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Freedom and Personality in the Theology of Maximus the Confessor according to contemporary Maximian Scholars; A Modern Question to a Church Father

INTRODUCTION

After George Florovsky's claim that 'the Fathers are the eternal category and criterion of the truth',¹ it has become clear more than ever that the perennial question of Orthodox theology is precisely one of how to read the Church Fathers.² If we accept that the Fathers are 'the eternal category and criterion of truth', is it not the case that this major methodological contention *a priori* and in a radical manner determines our reading of patristic texts? It seems that Florovsky's neo-patristic synthesis, as a methodological paradigm, does not envisage a possibility of a critical reading of the Fathers. Although Florovsky talks about the 'new creative act', his vision of creative theology focuses entirely on the exegesis of the 'western religious tragedy' and never seems to accept a possibility of a critical approach to the Fathers.

However, have the Fathers succeeded in developing a systematic and satisfying concept of divine personhood or hypostasis? Kallistos Ware for example observes:

[...] It should be emphasized that there is in the Greek Fathers no single, systematic theory of personhood, or even an agreed terminology, but only a series of overlapping approaches. We should not speak of *the* patristic doctrine of the person, as if there were only one such doctrine.³

1 Ways of Russian Theology, in Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, vol. 4: Aspects of Church History, (Vaduz: Bücherververtriebsanstalt, 1987), p. 195.

2 Florovsky also argued that "it is not enough to refute or reject western errors or mistakes—they must be overcome by the new creative act." The "new creative act" is depicted in a rather patronizing manner as "a historiosophical exegesis of the western religious tragedy", which is to be performed with "greater care and sympathy by Orthodox theology than has been the case until now." Ibid., p. 15-16.

³ Kallistos Ware, The Human Person and the Greek Fathers, in: Persons and Personality, edited by Arthur Peacocke and Grant Gillett, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987, p. 199.

If in the Fathers there is no single and systematic theory of personhood, then the most important doctrines of Christianity, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, do not have the kind of substantial basis as is often claimed they have. Moreover, can we elucidate what is human personhood unless we clarify what is divine personhood? What does it mean to say that we believe in a personal God, if we do not know what personhood is? In this paper, I would like to propose a critical approach towards the theology of the patristic period, and in particular of Maximus the Confessor, one of the most prominent Church Fathers, who was born in 580 AD and died in 662. For this purpose, I shall use some of the remarks made by Nicolas Berdyaev, a noted Russian religious philosopher.⁴

Berdyaev's main argument is that Christianity has not yet revealed itself in its fullness as an experience of freedom.⁵ The Russian philosopher claims that this is due to the incomplete Christian concept of freedom. In other words, the Christianity which is represented in the teachings of the patristic period has mostly struggled to produce a negative notion of freedom, that is, freedom *from* passions, whereas freedom *for*, which would demand the activation of human creative capacities, has been largely overlooked.

Salvation from sin, from perdition, is not the final purpose of religious life: salvation is always *from* something and life should be *for* something... Man's chief end is not to be saved but to mount up, creatively. For this creative upsurge salvation from sin and evil is necessary.⁶

Berdyaev's concern is in how man can exist as a separate and autonomous being with respect to God. Here it is obvious that Berdyaev tackles one of the most important issues of patristic theology, i.e., the question of the two natures, divine

⁴ Berdyaev's methodology is in a stark contrast with Florovsky's neo-patristic synthesis. As one of the key figures of the Russian religious philosophy, Berdyaev sought a 'third way', between conservative Orthodoxy and western rationalism. Florovsky severely criticized Berdyaev in his *Ways of Russian Theology*, but Berdyaev responded in series of articles in the journal *Put'*. Paul Tillich gave an accurate and flattering appraisal of Berdyaev's mode of thought: "Berdyaev himself calls his type of thought 'theosophy' and means by this a free further development of ecclesial doctrines in the spirit of a speculative metaphysics and mystical intuition. This mode of thought can be seen as the characteristic and most valuable contribution of the Greek Church to the religious thought of the present age." P. Tillich, *Nikolai Berdiajew: Eine Geistesgeschichtliche Würdigung*, *Gesamelte Werke Band XII*, (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1971), p. 290ff. Quoted in: Georg Nikolaus, C.G. Jung and Nikolai Berdyaev; *Individuation and the Person*, (Routledge, 1971), p. 205, n7.

