over the abyss of nothingness. Yet we have an urge to fight against the threat of non-being. Although all creation shares an innate drive towards life and is against death, Zizioulas observes that 'it is only the human being that refuses to accept the finality of death, inventing ways of prolonging the existence of loved ones for ever'.²² That said, human beings often give in and accept death, incorporating acceptance of it into their philosophies and approaches to life. It is only when the notion of the human person as eternal, unrepeatable, and irreplaceable is asserted, that death becomes the true and final foe: 'Death appears to be the most tragic event of human life only if man is viewed from the angle of his personhood. To a biologist, death may be a form of life, and to an idealist a meaningful sacrifice of the individual for a higher cause, but to Christian theology it remains the worst enemy of man, the most unacceptable of all things'.²³ The ubiquity of death, which is engrafted into the processes of life itself, cannot be overcome through our ingenuity or through any kind of moral progress: 'by morality creation improves itself but it does not save itself from death'.²⁴ Trapped by death, and unable even by the highest moral life to overcome it, the human being easily meets with despair.

Such, then, is the human predicament. Let us quickly glance at Zizioulas' turn to patristic theology for a solution.

All three dilemmas of individualism, necessity, and death are resolved philosophically, he claims, by early patristic theology, particularly by the work of the Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century. The controversies over the doctrine of the Trinity marked a decisive moment, he claims, in the history of philosophical thought, and brought about what he calls 'a revolution in ontology'. This involved the affirmation that Father, Son, and Spirit are one God in three persons, uncreated and eternal, in full communion yet irreducible one to the other. He summarizes the implications:

Patristic thought is led by its discussion of the being of God to the following theses: there is no true being without communion. Nothing exists as an 'individual', conceivable in itself. Communion is an ontological category; communion which does not come from a 'hypostasis', that is, a concrete and free person, and which does not lead to 'hypostases', that is concrete and free persons, is not an 'image' of the being of God. The

²⁰ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 107n104.

²¹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 41n81.

²² Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 40.

²³ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 226.

²⁴ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 258.

person cannot exist without communion; but every form of communion which denies or suppresses the person, is inadmissible.²⁵

This revision of the notion of hypostasis provided, Zizioulas claims, the tools needed for validly expressing the Christian ideas of creation *ex nihilo*, humanity's drive for communion, the identification of death as humanity's 'last enemy', and the significance and role of Christ and the Church. Through hypostatic union (a key tenet of Zizioulas' thought, based on the Chalcedonian Definition and the theology of Maximus the Confessor), Christ united human nature to divine nature in his person, his hypostasis thereby becoming the focal point for reconciliation and redemption (i.e. for becoming a true person/hypostasis).

This summary is necessarily brief, but it hopefully gives a sense of some of the concerns with which Orthodox personalism is preoccupied. I would like to turn now to the question of the legitimacy of the claim that what we have in Orthodox personalism is a straightforward re-expression of patristic thought. I will deal first with the major difficulties involved in this claim, namely issues in philosophy and terminology; the question of applying theological enquiry to anthropology; and the question of sources and metanarratives.

1) Philosophy and Terminology.

It is clear that John Zizioulas and even more so Christos Yannaras consciously use language borrowed from existentialism and phenomenology. This has been a bone of contention amongst some historical theologians who consider such action dangerously anachronistic, bringing questions and problems to patristic sources that simply weren't addressed there. Depending on one's attitude to the use and relevance of ancient texts, this may or may not hold. More problematic is the argument for a new personalist grammar in the patristic period. Several studies have shown that neither *prosopon* (Yannaras' preferred word) nor *hypostasis* (Zizioulas') have the kind of solidified meaning in either the patristic or Byzantine periods that would justify the emphasis placed on them as key to true relational ontology.²⁶ The vocabulary simply isn't consistent, even if the concepts in question can arguably be discerned.

²⁵ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 18.

²⁶ André de Halleux, "Personnalisme ou essentialisme trinitaire chez les Pères cappadociens?," *Patrologie et Oecuménisme* (Louvain: Peeters, 1990), pp. 215–268, and the articles by L. Ayres, M. Barnes, and esp. L. Turcescu in S. Coakley (ed.), *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

2) Theology applied to anthropology.

