

From Sophia to Personhood: The Development of 20th Century Orthodox Trinitarian Theology

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Abstract: This presentation will trace the development of trinitarian theology, beginning with Sergius Bulgakov and including Dumitru Stăniloae, Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas. It will demonstrate how much of contemporary Orthodox theology on the Trinity, although projecting itself as a neo-Patristic synthesis, is, in large part, a footnote to Bulgakov. I will also argue how the development of a contemporary Orthodox theology of personhood is both consistent with patristic theology and a result of hermeneutical and existential contextuality.

Contemporary Orthodox theology of the person is probably one of the most ecumenically recognizable aspects of contemporary Orthodox theology, and, recently, one of the most controversial aspects, especially among the Orthodox themselves, but also among patristic scholars from across the confessional divide. It is indisputable that the one who placed a theology of person at the center of contemporary Orthodox theology, together with the essence-energies distinction, is Vladimir Lossky. This is attributable to several factors, not least of which is the book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, which is a mini-systematic theology. He wrote this book in 1944 in French and it was translated into English in 1957. The English translation of this book is significant because it became one of the very few books on Orthodox theology in the English language that existed at the time, and it had a profound influence on shaping the ecumenical perception of Orthodox theology. As my doctoral advisor, David Tracy, once admitted to me: “We read Lossky.”

Aspects of Lossky's theology became standard in contemporary Orthodox theology, and his theology of personhood in particular became a lens both to interpret trinitarian theology and Christology, but also for understanding the human person's relationship with God. The standardization of a Losskian interpretation of the fathers can be seen in John Meyendorff's influential book, *Byzantine Theology*, in Alexander Schmemmann's liturgical theology, in Kallistos Ware's writings, and even in Lars Turnberg's magisterial study on Maximos the Confessor, *Microcosm and Mediator*. The most obvious influence is in the philosophy of Christos Yannaras, who in a personal conversation admitted to me that he "started with Lossky," and in the theology of John Zizioulas. Zizioulas has admitted to being influenced by Yannaras, and if he does not admit of a direct Losskian influence on his thought, then it is surely indirect through his own theological development of the ideas in Yannaras's well known book, *Person and Eros*. Only recently has he admitted to the affinities that exist between his and Lossky's theologies of person. Both Yannaras and Zizioulas are among the Greek theologians who are now known in Greece as the "Generation of the 60s," and who broke from the dogmatic manuals of Trembelas and Androutsos primarily by being influenced by the Russian émigré theologians, and, in particular, Vladimir Lossky, whose *Mystical Theology* was published in Greek in 1964. In trying to understand contemporary Orthodox theology's understanding of "person," no matter where we turn, Lossky is always in view.

The theology of personhood developed by Lossky, together with other aspects of his theology, including the centrality of the essence-energies distinction, was uncontested for several decades within Orthodox theology and, as I indicated, was highly influential within Orthodox thought in the 20th Century. It also shaped non-Orthodox perceptions of Orthodoxy. It was not until the mid-1980s that we see the first real challenge to the patristic basis for this theology of personhood, which was given by the Belgian Franciscan scholar, André de Halleux, and which was directed toward Zizioulas's development of this Orthodox theology of personhood. Zizioulas's well-known book, *Being as Communion*, was

not published until 1985, so de Halleux was responding to Zizioulas's book, *L'être ecclesial*; and, as is well known, most of the essays in this French book became part of the English *Being as Communion*. Not long after that, criticisms were forthcoming primarily of Zizioulas's theology of personhood from Jean Claude Larchet, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, Savas Agourides, John Panagopoulos, Lucian Turcescu, John Behr, Lewis Ayres, and Nikolaos Loudovikos. It is also clear that resistance to this contemporary theology of personhood in its Ziziouleian form played a key role in the recent Great and Holy Council, as the Russian delegation objected to this particular language in council documents and demanded the rewriting of those particular sentences that reflected a theology of personhood. All this, of course, before they decided not to attend the Council.

So, where does that leave us? Is the contemporary theology of personhood most developed by Lossky and Zizioulas Orthodox? And how exactly do we make such a judgment? At stake in assessing this contemporary Orthodox theology of personhood is not simply an Orthodox understanding of Trinity, Christology and the human being, but the very task of theology itself. The criticisms are not simply about what it means to be a person, but how to do theology that is faithful to the Tradition. In many ways, it is about the very meaning of Tradition as a living Tradition.