⁵ *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. by Donald A. Lowrie, (San Rafael CA: Semantron Press, 2008), p. 158.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

and human, in the person of Christ. As it is well known, the council of Chalcedon dealt extensively with this problem, and the autonomy of human nature was preserved in the definition that explained that both natures exist in Christ in an “unconfused” way. The theme of two natures existing in Christ certainly represented one of the most important problems in the history of Christian theology, and among the Orthodox scholars there is almost a common consent that it was resolved in a satisfactory manner,⁷ not least because of the immense contribution of Maximus the Confessor’s theology. Nevertheless, many centuries later, Berdyaev deemed that it was necessary to raise this issue again. Moreover—and I would like to emphasize this—the Russian philosopher claimed boldly that “in the Christianity of the early Fathers there was a monophysite tendency.”⁸

Berdyaev’s most significant argument about human freedom is that “freedom is the power to create out of nothing.”⁹ According to Berdyaev, man is able to be free, that is, to create out of nothing (although not without a medium, as God does).¹⁰ If this claim plays such an important role in the question about human freedom, and in particular with regard to a *formative ontological principle of personhood*, and if this is not obvious from the texts of the Fathers but could only be extracted with difficulty, then, is it not possible to speak about, as Berdyaev puts it, the “monophysite tendency” in the Christianity of the patristic period? However, since the Fathers claim that nature never exists in a “naked form”,¹¹ that is, without a hypostasis, I find it necessary to amend Berdyaev’s argument. I contend that in the works of the Fathers there is a tendency towards impersonalism.

7 There is almost no doubt, at least amongst Orthodox theologians, that the question of the two natures in Christ was resolved once and for all. Here I give just one example: “... Christ who is the perfect communion of God and man unto all ages...” Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology; Maximus the Confessor’s Eucharistic Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity*, (Brookline: Massachusetts, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), p.177. However, one can notice that most Orthodox theologians also believe that Christian anthropology is going to be one of the central issues of our century due to the lack of sufficient doctrine concerning the human person. Nevertheless, the question of the human person is essentially related to the issue of the two natures in Christ and these two problems cannot be treated separately.

8 Berdyaev, p. 80.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 144-46.

10 *Dream and Reality; An Essay in Autobiography*, (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 212-3.

11 For instance, Maximus writes, ‘the fact that no nature is without hypostasis does not make it into a hypostasis but rather into something hypostasized (ἐνυπόστατον)...’ *Opuscula*, PG 91, 264A.

I shall also seek to demonstrate that one can trace the same tendency in the theology of the most contemporary Orthodox theologians, even among those who are said or claim to be “personalists”.

Nature and Person in Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor

There is no consensus among Orthodox scholars about the concepts of personhood and nature in the teachings of the Fathers. On the contrary, this issue became a serious controversy in several recent publications.¹² As a result, we have presently two antagonized factions. The first group (Lossky, Yannaras and Zizioulas) finds in the Fathers a highly developed concept of personhood which in several points resembles a modern personalist position. However, it is with a certain reserve that I put Lossky together with the other two. The Russian theologian expressed clearly his doubts as to whether one can find an elaborate doctrine of the human person in the Fathers.

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. However, there is *a Christian anthropology* among the Fathers of the first eight centuries, as well as later on in Byzantium and in the West; and it is unnecessary to say that these doctrines of man are clearly personalist. It could not have been otherwise for a theological doctrine based upon the revelation of a living and personal God who created man ‘according to his own image and likeness.’¹³

12 “The theology of personhood as developed from Lossky through Yannaras to Zizioulas has left at least two issues which future Orthodox theologians must confront. The first is a perennial question for Orthodox theologians and it deals with how one is to read the writings of the Church Fathers. Lossky’s, Yannaras’ and especially Zizioulas’ attempt to root their theologies of personhood in the Fathers, particularly the Cappadocians, has recently been criticised. The criticism keeps in the foreground the ongoing debate on how Orthodox Christians should ‘theologize’. Aristotle Papanikolaou, Personhood and its exponents in twentieth-century Orthodox theology, in: Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology, edited by Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 241. Zizioulas’ approach to the Fathers was under scrutiny in the article by Lucian Turcescu, “Persons” versus “Individual”, and other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa, in: Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa, edited by Sarah Coakley, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 97-109. Aristotle Papanikolaou answered to this criticism in Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise? Response to Lucian Turcescu, *Modern Theology* 20:4, October 2004, p. 601-607. See also: Melchisedec Törönen, Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007; Johannes Zachhuber, Gregory of Nyssa on Individuals.