A point which is often glossed over by Zizioulas and Yannaras is the question of how far we can directly apply early Christian thinking about God to early Christian thinking about human beings: does theology really translate directly into anthropology? On the surface, an affirmative answer seems to be a given for Zizioulas and Yannaras, based on a quick reference to the *imago Dei*. But in the context of the patristic texts being cited, such an argument is difficult to make: if the Cappadocians, for instance, had wished to translate their Trinitarian theology into an anthropological vision of human beings in communion, why did they never make this explicit themselves? What is particularly curious is that thinkers earlier in the twentieth century were far more careful about making this kind of direct identification. Vladimir Lossky, for instance, wrote in the 40s:

I do not intend to discourse on the notion of the human person either in the doctrines of the Church Fathers or in the works of other Christian theologians. Even if I had wanted to do so, I would have had to ask myself originally, to what degree this wish to find a doctrine of the human person among the Fathers of the first centuries is legitimate. Would this not be trying to attribute to them certain ideas which may have remained unknown to them and which we would nevertheless attribute to them, without realizing how much, in our way of conceiving of the human person, we depend upon a complex philosophical tradition—upon a line of thought which has followed paths very different from the one which could claim to be part of a properly theological tradition? To avoid such unconscious confusion, as well as conscious anachronisms—inserting Bergson into the work of St. Gregory of Nyssa or Hegel into the work of St. Maximus the Confessor—we will refrain for the moment from all attempts at finding in these texts the outlines of a developed doctrine (or doctrines) of the human person such as might have arisen in the course of the history of Christian theology.²⁷

And again:

For my part, I must admit that until now I have not found what one might call an elaborated doctrine of the human person in patristic theology, alongside its very precise teaching on divine persons or hypostases.²⁸

Similarly, in an article on the concept of the person in the Greek fathers, Jean Daniélou wrote:

What is paradoxical is that it was on the level of theological issues that the categories [of personality] were elaborated; on the level of anthropology, we have a concrete awareness, but one which...has not yet found its vocabulary; and it is only little by little that the vocabulary will catch up to experience.²⁹

These early warnings have yet to be fully heeded by contemporary Orthodox personalists.

²⁷ V. Lossky, *In the image and likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), pp. 111–2.

²⁸ Lossky, *In the image*, p. 112.

²⁹ J. Daniélou, “La notion de personne chez les pères grecs” in I. Meyerson (ed.), *Problèmes de la personne* (Paris: École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1974), pp. 113–21 (here at 114).

3) Sources and Metanarratives

Another problem with the enterprise of finding patristic precedents for a contemporary theology of the person is the question of sources and metanarratives. There is a tendency, for instance, to completely buy into an overarching narrative of East-West dichotomy reaching back at least to Augustine, who (sometimes alone, sometimes together with the Franks and the Pope) represents the beginning of the end of Western civilization. With regard to sources, there is unfortunately only little by way of close readings of individual fathers to support the arguments being made. Most of the time a brief citation or series of citations without context are offered. In order to be persuasive to historical theologians, however, more than a patristic florilegium is required. Here the interest of Classicists such as Christopher Gill and Richard Sorabji in notions of the self and inter-subjectivity in the ancient and late ancient world would provide an ideal point of reference for better methodological procedure.³⁰

These three problems I have outlined are significant difficulties, but I would not go so far as to say that they automatically void the search for relevant notions of the person in patristic texts. The sense of human beings as created in the image of the personal God, and called to be in His likeness, still holds in the patristic world. But a more fruitful way of accessing early Christian thought on this matter, it seems to me, is not via doctrinal formulations about God's being *per se*, but through an examination of how the ideal human being is conceived and described in patristic sources. In the end, the notion of the person for Zizioulas and Yannaras designates what each human being potentially can be, i.e. 'personhood' designates a holy or sanctified life. Thus the gateway to understanding early Christian anthropology might best be found in ascetic rather than strictly doctrinal texts, given that these are the texts written with the idea of human perfection and its content clearly in view. In other words, if we can fully unpack the various understandings of the Christian holy man in late antiquity (taking our cue from Peter Brown), we might better judge how far contemporary Orthodox concepts of personhood stand or fall by comparison.