In my address tonight, I want to further unpack this overview of contemporary Orthodox theologies of personhood, and in so doing, I want to both disagree and agree with its critics. I want to agree with its critics that theologies of personhood as we read them in Lossky and Zizioulas, in particular, are not exactly to be found in the fathers, but I also want to argue that that is okay. There are legitimate criticisms that could be leveled against Lossky and Zizioulas, but whether they are faithful to the fathers of the Church all depends on what one means by being faithful to the fathers of the Church. I agree with the critics that it would be difficult to find in the fathers an articulation of theologies of personhood as developed by Lossky and Zizioulas; but, as I have argued

elsewhere, Lossky and Zizioulas can be interpreted as consistent with the fathers insofar as they develop the patristic distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* on the basis of the principle of divine-human communion, or *theosis*.¹ I will, thus, disagree with the critics in defending contemporary Orthodox theologies of person as offering genuine Orthodox insights into both Trinitarian theology and the question of what it means to be human, and in so doing, I hope to demonstrate the hermeneutical and existential dimensions that are inescapable in the task of doing theology, even for the fathers of the Church, and which can be justified on the grounds of the Incarnation itself. In so doing, I will amplify points made in my article, “Tradition as Reason and Practice,” published in 2015 in St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly, and where I draw on Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of tradition as being constitutive of and constituted by rational enquiry as a way of making sense of the Orthodox understanding of tradition, and, thus theology, as a lived experience.

But first, we must begin with Vladimir Lossky, since, as I said, no matter where we turn in contemporary Orthodox theologies of personhood, we find Vladimir Lossky lurking in the shadows. The basic idea in Orthodox theologies of personhood is that it is built upon a distinction between person and nature, where person is identified with freedom and nature is identified with necessity. When I say that person is identified with freedom, I do not mean the freedom for unlimited choice, but an existential freedom from necessity. Nature is, thus, identified with a kind of necessity that personhood ecstatically overcomes and transcends. As Lossky himself explains, “‘person’ signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature—‘irreducibility’ and not ‘something irreducible’ or ‘something which makes man irreducible to his nature’ precisely because it cannot be a question here of ‘something’ distinct from ‘another nature’ but of *someone* who is distinct from his own nature, of someone who goes beyond his nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping and yet does not exist in himself beyond the nature which he ‘enhypostasizes’ and which he constantly

1 ‘Is Zizioulas an Existential in Disguise?’ *Modern Theology* 20:4 (2004) 601-8.

exceeds.”²² Elsewhere he elaborates that “the idea of person implies freedom *vis-à-vis* the nature. The person is free from its nature, is not determined by it.”²³

For Lossky, the person/nature distinction originates in trinitarian and Christological thought.⁴ The basis for theology, according to Lossky is the Incarnation, which is the revelation of the full divinity of the Father in Jesus Christ. In the Incarnation, we witness simultaneously the revelation of the Trinity as a primordial fact, and the challenge is to discern the language and categories that would express the antinomic nature of God’s being as Trinity, as simultaneously one and many. Lossky argues that the brilliance of the Cappadocian Fathers was to draw from Greek philosophical categories of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, where *ousia* would point to that which is attributable to all persons of the Trinity, and *hypostasis* would refer to what is irreducibly unique to each of the persons, that is, the Father is not Son, etc. What was brilliant, according to Lossky, was that *hypostasis* was synonymous with *ousia*, thus cementing the important point that the three *hypostases* of the Trinity were also of the same *ousia*. In this way, the distinction affirms the antinomy of God’s Trinitarian being, but also when thinking of either pole of this antinomy—*hypostasis* or *ousia*—one is always referred to the other side of the antinomy.

There is, however, one more aspect of trinitarian thought that is

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- 2 Vladimir Lossky, ‘The Theological Notion of the Human Person’ in *In the Image and Likeness of God*, eds. John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974) 120. See also, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Ian and Ihita Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1989) 72: “The Person [...] is then man’s freedom with regard to his nature, ‘the fact of being freed from necessity and not being subject to the domination of nature, but able to determine oneself freely.’ (St Gregory of Nyssa)”. No reference is given for the quote from Nyssa.
 - 3 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976) 122.
 - 4 For further details, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism and Divine-Human Communion* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

important to contemporary theologies of personhood—the monarchy of the Father. Against Western notions of the *filioque*, Lossky defends the monarchy of the Father, but in so doing also highlights another aspect of personhood in addition to irreducibility to nature, and that is freedom from nature. As Lossky argues, “What the image of causality wishes to express is the idea that the Father, being not merely an essence but a person, is by that very fact the cause of the other consubstantial Persons, who have the same essence as He has . . . [the] procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father alone, by emphasizing the monarchy of the Father as the concrete principle of the unity of the Three, passes beyond the dyad without a return to primordial unity, without the necessity of God retiring into the simplicity of the essence.”⁵