13 In the Image and Likeness of God, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York 10707, 1985, p. 112. Emphasis added.

Lossky's position is clear—the Fathers have not produced a developed teaching on the human person, but the notion of personhood can be extracted from their anthropology. This anthropology can only be personalist because it is developed from a doctrine of a personal God. In other words, Lossky detects a lack in the theology of the Fathers—a lack of an elaborate notion of human personhood, although it is not quite clear how it is possible to have a “very precise teaching on divine persons” and not to be able, using analogy to a certain extent, to work out a notion of the human hypostasis. This is why I venture a claim that a theory of human personhood was not formulated because the Fathers have not yet completed their work in elaborating a theology of divine personhood.

The logical consequence of a deficient theory of the human hypostasis is the absence of a genuine concept of freedom of a particular human person. The second group of theologians is not completely homogenous. They all seem to doubt, in differing ways,¹⁴ that the Cappadocian Fathers had an elaborate concept of divine persons, if person is to be understood as an absolute uniqueness with ultimate ontological identity. Melchisedec Törönen, for instance, is very much in line with Loudovikos' position, since he does not regard this absence as a failing of patristic theology. Although Törönen does not mention Zizioulas by name, it is clear that he uses the metonymy “modern personalist”¹⁵ to denote Lossky, Zizioulas, and Yannaras. Holding his position on the “freedom of nature”, Törönen can hardly share sympathies for contemporary personalism, although he never claims this openly.

14 One of the differences is that Törönen's work is based entirely on Maximus, although, of course, he also mentions the Cappadocians, whereas Zachhuber and Turcescu concentrate on Gregory of Nyssa. However, Gregory of Nyssa, together with his brother Basil, Gregory Nazianzen, and the Alexandrian Christological tradition, are theologians who exercised a highly significant dogmatic influence on Maximus and the analysis of his theory of person is therefore relevant. See: Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 26-28.

15 *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor*, p. 54.

Johannes Zachhuber is even more reserved with regard to taking a position vis-à-vis modern personalist trends and his focus is primarily to demonstrate that Gregory of Nyssa was not an individualist.¹⁶

Lucian Turcescu is probably the sharpest critic of Zizioulas, so I shall start with him. Turcescu's position can be summarized as follows: in the time of the Cappadocians, the notion of individual/person "was only emerging".¹⁷ This is why Zizioulas' argument that the Fathers make a distinction between person and individual, in the modern personalist and existentialist sense, is rather unsubstantiated. Primarily basing his argument on the work of Gregory of Nyssa, Turcescu tries to demonstrate that the Cappadocians *did* use the terms 'person' and 'individual' interchangeably, i.e., that the Cappadocians regarded 'person' as individual in Zizioulas' terminology. Therefore, despite Zizioulas' claims, there is no such a thing as a relational ontology of person in the theology of the Fathers.

We have to elucidate carefully what Turcescu claims here. Zizioulas explains that the 'individual' is, first, a complex of qualities that cannot guarantee uniqueness, and, second, that the 'individual' can be enumerated, whilst the uniqueness of person defies such an enumeration.¹⁸ In both cases Zizioulas describes the individual in sharp contrast with the person—an individual is different from a person because it does not possess uniqueness. This means that Turcescu's argument that the Cappadocians did not have a relational ontology rests fundamentally on his more elementary argument, i.e., that according to the Fathers, person equals individual. This is because the character of a relationship is dependent essentially on the character of related entities.¹⁹ If the work of the Fathers does not contain a notion of personhood—understood as unique particularity in an absolute sense—then relationship makes little sense indeed.

16 Gregory of Nyssa on Individuals, p. 12.

17 "Person' versus 'Individual', and Other Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa", in: *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, edited by Sarah Coakley, Blackwell Publishing, 2003, p. 103.

