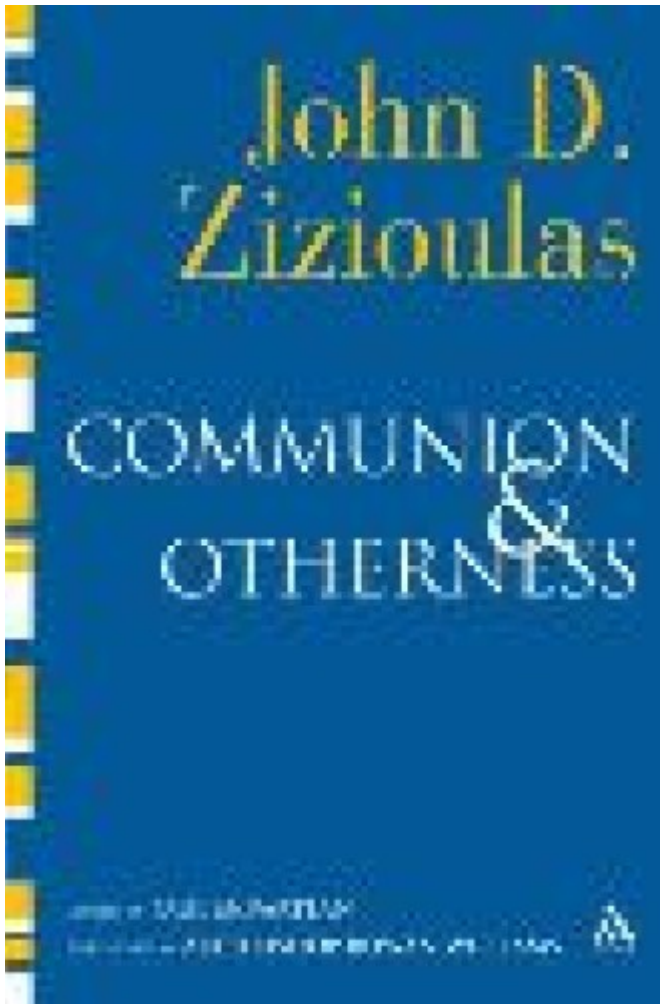


Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church

reviewed by [Thomas Finger](#) in the [May 20, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church

John Zizioulas

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Interest in Eastern Orthodoxy has been rising for several decades. At a time when many churches simplify and repackage their messages in current idioms that can seem shallow and ephemeral, Orthodoxy offers some people a deeper mystery and a stable tradition.

Orthodoxy's ancient symbols and practices intrigue newcomers, for they offer access to realities that can be profoundly experienced though not fully explained. Nevertheless, inquirers and converts desire some understanding of what these symbols and practices mean today. Orthodox writers like John Zizioulas seek to clarify them, but without reducing their mystery or altering their original meanings.

Zizioulas is widely appreciated for translating complex, ancient ideas like hypostasis and perichoresis into contemporary concepts like person and relationship. He achieves this not by oversimplifying the Greek terms but by explicating them carefully.

Communion and Otherness contains nine essays; three are new, and six were published between 1975 and 1995 but revised for this volume. Zizioulas expands on an age-old philosophical question raised in the author's earlier book *Being as Communion* (1985): What is being? What ultimately makes beings be, or causes entities to exist?

Patristic theology is often criticized for replacing scripture's dynamic, narrative language with static Greek philosophical concepts. Zizioulas argues that, on the contrary, the church fathers transformed Greek thought in light of scripture and gave radically new meanings to some of its concepts. Above all, they interpreted both person and being as personal.

In Greek philosophies, Zizioulas writes, all beings participate directly in ultimate being, which is a rational principle (such as a Platonic Idea). Their universes are monistic: all beings in a universe are of the same general type, are governed by necessary laws and lack true freedom and personhood.

Christians believe, however, that particular beings are created from nothing by a very different, volitional Being. Creation and salvation are gifts of this radical Other. Zizioulas traces the process by which this Being came to be conceived of as personal. He explains that this personal Being exists as Trinity, and since no divine

Person exists without the others, personal being is also intrinsically relational.

Authentic personhood, then, is constituted by communal relationships, while true communities are constituted by authentic persons. In *Being as Communion*, Zizioulas focused on the personal aspect. In *Communion and Otherness*, he stresses that true community involves genuine differences among participants.

In light of the Trinity, Zizioulas develops an Orthodox view of human personhood, clarified by the use of contemporary concepts. The person, at its core, is otherness in communion and communion in otherness. Personhood also involves freedom, which is the ability to be one's own unique self. This cannot be freedom *from* all restraints and relationships, but only *for* relationships, which co-constitute freedom. Relationships among unique persons flourish through love, and from love and freedom springs another basic feature of personhood: creativity.

What, then, accounts for impersonality, individualism and conflict in society? Although Zizioulas occasionally interacts with philosophers like Levinas, Sartre and Heidegger, he develops his anthropology, in common Orthodox fashion, from the creation, the Fall and Christology. Human beings, he writes, were created within relational networks with God and other creatures. They were designed to eventually participate in the eternal triune life through increasing communion with these others.

By turning against God, Adam fell out of these supportive relations and became an individual: an isolated being quite different from a person. By severing these outward connections Adam also subjected his descendants to inward disintegration, culminating in death.

Yet Jesus walked with God as Adam should have, and his person (or hypostasis) maintained unbroken communion with his Father. By living as a full human being, by undergoing disintegration in death and reintegration through resurrection, Jesus drew human nature back into relationship with God. People become true persons by entering the hypostatic relationship, or eternal communion, that Jesus shares with his Father.

While Zizioulas often describes personhood in general, contemporary ways, he considers personhood inseparable from ecclesiology. True communion with otherness is realized supremely in the Eucharist, which offers participation in Christ's unique hypostasis.

Zizioulas often expresses the Orthodox vision through existentialist contrasts—for example, favoring persons entirely over things. Such contrasts appear to minimize Orthodoxy's stable, enduring features. Zizioulas says, for instance, that the church is "built up through a convergence of new events and not through a preservation or transmission of historical realities." But does not Orthodoxy stress both, and do not many outsiders find it attractive for this reason?

One central theme may give readers pause. Zizioulas, like Orthodox tradition, locates personhood finally in God the Father. He explains at length how the Father "causes" the Son's and the Spirit's existence. Western theologians usually find this overly subordinationist and hierarchical. Some of them propose that personhood should be ascribed to the interactivity among the three Persons, and that there is no need to search for one single cause. Zizioulas considers this possibility carefully, but rejects it.

While Zizioulas employs current concepts skillfully in *Communion and Otherness*, this is a serious theological book. Readers without some prior knowledge of Orthodox theology may find it tough going. Still, this volume, along with *Being as Communion*, provides one of the most insightful, contemporary and accessible accounts of Orthodoxy available.