In Lossky’s trinitarian theology, we thus see that person is something distinct from nature, and in one sense identical to nature, though still distinct, but in another sense over-and-against the necessity that is inherent to nature, even God’s nature. This tension between an understanding of nature as a shared reality and that over and against which person is defined would be transferred to Lossky’s understanding of the spiritual life. Although he cautions against an easy one-to-one correspondence between God’s trinitarian being and the human person, Lossky uses the categories of person and nature to understand the spiritual life. The movement toward theosis for Lossky is one of realizing irreducible uniqueness and is a freedom from the necessity inherent to created nature. For Lossky, the movement toward irreducible uniqueness that is *theosis* is not a negation of nature, but a movement beyond its inherent finitude, but also a reintegration of its fragmentation that was caused by sin. As Lossky states, “The creature, who is both ‘physical’ and ‘hypostatic’ at the same time, is called to realize his unity of nature as well as his true personal diversity by going in grace beyond the individual limits which divide nature and tend to reduce persons to the level of the closed being of particular substances.”⁶ The most important point here is that for Lossky the categories of person-nature map onto the

5 ‘The Procession of the Holy Spirit’ in *In the Image and Likeness of God* 83-85.

6 ‘The Theological Notion of the Human Person’ 122.

antinomy between freedom and necessity, which will come to define later developments of Orthodox theologies of personhood.

Vladimir Lossky presents his own theology as a genuine retrieval of patristic theology, which is especially clear when he juxtaposes the “God of the philosophers” against the “Living God” of the fathers of the Church.⁷ And it is absolutely clear in Lossky that in addition to scholasticism, Bulgakov’s sophiology leans more on the side of the “God of the philosophers” than the “Living God.”⁸ For Lossky, the slide toward the “God of the philosophers” occurs when theology is not sufficiently apophatic.

The antinomy, however, between nature-as-necessity and hypostasis-as-freedom is actually attributable to Sergius Bulgakov, even if Bulgakov never developed a theology of personhood with which we are now all familiar. This antinomy between necessity and freedom in human subjectivity is also discernible in German Idealist philosophy.⁹ There are those who could argue that Bulgakov uncritically appropriated German Idealist philosophy, which seems especially evident when he relates the phenomenology of Spirit to trinitarian theology, a move Lossky criticized.¹⁰ Bulgakov himself, however, indicates that the distinction

7 *In the Image and Likeness* 81.

8 In addition to critical remarks throughout Lossky’s corpus, he is well known for writing early in his career *Spor o Soffi* (The Controversy over Sophia) (Paris: Confrérie de S. Photius, 1936), which was a refutation of Bulgakov’s sophiology.

9 On this point and its influence on Bulgakov, see Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology* 62: “Nevertheless, we may ask, does not this triadology [the monarchy of the Father] fall into the opposite excess: does it not place the persons before the nature? Such would be the case, for example, if the nature were given the character of a common revelation of the persons (as in the sophiology of Father Bulgakov, a modern Russian theologian whose teaching, like that of Origen, reveals the dangers of the eastern approach, or, rather the snares to which the Russian thinker is prone to stumble.)” In a footnote to this citation, Lossky quotes Bulgakov as affirming God as a “‘person in three hypostases’ who reveals himself in the *ousia*.” Such a quotation is taken out of context. Bulgakov technically considered God as Spirit whose self-revelation

between freedom and necessity has its roots in the Christian Trinitarian and Christological controversies. Regarding the Trinity, he states that “deduction is incapable of establishing the fact of divine Triunity, which is given by Revelation; but thought is called to fathom this revealed fact to the extent this is possible for human knowledge.”¹¹ Throughout his corpus, but most especially in *The Comforter*, Bulgakov traces how the categories of *hypostasis/prosopon* and *ousia* were the Christian attempt to “fathom this revealed fact,” and this distinction maps onto the freedom-necessity distinction.