18 A. Papanikolaou, *op. cit.*, p. 601.

19 "The thrust of Turcescu's argument can be paraphrased as follows: by looking primarily at the work of Gregory of Nyssa, it can be shown that the Cappadocian Fathers do in fact identify person with individual as Zizioulas defines the latter and, therefore, there is no such a thing as a relational ontology of person in the Trinitarian theology of the Cappadocian Fathers." A. Papanikolaou, *op. cit.*, p. 602.

Genuine relationship exists only if each of the entities involved possesses an absolute otherness and particularity, and, as a consequence, has something to communicate to the other. That is, without a notion of an absolute otherness of the other a relationship *without confusion* is inconceivable.²⁰ The question is—can we talk about a genuine relationship if the related entities melt into each other—would this not be simply an end of a relationship? As I shall demonstrate shortly, without a concept of personhood with full ontological *identity*, both Trinitarian theology and Christology lose their foundation.

That the Cappadocians, according to Turcescu, have indeed regarded the term ‘person’ as an equivalent with the concept of the individual is even clearer from the following quotation:

The Cappadocian Fathers were not aware of the dangers of individualism and perhaps this is why they did not make many efforts to distinguish between person and individual. They were more concerned with distinguishing between person or individual, on the one hand, and nature or substance, on the other hand, in connection with the Christian God. At that time, the three divine persons were not properly understood as three different entities while each was one and the same God.²¹

If at the time of the Cappadocians “the three divine persons were not properly understood as three different entities”, it follows that the Cappadocian concept of person was similar to Zizioulas’ concept of individual, or, in different words, that the Cappadocians understood person as something not possessing uniqueness and full ontological identity.²² However, in the case when the person is understood simply as a mask or modality without a distinct identity, it is hardly possible to distinguish between person and individual, on the one hand, and nature or substance, on the other. However, according to the Cappadocians, it is precisely this difference—distinction between the *logos of nature* and the *tropos*

20 Törönen is aware of this: “Particularity and its integrity is for both [Greek patristic theology and the existentialist type of personalism] of immense importance. Unity which annihilates the particularity of those united cannot be true unity.” Op. cit., p. 59. Nevertheless, we shall see shortly how Törönen understands “particularity”.

21 “Person” versus “Individual”, p. 106-107.

22 I disagree on this point with Zizioulas, because I think we cannot say that an individual lacks uniqueness or identity. If it were so, it would follow that there is no one to create relationship or, rather, that relationship is self-created. An individual, I think, is rather a personhood in becoming.

hyparxeos—that makes the doctrine of the Trinity possible. Following the Fathers, Maximus explains that personhood is a unique *tropos* or *mode* according to which substance or nature is appropriated. If personhood lacks this uniqueness, it follows that it cannot create its unique *tropos*.

Finally, in support of his contention Turcescu explains that the Fathers—in this particular case Gregory of Nyssa—employ the term hypostasis even when referring to a horse.²³ This is possibly the strongest argument one can use in order to dismiss a Zizioulian or, rather, personalist interpretation of the Fathers. If a non-rational animal, a horse, is a person in the same way as a human being, this means that the Greek patristic thought did not conceive of person as an absolute particularity.

Törönen uses the same argument, but only as an introduction for a much longer scrutiny of the notion of person in Maximus. Törönen’s position can be summarized as follows: according to the Fathers, “what the universal is in relation to the particular, this the essence is in relation to the hypostasis”.²⁴ In other words, things which share the same essence belong to one nature, whereas “hypostasis” denotes things which share the same nature or are composed of the same nature but *differ in number*.²⁵ Maximus endorses these two claims when he writes that “hypostasis is that which exists distinctly and by-itself, since they say that ‘hypostasis’ is an essence together with particular properties and it differs from other members of the same genus in number”.²⁶ From these quotations Törönen draws the conclusion that “a hypostasis is an instance of a nature [“not something opposed to essence”], distinguished in number from other individual instances of the same nature by its particular properties”.²⁷ Törönen rightly observes that an understanding of hypostasis as particular immediately raises the question: can

23 Ibid., p. 103.

24 Törönen here quotes Basil, Ep. 214 (Deferrari 3), who is quoted by Maximus, Ep. 15 (PG91), 545A; Törönen, op. cit., p. 53.

25 This is a synoptic account of the quote from Leontius of Byzantium, Nest. et Eut. (PG 86), 1280A, quoted in Törönen, ibid., p. 53.