An approach based on a close reading of ascetic texts is not unheard of within the circles I am studying, but generally involves figures who are far less known in the West than Zizioulas or Yannaras. The Serbian theologian Justin Popovich (1894-1979), for instance, defended a remarkable doctoral thesis at the University of Athens in 1926 entitled *Το πρόβλημα του προσώπου και της γνώσεως στον Άγιο Μακάριο τον Αιγύπτιο* [The problem of the person and knowledge in Saint Macarius the Egyptian]. Here Popovich provides a rich analysis of the Macarian Homilies from the point of view of anthropology: 1) the state of the

³⁰ See C. Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); idem. *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); R. Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From Stoic Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and idem. *Self: Ancient and Modern Insights About Individuality, Life and Death* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

human being in its original form; 2) the decomposition of the person through different forms of sin and the abuse of knowledge; and finally 3) the restoration of the person through Christ and the virtues of Christ.

It is in coming to grips, I would argue, with ascetic texts in the patristic period that we can get a better sense of patristic anthropology, and from there be able to gauge its relevance for contemporary debates about personhood. Let me close with an example from my own work-in-progress which involves definitions of the term *μοναχός* in the early period. On the surface, of course, the use of the word *monachos* to describe the ideal Christian life appears antithetical to modern personalism's concern to sharply distinguish person from individual. If early Christians were so concerned with true being as communion with God and the world, why use a word to describe their ideal which immediately evokes radical solitude: the *monachos* is pre-eminently a singleton, a loner who shuns the weary multiplicity of family and society for a life of ascetic solitude in the presence of God (an impulse so vividly depicted in Peter Brown's *Body and Society*).³¹ The degrees and expressions of this withdrawal vary, of course, but this sense of solitude remains an underlying principle, crystallized by the term *μοναχός*. The Plotinian 'flight of the alone to the Alone' comes to mind, and indeed, one 'old man' when questioned about the correct nature of the monk claims that it is to be 'alone with the Alone' (*μόνος πρὸς μόνον*).³²

In Evagrius, however (with whom I will end for the sake of time), the term *monachos* takes on a meaning strangely akin to the personalist ideal. His classic definition of the monk is as follows: 'a monk is he who, having been separated from all, is also united to all'.³³ He offers another definition of the monk immediately after this: 'A monk is he who considers himself one with all, and unceasingly sees himself in each [person]'.³⁴ This definition might come across as individualistic to the extreme, where the monk projects his own self into everyone he meets and allows this to govern his social interactions. Perhaps this happened from time to time, but what Evagrius has in mind is the capacity to treat all people as neighbours, who are to be loved as one's own self. A few lines before, Evagrius considers blessed the monk 'who regards every human being as a god after God' and again, 'blessed is the monk who looks on the salvation and progress of all as though they were his own, with all joy'.³⁵ This regard for others, even if only in a rather abstract and hypothetical way, is nonetheless a key component of early monastic consciousness, and it carries over surprisingly well into modern personalist concerns.

³¹ P. Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

³² For Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.7.38, for the words of the old man, see *Apophthegmata* (Systematic Collection) 21.4 (SC 498.200: also Anonymous Collection N 89).

³³ *μοναχός ἐστίν, ὁ πάντων χωρισθείς, καὶ πᾶσι συννημοσμένος* – *De Oratione* 124 (PG 79.1193C).

³⁴ *De Oratione* 125 (PG 79.1193C).

³⁵ *De Oratione* 122-23 (PG 79.1193BC).

Conclusion

I have tried in this presentation to touch upon the various major aspects of my project on personalism. Considering the vastness of the topic of the person in modern thought, I am dealing with a rather narrow area. But this area, as I have tried to intimate, is a world of problems unto itself (whether historical, philosophical, or theological). As my understanding of how to frame the topic is still in development, I am especially grateful for any feedback or comments you might have. Thank you.