Bulgakov is also, unlike Lossky, not shy to criticize patristic thought in order to bring its many accomplishments to completion with insights drawn from German Idealist philosophy. For example, he has no problem making such statements as “Fichte showed convincingly, the creaturely I is, in its freedom, connected with necessity, with not-I, which reflects and limits it.”¹² Bulgakov himself sees his own understanding of *Sophia* as the trinitarian being of God as self-revelation as further developing what was left unfinished in the patristic literature. This is indicated not simply by the content of *The Comforter*, but by the very structure itself, where a historical analysis of patristic thought on the Holy Spirit is abruptly halted, and one encounters a dense phenomenological account of the self-revelation of Spirit, after which Bulgakov continues with a historical analysis of the *filioque*.¹³ The reason that the historical account of the *filioque* occurs *after* the self-revelation of Spirit is that for Bulgakov, such a phenomenological account of the self-revelation of Spirit, which is *Sophia*, is what is lacking in the patristic attempt to make sense of the revelatory fact of the Trinity, which for Bulgakov is

is *ousia-as-Sophia-as-three-irreducibly-unique-persons*. God as self-revealing Spirit is not exactly the same as God as Person. Although Bulgakov is not always consistent in his use of language, he firmly states that “Sophia is not a hypostasis”—*The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002) 80.

11 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004) 53.

12 *The Bride of the Lamb* 127.

13 Bulgakov, *The Comforter* 1-151.

the revelatory fact of divine-human communion. The discussion of the *filioque* occurs after his phenomenological account of the self-revelation of Spirit because for Bulgakov, the *filioque* was an unnecessary detour in which both sides are complicit and which obfuscated the issue; in other words, it precludes any progress on attempts to “fathom this revealed fact.” As he states clearly, “From the point of view of positive dogmatics, this millennium-and-a-half logomarchy pertaining to the procession of the Holy Spirit was totally fruitless.”¹⁴

Although one can identify the distinction between *hypostasis/prosopon* and *ousia* in the trinitarian and Christological controversies of the fourth century, the mapping of the freedom-necessity distinction onto the *hypostasis/ousia* distinction resulted from Bulgakov’s engagement with German Idealist philosophy. As he states, “In the creaturely spirit, nature is givenness or unfreedom. It is necessity that is realized in the freedom of the person.”¹⁵ Bulgakov, however, does not see such a development as an unauthorized invasion of philosophy into theology, since he sees the German Idealist appropriation as indebted to early Christian debates and, in this sense, somewhat continuous with this patristic tradition. As a result of this continuity-in-discontinuity between German Idealist philosophy and the patristic tradition, Bulgakov has no problem admitting that the phenomenology of the self-revelation of Spirit is in fact what was needed to bring to completion the patristic insights on the Trinity, and to account for divine-human communion. After first affirming in *The Comforter* that “It is proper to spirit to have a personal consciousness, a hypostasis and a nature as its self-revelation, and the life of spirit consists in the living out of this personal self-revelation in its nature,” Bulgakov then states toward its last pages that “Not only is this revelation of the Father about Himself the sweetest of religious truths, but it also contains the solution to all the difficulties of philosophical

14 Ibid. 129.

15 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb* 128. This is but one of numerous citations in Bulgakov’s work mapping the freedom-necessity distinction onto the person-nature distinction.

speculation.”¹⁶ For Bulgakov, however, this appropriation is critically used against such philosophers as Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, as he argues that only God’s trinitarian being as *Sophia*, which maintains the *hypostasis-ousia* antinomy even as it transcends it in free necessity and necessary freedom, cannot account for how God’s being is such that God creates the not-God for communion with God’s very existence.¹⁷

Coming full circle, Lossky’s own theology has been interpreted as part of a genuine neo-patristic retrieval of patristic theology, over-and-against the philosophically tainted theology of the West and of Russian religious thought.¹⁸ It is clear, however, that Lossky’s theology of personhood in terms of the freedom-necessity antinomy is itself constructive and indebted to his own context, especially the theology of Sergius Bulgakov, even as Lossky was attempting to define his theology against that of Bulgakov’s. Lossky’s dependence on Bulgakov is further supported by the fact that all of Lossky’s major categories—antinomy, the person-as-freedom versus nature-as-necessity distinction, kenosis of the Son and kenosis of the Spirit, individual versus person—are all found in Bulgakov, though Lossky presents them as emerging from the patristic tradition. As but one of many examples, although there does not exist a Greek word for “antinomy,” Lossky does not hesitate to discuss the relation between apophatic and cataphatic theology in Dionysius the Areopogite as an “antinomy,” which, again, he inherits from Bulgakov.¹⁹ It appears as if Lossky is co-opting these central categories of Bulgakov and apophaticizing them so as to present self-consciously an anti-sophiological theology. This contextuality is further evinced in Lossky’s identifying the essence-energies distinction as most adequate to expressing divine-human communion, and over-and-against Bulgakov’s

16 *The Comforter* 61, 393.