26 Ep. 15, PG 91, 557D; quoted in Törönen, ibid., p. 53.

27 Ibid., p. 54.

simply any particular being be a person? Does this mean that there is no difference between rational and non-rational creatures? Törönen opts for an understanding of the term “hypostasis” as a “merely grammatical tool in the toolkit of a Byzantine logician”—“if we are to understand the theological discussions in the Greek-speaking world of the first millennium, we must come to terms with this merely logical notion of the ‘person’”²⁸. In other words, in the final instance he endorses a rather astounding position that *there is no* difference between rational and non-rational creatures.²⁹

What the sources themselves seem quite strongly to suggest is, in fact, that there is no such distinction [between rational and non-rational creatures]. The modern personalist would find the following statement of Gregory of Nyssa rather disappointing, even off-putting.

‘One thing is distinguished from another either by essence or by hypostasis, or both by essence and hypostasis. On the one hand, man is distinguished from a horse by essence, and Peter is distinguished from Paul by hypostasis. On the other hand, such-and-such a hypostasis of man is distinguished from such-and-such a *hypostasis of horse* both by essence and hypostasis’.³⁰

However, Törönen seems to neglect Zizioulas’ answer to this critique, an answer which I find rather reasonable. Zizioulas does not try to hide that Maximus applies the term *hypostasis* to everything that exists and not only to human beings. He observes,

Since the Fathers, argument goes, use the term *hypostasis*... to describe non-humans as well, such a personalism cannot be found in them. This criticism, based mainly on a literalistic treatment of the patristic sources, entirely misses the theological point, emphasized particularly by St Maximus, that all created beings exist as different *hypostases* only by virtue of their relation to, and dependence upon the free hypostasis of human being, and ultimately of Christ.³¹

28 Ibid., p. 55.

29 One cannot but be astonished as to how one can come to such a position, which totally overlooks the concept of image and likeness, simply because one is a priori against every theological theory which does not originate from the “first millennium”. I think here we have a very good example of what happens, if in one’s interpretation of the Fathers, one does not have, alongside indispensable humility, enough courage to take responsibility to follow the “spirit” of the Fathers (to recall Florovsky), rather than the dead letters from several quotes which are taken out of a wider context of Trinitarian theology and Christology. This could be also a good illustration for Berdyaev’s words that freedom, in this case freedom to interpret, is not a privilege, but duty.

30 Ibid., p. 54. Quote from Gregory of Nyssa, Comm. not. (GNO 3, part 1), 29; italics added by Törönen.

31 Communion&Otherness, p. 24, n36. Also: “The logoi of creation on which the ‘logos of nature’ depends can only truly exist in the hypostasis of the Logos. From the Christian point of view, there is no other way for

Törönen then proceeds to explain that contemporary theology understands personhood as founded on five notions. He stresses that the first four, rationality, freedom, relatedness, and self-consciousness, nevertheless, are connected, not with the personal, but with the universal. It is only in the fifth concept—particularity—that personalism and patristic theology converge. However, if we try to find whether Törönen has to say something more about the description of particular or hypostasis, we see that he only reiterates what he has already explained. In other words, Törönen claims that ‘particular’ in Greek patristic thought is solely a logical term. He quotes Maximus in saying that the otherness of particularity is a matter of difference, and the difference is embedded in the *logoi* of creatures.

[It is] by means of these *logoi*... that the different beings differ [from one another]. For the different beings would not differ from one another, had the *logoi* by means of which they have come into being have no difference.³²

The particular possesses otherness because of the difference, and the difference is something rooted in the particular in the form of the *logoi* of creation. Are we, then, to conclude that the *logos* of each particular represents its *hypostasis*, or rather the *very identity* (*ταυτότης*) of the hypostasis, which means that each one of us possesses a totally unique characteristic upon which we build our relationships with others? Törönen does not say that. It seems to me that in trying to avoid the term ‘hypostasis’ Törönen embraces the concept of *logos*, but he does not explain in what way these two terms are distinct. The Fathers must have had some reason for using both terms, and it is apparent that they are not using them as synonyms. Why would it not be possible to regard *logos* as an element of hypostasis, as the root of its identity? Törönen’s reasoning is rather odd, because only two pages further he quotes a passage in which Maximus writes about the “*logos* of the essential community” and the “*logos* of personal otherness”. This paragraph deserves our attention.

creation to exist authentically except ‘in Christ’, which from the patristic standpoint means to exist in the hypostasis of the Logos. There is no escape from personhood in Christian cosmology.” Ibid., p 66. See also p. 32.

³² Ibid., p. 59; quote from Maximus: Amb. 22 (PG 91), 1256D.

[Although some beings share the same essence and are consubstantial by virtue of the *logos* of the essential community], on the other hand, they are of different hypostases (*ἑτεροπόστατα*) by virtue of the *logos* of personal otherness which distinguishes one from another. The hypostases do not coincide in their characteristic distinguishing marks, but each one by virtue of the sum of its characteristic properties bears a most particular *logos* of its own hypostasis, and in accordance with this *logos* it admits of no community with those that are connatural and consubstantial with it.³³

If I read this paragraph properly, it seems that Maximus claims precisely what I have mentioned, i.e., that each hypostasis bears its “most particular *logos*”. It follows that the “most particular *logos*” is an element of hypostasis, moreover, that it is the root of identity.

Zizioulas interprets Maximus in a similar way, when he writes that,

Maximus is keen to distinguish between *diaphora* (difference) and *diairesis* (division). For him, *diaphora* is an ontological characteristic because each being has its *logos* which gives it its particular identity, without which it would cease to be itself and thus to be at all. Without *diaphora* there is no being, for there is no being apart from beings. This is an ontology applied also to Trinitarian theology, as well as to Christology and to cosmology.³⁴

Torstein Tollefsen follows the same line of thinking and quotes another important passage from Maximus.

...Nature has the *logos* of being that is common, while hypostasis in addition has the *logos* of being that belongs to itself. The nature, then, has only the *logos* of the species, while the hypostasis is such that it in addition shows a someone.³⁵

If the hypostatic *logos* is an integral element of the hypostasis, and it makes the hypostasis absolutely unique, it is impossible to claim that there is no difference between human and non-rational hypostases. Indeed, the Fathers use the term hypostasis, as we have seen, even when they refer to the lower forms of life – such as plants, and even when referring to minerals. However, it would be a gross misinterpretation of the Fathers to draw a conclusion that the hypostasis of a horse is not absolutely unique, but by acquiring its uniqueness through the *free* human

33 Ep. 15 (PG 91), 552BC. Quoted in Törönen, *ibid.*, p. 61.

34 Zizioulas, p. 22-23.

35 Th. pol. 26, PG 91, 276a-b. Quoted in: *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 128.

hypostasis, and to conclude that the Fathers likewise understood the human hypostasis as a “logical notion”, that is, as something abstract and impersonal.³⁶ Quite the opposite is the case. Everything created exists in a hypostatic form, as Törönen himself outlines in a remarkable way, because union and distinction are the very logic of the Trinity and, consequently, of the universe. Nonetheless, it is only due to the human hypostasis—human being is according to Maximus microcosm and priest of creation—more precisely—due to the *very specific form of freedom*, about which I am going to say more later on, by which the human hypostasis is uniquely endowed, that createdness is going to be saved in a hypostatic form. It is this freedom that generally makes human beings different from all other creatures—this freedom is the *logos* of their nature. However, the freedom ought to be manifested in each human being according to the “most particular *logos* of one’s own hypostasis”, i.e., freedom consists not only of living *kata physin*, but, as I have argued, also of *kata hypostasin*.

This is why I suggest that we should make a distinction between hypostasis and hypostatic *logos* or identity (*ταυτότης*). We find a similar argument in Tollefsen when he writes,

The Logos Himself is also the centre of each particular because each being is created by, and has its being from, the *logos* of its being *qua* particular... One of the most important lessons to be learned from this is that the particular being of each man has its *logos* from God, which *logos* is the centre of the person’s very being.³⁷

Hypostasis, I argue, is a broader term and it entails the very special gift of freedom as well as engagement into relationship. Identity, on the other hand, is a mysterious “name”, a centre of an absolute uniqueness of each particular human being.³⁸ It is due to this “name”,³⁹ or hypostatic *logos/identity*, that one is in the