17 For this critically appreciative engagement with Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, see *The Lamb of God*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008) 89-117.

18 For this reading of Lossky’s place in Orthodoxy theology, see Christos Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*, trans. Peter Chamberas and Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2006).

19 *The Mystical Theology* 26.

sophiology.²⁰ Finally, and more directly related to the theology of personhood, Lossky argued for a more apophatic understanding of the person-nature distinction both in trinitarian theology and in the understanding of human personhood over-and-against Bulgakov because he felt that only an apophatic understanding of the person-nature distinction could secure the freedom and irreducible uniqueness of the person. As he argues, “[t]heological thought, which divides nature into its hypostatic and personality principles—as in the Sophiology of Father Sergius Bulgakov—dissolves human personalities with their freedom in their relations towards God and the world in a cosmic process of the return of the created Sophia to God.”²¹

In the emergence of this contemporary Orthodox theology of personhood we see the dynamics of theology as hermeneutical, in the sense that one cannot really make sense of this theology of personhood without considering both the continuity of this theology with the tradition and the way in which this theology of personhood has absorbed the thought patterns of both modern and post-modern philosophical trajectories, as it attempts to confront the questions and challenges of the moment. I would further like to define this dimension of theology as “hermeneutical” in the sense that as one attempts to give expression to, articulate, interpret or render intelligent Christian truth, one cannot avoid being influenced by the questions and prevailing modes of thought of one’s time and place.²² This is not to say that one simply maps theology onto a particular philosophy; hermeneutical contextuality simply affirms that as one engages one’s own tradition, one cannot escape doing so without having already absorbed the questions and language of particular modes of thought of a given

20 On this point, see *The Mystical Theology* 80.

21 Vladimir Lossky, “The Spiritual Legacy of Patriarch Sergius” *Diakonia* 6 (1971) 168.

22 On the relationship between Orthodox theology and hermeneutical philosophy, see Assaad Elias Kattan, ‘Gadamer *Ad Portas*’: The Orthodox Understanding of Tradition Challenged by Hermeneutics’ *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 66:1-2 (2014) 63-71. See also Aristotle Papanikolaou, ‘Tradition as Reason and Practice: Amplifying Contemporary Orthodox Theology in Conversation with Alasdair MacIntyre’ *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 59:1 (2015) 91-104.

time and place. Such an hermeneutical contextuality denies that there is an identity to ideas, which often migrate across various intellectual systems and worldviews. Such a hermeneutical contextuality is evident in the fathers of the Church, with the appropriation of such language of *hypostasis* and *ousia*, and in other ways; it is also evident in Bulgakov and Lossky. What unites Bulgakov and Lossky with the fathers of the Church, across time and in distinct places, is their concern to faithfully and adequately articulate the realism of divine-human communion, and it is through this attempt at expressing divine-human communion that one can trace the genealogy of the Orthodox understanding of personhood. Indeed, with this understanding of hermeneutical contextuality, I would argue that all Eastern Christian thought from the moment of its inception has been and always will be contextual.

The theologian who has most developed this theology of personhood, and who is most associated with this theology, is John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon. In Zizioulas's theology of personhood, I would argue that we see not simply the continuation of the hermeneutical dimension of theology evident in the fathers of the Church, Bulgakov and Lossky—hence, Zizioulas continues the tradition of thinking on divine-human communion; but, evident also is what I would call an existential dimension, as Zizioulas is concerned to articulate a theology of personhood that resonates with the experience of being human.

According to Metropolitan John, and as is well known to this audience, personhood should not be attributed to any particular capacity of the human being, such as rationality or self-consciousness. Personhood is a relational event in which the human being—and through the human being all of creation—is constituted as irreducibly unique—*hypostatic*; and free—*ekstatic*. This freedom as *ekstasis* is not a multiplication of choices but a transcendence beyond the necessity surrounding the human being by the finitude of nature and beyond the existential necessity of nature caused by human sinfulness. Personhood is a Eucharistic event, and, as such, is the realization of the greatest commandment to love

God with all of one's heart, mind, and soul, and to love the neighbor as oneself; it is an event of communion, of unity-in-difference, of the one and the many.²³