³⁶ However, Gregory of Nyssa emphasizes that it is precisely the image and the likeness to God that makes man, in a mysterious way, different from all other beings. Psalm Inscriptions 1.3 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera [GNO] 5:32, 18-19), and The Beatitudes 6 (GNO 7, 2:143); quoted in: Robert Louis Wilken, *Biblical Humanism*, in: *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 2006, p. 17.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁸ “Because human beings are made in the image of God, the human self is a mystery... But, ‘who has understood his own mind?’ asks Gregory [of Nyssa]. Let those who reflect on the nature of God ask themselves whether they ‘know the nature of their own mind’. Basil wrote, ‘We are more likely to understand the

first place able to act and to will, and, consequently, to create, a relationship. Maximus himself describes identity as the “constant unchangeability of a rational being in the context of his always active personal perichoretic relation with others”.⁴⁰ However, he does not seem to apply the concept of “name”.

As I have already claimed, the concept of hypostasis cannot be underplayed without the most detrimental implications for the doctrine of the Trinity and for Christology. The Cappadocians sailed into an uncharted sea in order to develop the notion of hypostasis precisely because of the Trinitarian controversy. They could have used some other term, ‘*logos*’ for instance, but they opted for ‘hypostasis’. The concept also proved to be crucial in the framework of Christology, because the unconfused union of the two natures in Christ is explained as a *hypostatic* union. However, the case that the patristic concept of hypostasis provides an opportunity for the formulation of many different and highly incompatible interpretations proves that even the Fathers themselves did not have a clear enough picture as to what the notion of personhood really entails. What could be the reason for this major drawback of patristic theology? In order to answer this question we need to embark upon a very brief survey of the concept of divine persons in Gregory of Nyssa. For this purpose I shall use Johannes Zachhuber’s text *Gregory of Nyssa on Individuals*.

heavens than ourselves’. We do not know ourselves, said Augustine, for ‘there is something of the human person that is unknown even to the spirit of the man which is in him.’” R. L. Wilken, *ibid.*, p. 18.

39 The concept of ‘name’ is mentioned in Sophrony Sakharov: ‘At the last trump every man will receive a new name for ever, known only to God and to him that receiveth it’ [cf. Rev. 2:17], We shall see Him as He is, (Essex: The Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 2004), p. 84; in Christos Yannaras: ‘Therefore we must separately evaluate the importance of the function of the name, which alone can signify this uniqueness, which alone can express and reveal a person beyond all concepts and determination.’ *Elements of Faith; An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 30. See also in John Zizioulas: ‘Outside the communion of love the person loses its uniqueness and becomes a being like other beings, a ‘thing’ without absolute ‘identity’ and ‘name’, without a face.’ *Being as Communion*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2004) p. 49.

40 PG 91, 1189A. Quoted in: Petar Jevremović, *Personology and Ontology in the Works of St Maximus the Confessor*, *Gledišta* 1-6, 1995, p. 142 (in Serbian). Jevremović, for instance, writes: “To be faithful to one’s identity (which is the other name for ταυτότης) means to be personally (not according to nature or essence) different from the other and the others, vis-à-vis whom and with whom we live... In order to be different one has to be in the first place personal; more precisely, one has to be a person...Every possibility of human existence, at least for St Maximus, is always considered consistently in the light of a high axiological principle to be personal, i.e., to be hypostatic. Not to be hypostatic—or, which is even worse, to be impersonal—would represent the utmost fall of human existence.” *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Gregory of Nyssa on divine persons

Zachhuber's argument is elaborate and detailed, so I will therefore present it synoptically. Zachhuber makes a significant distinction between a 'strong theory' and a 'weak theory' of individuality. The former has its roots in Stoics and their concept of a distinctly qualified object, which is also used by Porphyry in an Aristotelian framework; that is, Porphyry endeavoured "to move beyond Aristotle's view of individual predication as predication only 'by accident'".⁴¹ The 'weak theory' belongs to Dexippus who assumed that individuals are distinct because they are *numerically* distinct. In other words, the individual is 'a human being', and not Plato or Socrates.⁴²

For the Cappadocians and especially Gregory of Nyssa it was the strong theory that was attractive. This is most obvious in the so-called *Epistle 38* of Basil, which was most probably written by Gregory of Nyssa. In the *Epistle 38* Gregory argues that an individual being is individual in so far as it is qualitatively different from other individual beings. In order to be qualitatively distinct an individual needs to possess a *unique set of properties*, argues Gregory.⁴³