Zizioulas has not only demonstrated this understanding of personhood theologically in relation to Trinitarian theology, Christology and ecclesiology, but has also shown how it is discernible in our everyday lives. He pointed us to the human creation of art,²⁴ the analysis of the question of 'who am I',²⁵ and to the procreative act²⁶ in order to illustrate for us the human longing for uniqueness and freedom. I would add that this understanding of personhood is shown to be true by other examples, such as events of history or the suffering of a particular illnesses, and in so doing, extend the existential contextuality of Zizioulas's theology of personhood; in other words, these examples further reinforce the degree to which Zizioulas's theology resonates with dimensions of human experience. The Nazi concentration camps and the communist gulags are clear examples of structures of relationships that depersonalize the human being, constituting him as non-unique and unfree while subjecting him to extreme forms of oppression. In such situations, the human being can claim to be unique and free over the oppressor, but the reality is such that this cry for recognition is ignored. The only basis for justifying this claim to uniqueness and freedom in the midst of oppression is an eternal relationship with God, who is eternally relating to each human being in such a way as to always be constituting the human being as unique and free, even if fallen conditions do not allow for the realization of such an experience of personhood. The relational understanding of personhood in terms of freedom and uniqueness is also clearly manifested in those who suffer from Alzheimer's disease, which is a disease that seeks to destroy one's uniqueness and freedom. For those who suffer from Alzheimer's,

23 For a fuller analysis of Zizioulas's theology of personhood, together with the relevant citations, see Papanikolaou, *Being with God* 129-61.

24 John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (New York: T&T Clark, 2006) 206-49.

25 Ibid. 99-112.

26 John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985) 50-53.

their capacity to remember the details of their own unique story or the people who are a part of that story disintegrates and they are trapped in a world of confused thoughts and fleeting images. In such a state, the only hope for affirming the uniqueness of the Alzheimer's patient is through their loved ones who have always related to the Alzheimer's patient as "Helen", "Maria", "George", or "Seraphim", even as the Alzheimer's patient cannot remember their own unique name.

We see another example of existential contextuality in the Romanian theologian, Dumitru Stăniloae, who is similar to Zizioulas in that he searches for that aspect in human experience that would allow for clarification and understanding of the dogmatic tradition. The dogmas are not sterile propositions, but must speak to the realism of divine-human communion and, thus, must resonate with life experiences. Stăniloae, Zizioulas and Bulgakov all attempt to interpret the dogmatic tradition in light of some aspect of human experience, though Stăniloae and Zizioulas do so in a more exploratory fashion, rather than, as with Bulgakov, locating a foundationalist grounding within the human experience of self. Whereas for Zizioulas, the aspect of human experience by which he clarifies his trinitarian theology of personhood is the human experience of longing for irreducible uniqueness and freedom of necessity colliding tragically with death and finitude, the point of focus for Stăniloae is the movement of dialogue in relationships of love.

In unison with all contemporary Orthodox theologians, Stăniloae affirms that humans were created for union with God. Human beings, like no other living beings, realized this union through a dialogue of love that God initiated from the moment of creation. Stăniloae affirms a notion of creation as God's gift that initiates the possibility of an exchange of gifts between God and human beings, who function as priests of creation. This exchange of gifts is simultaneously a dialogue of love enabling a personal communion between God and creation. The fact that the world was created for the purpose of communion between the personal God and human persons is a truth of revelation confirmed by the human experience of freedom and relationality. As Stăniloae states, "It

is only with other persons that man can achieve the kind of communion in which neither he nor they descend to the status of being objects of exterior knowledge used always in an identical way. Instead, they grow as sources for an inexhaustible warmth of love and of thoughts that are ever new, brought forth and sustained by the reciprocal love of these persons, a love that remains always creative, always in search of new ways of manifesting itself.²⁷ That the human experience of love shapes Stăniloae's trinitarian theology is especially clear when he wrestles with the question of why a third in God; it is also in addressing this question that Stăniloae's speculative tendencies become evident. In a way that is similar to Augustine and Richard of St Victor, Stăniloae argues that "It is only through the third that the love between the two proves itself generous and capable of extending itself to subjects outside themselves. Exclusiveness between the two makes the act of a generous overflow beyond the prison walls of the couple impossible."²⁸ Though Stăniloae was an independent thinker in his own right, this particular quote reveals his indebtedness to Bulgakov.

In as much as existential contextuality offers confirmation of Zizioulas's understanding of personhood as irreducible uniqueness and freedom from necessity constituted in particular relationships of communion, it also indicates a blind spot in his understanding of personhood. This blind spot has to do with his lack of attention to the fact that love itself is not simply an event but also a learning. The interpersonal dynamics of love as a learning is evident in Stăniloae's theology as Stăniloae pays much more attention to what I would call the asceticism of personhood. There is an asceticism to personhood as a learning how to love that is indicated existentially in day-to-day existence and in the patristic tradition. Zizioulas never denies the importance of asceticism, but there is little development in his thought of the relation between asceticism and his theology of personhood. He gives the impression that

27 *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology: Revelation and Knowledge of the Triune God*, vol. 1, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, trans. and ed. Ioan Ionita and Robert Barraniger (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press) 10.

28 *Ibid.* 267.

personhood as irreducible uniqueness and freedom from necessity is exclusively a Eucharistic event; that which is constituted in and through the Eucharist. Although the realization of personhood as an hypostatic and ekstatic event occurs in the Eucharist through the eschatological in-breaking of the Holy Spirit, St Maximos the Confessor, in his *Four Hundred Chapters on Love*, helps us to understand that the virtue of love is something that must be learned; it requires humans to engage in ascetical practices that allow us to acquire the virtues, which then form the building blocks for acquiring the virtue of virtues, which is love. St Maximos offers a relational understanding of the virtues in which virtues build relationships, while vices destroy relationships. He says, “All the virtues assist the mind in the pursuit of divine love” (1.11).²⁹

This acquisition of personhood is the realization of a Eucharistic mode of being in the world, in which the person relates to others in the world so as to enable further realizations of this Eucharistic mode of being in others and throughout all of creation. This asceticism of personhood is not one that manifests itself in being judgmental or legalistic; but it is a living the truth even in relation to those who have yet to discover it. This asceticism of personhood is a struggle to overcome all that which obstructs the realization of our uniqueness and freedom, which includes our own insecurities and fears, as well as the sin that is committed against us. Finally, this asceticism of personhood is the realization of the greatest commandment—to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 23:37).

The fact that our personhood as freedom from necessity and irreducible uniqueness is realized through an asceticism of personhood as a Eucharistic mode of being in the world is confirmed existentially

29 Maximos the Confessor, *Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985) 36. For more on Maximos’s understanding of virtues as a learning to love, see Aristotle Papanikolaou, ‘Learning How to Love: Saint Maximus on Virtue’ in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation Through the Resurrection: Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor*, ed. Bishop Maxim Vasiljević (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2013) 239-50.

not simply through the dynamics of interpersonal love, as suggested by Stăniloae, but also by negative human experiences, including the experience of violence. Recently in my research, I have been exploring the effects of violence on learning how to love, and in so doing, I am following Stăniloae and Zizioulas in trying to think our tradition in relation to what I have been calling existential contextuality. But the form of contextuality that I am highlighting is what I would call, following Edward Schillebeeckx, contrast experiences within human existence. Specifically, the question I want to ask is whether the Orthodox theology of personhood as freedom from necessity and irreducible uniqueness makes sense in light of these contrast experiences, specifically the human experience of violence.

First, it is absolutely clear that the experience of violence leaves an existential mark on the human person. It is often thought that when one is threatened by or suffers violence, or even commits violence, once the violence is stopped, the person is unaffected. This assumption is wrong. Neuroscience is now able to show that the experience of violence—and even the committing of violence—leave a trace on the body that makes learning how to love difficult. The trace on the body has to do with actual physical effects on the formation of the brain that have to do with how we regulate fear and anger. For St Maximos the Confessor, the greatest obstacles to learning how to love are anger, fear and hatred. The traces of violence are manifested in the form of not being able to be in public places, such as restaurants, not sleeping, having nightmares of killing spouses or children, and many other such similar symptoms. Thus, this trace on the body can be explained in terms of being locked into a kind of necessity that tragically prevents the fulfillment of one's longing for freedom from the existential effects of this violence. In so far as it makes being in relationship difficult, it makes love difficult, and by so doing it also tragically prevents the realization of our longing for irreducible uniqueness in relations of communion.

In one sense, the effects of violence offer further confirmation of the Orthodox theology of personhood in terms of freedom from necessity

and irreducible uniqueness through relations of communion. What situations of experienced violence show is that violence subjects the human being to a state of existential necessity, and the deepest longing of those who experience the effects of violence is to be free from this necessity; or, in the words of contemporary Orthodox theology, to realize personhood. What these experiences also indicate is that what is most damaging about violence is the capacity for relationality, in which this freedom from necessity is most realized.

What situations of violence thus manifest is an absence in Zizioulas's theology of personhood to any attention to how personhood is realized as an event of freedom from necessity as a communion of love. If personhood exists as irreducible uniqueness and freedom as *ekstasis* from the necessity of nature, then personhood is a result of an asceticism of personhood as a learning how to love through the acquisition of the virtues.

Insofar as virtues build proper relationships while vices destroy such relationships, then the asceticism of *theosis* as personhood must be relevant to those attempting to undo the asceticism of violence. What's more, thinking about the healing of violence, in particular, along the lines of practices and virtues provides a way for intersecting the psychological literature on trauma and what is being called "moral injury" with the ascetical/mystical tradition on the formation of virtue and, thus, personhood. The connecting category is that of practices, since the one with a lived experience of violence must engage in a new kind of asceticism, one that replaces the asceticism of violence in order to combat the demonic images impacting his relationships to self and others.

One of the practices that wires the body for openness to love is truth-telling, and one can see the importance of truth-telling in treatments for both PTSD, such as exposure therapy, where the patient speaks repeatedly to the therapist his trauma in order to reduce the fear reaction to the memories; or Adaptive Disclosure Therapy, where patients engage in "imaginal conversation with the deceased or a compassionate and

forgiving moral authority.”³⁰ It is also being discovered that the practice of yoga has been shown to help those who have experienced trauma. My basic point is that the experience of violence indicates that personhood as freedom-from-necessity and irreducible uniqueness is not simply realized in the Eucharist, but through particular kinds of ascetical practices that manifest the virtues, and in so doing, increase the human capacity to form relationship and, thus, to love and be loved.

Conclusion

Let me affirm that the Orthodox theological notion of personhood as an event of irreducible uniqueness and freedom from the necessity of sin that has distorted created nature is one of the most important and enduring insights of contemporary Orthodox theology, which, again, traces its roots back to Bulgakov, but which was most developed by Lossky and Zizioulas, and which I would argue, in spite of the protests of Patristic theologians, is implicit in the Trinitarian and Christological debates of the patristic period. I would argue that this theology of personhood is an example of hermeneutical contextuality insofar as it emerges through an attempt to interpret the tradition, but whose content is not intelligible without taking into account Bulgakov’s, Lossky’s and Zizioulas’s engagement with the questions and thought-forms of their time. The line between what can be attributed exclusively to the fathers and to contemporary philosophers is not easy to draw, as ideas migrate without identity and borders.

I have tried to show how this understanding of personhood as a longing for a personal uniqueness and freedom from necessity is also an example of existential contextuality, insofar as it resonates with the human contrast experiences of self-loathing, oppression, mental illness and violence. I have also argued that this understanding of personhood needs to be supplemented with the aretaic anthropology of St Maximos

30 Shira Maguen and Brett Litz, ‘Moral Injury in Veterans of War’ *PTSD Research Quarterly* 23:1 (2012) 3—<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/newsletters/research-quarterly/v23n1.pdf> (retrieved on 20 July 2018).

the Confessor, most evident in the theology of Dumitru Stăniloae, who understood the ascetical struggle as a movement toward the manifestation of the virtues as building blocks toward the learning of love. The embodiment of the virtues is the realization of a Eucharistic mode of being in which the person is rendered irreducibly unique and free from the existential necessity caused by sin or being sinned against. Put another way, the ascetical struggle to realize this Eucharistic mode of being is itself a training of the body and soul to learn how to love. If we put the two together, the contemporary Orthodox theological notion of personhood and St Maximos's understanding of virtues, then we have a profound insight into the human condition that can illuminate the effects of violence on the human person. We also have the basis for a more positive relationship between person and nature, rather than the diametrical opposition that is implied especially in the theologies of Lossky and Zizioulas.

If the Orthodox theological notion of personhood as irreducible uniqueness and freedom from the existential necessity caused by sin is understood in relation to St Maximos's understanding of the virtues, then the Orthodox would offer a theological anthropology that would correct the blind spots of just war ethics, that would disrupt the current philosophical and theological discussions of virtue ethics, and would provide the basis of a unique Orthodox voice to the Christian concern for social justice and for social theology, in the sense that the Christian response would not be limited to activism, but would see the training in the virtues as potentially mitigating the problems caused by poverty. The Orthodox often speak of *theosis*, but do not really know what to say about *theosis* in relation to situations of post-traumatic stress disorder, mental illness, violence or poverty. A further hermeneutical and existential contextualization of the already contextual Orthodox theology of personhood through St Maximos's understanding of the virtues would help us make *theosis* more worldly.