However, when he was charged for tritheism, Gregory withdraws from his original position and embraces the weak theory of individual, which we find in his work *Ad Graecos*. In *Ad Graecos* Gregory argues that human individuals *do not* differ in their essential predicates, and while the various species of one genus are distinct because in each one of them the genus is modified, we cannot say the same thing for the individuals of one specie. Zachhuber observes,

Gregory seems willing to accept that the multiplicity of species within one genus implies a multiplicity of sorts in the latter..., but the same, he seems to urge, does not apply to the members of one species. Why not? His answer is that they only differ in 'accidents' (GNO III/ I, 31, 20).⁴⁴

41 Zachhuber, p. 5.

42 Zachhuber, p. 5.

43 Ibid., p. 9.

44 Ibid., p. 11.

The division of lower species (individuals) differs from those between genus and species, and this is precisely why Gregory argues that this model can be applied to the Trinity. Thus, the Trinity is not a genus with three species, because the distinction between the species is too radical to allow a unity; it is rather a genus with three *lowest species (infima species)*, the distinction between which is solely *accidental*. It seems to be obvious that it is because of the charges for tritheism, or *because he himself was not able to explain the unity of the Trinity if the individual hypostases have full ontological identity*, that Gregory embraces the ‘weak theory’ of individual. In other words, the only way for Gregory to defend himself from the charges of tritheism was to give up his initial position from the *Epistle 38*, that is, to deny his crucial notion of *hypostasis*.⁴⁵

We have come here to the most fundamental issue: a concept of *hypostasis* as a radical uniqueness cannot be developed as long as we are unable to explain in what way unity is possible between individuals endowed with full ontological identity and absolute otherness. Does identity preclude unity? Does identity exclude personhood? As I have argued before, the absence of such a concept of hypostasis places insurmountable obstacles in front of the theological thought that wants to be faithful to the Orthodox way of theologizing. If the differences between divine hypostases are only accidental, as Gregory seems to contend, the Eastern patristic doctrine of the Trinity, built through an extremely painful process over the ages, simply collapses. We are again at the very beginning of the speculation on the Trinity, and we would need to re-think, for instance, the distinction between the hypostasis of the Son from that of the Father. The same remark is valid for Christology, in particular with reference to Christ’s Incarnation. If *hypostasis* is nothing more than accidental, then what do we imply when we reiterate with Chalcedon and Maximus that the unity of the two natures in Christ is

45 “It would then possibly follow that the Cappadocian approach cannot reply to the charge of tritheism without giving up on some of its central concepts.” *Ibid.*, p. 11.

a hypostatic union? Is it possible to have unity of the two natures which is without confusion and without separation if this unity is not hypostatic?

It is necessary now to elucidate in a very synoptic manner those consequences of the strong theory of the individual regarding the ontological constitutive principle of personhood.

On the ontological constitutive principle of personhood

If “freedom is to be other in an absolute sense”, i.e., to be like no one else, as Zizioulas claims, can I be absolutely other unless I am also absolutely unique? My absolute otherness is inevitably related to my absolute uniqueness—I am absolutely other in comparison to all other persons precisely because, and only if, I am absolutely unique. If I am, however, absolutely unique, how is my uniqueness manifested? It ought to be manifested through my mode of existence. All men have a common human nature, but they are distinguished among themselves through their modes of existence.

If my uniqueness is manifest through my mode of existence, because I am unique this manifestation ought to be also unique in an absolute sense. That which is absolutely unique is inevitably manifest as total newness. If I am free, this is so because of my absolute otherness; my absolute otherness is predicated on my being absolutely unique. My uniqueness, on the other hand, is manifest in my mode of existence, but from the point of view of other persons it is perceived as an absolute newness. It follows that I am free because I am able to create absolute newness.

However, my otherness, uniqueness, freedom, and capacity to create things formerly non-existent are given to me only as a potentiality. This means that in order to actualize my otherness and uniqueness, which are my freedom and without which I am not a particular person, I ought to struggle to create things absolutely new, being faithful to the distinctiveness of my personhood. In other words, when I create, it has to be *kata hypostasin*. God creates *ex nihilo*, but man

possesses a capacity for infinite creation. Our capacity for infinite creation is what I have here denoted as a power to produce absolute innovation. This is how I understand Berdyaev's claim that "freedom is the power to create out of nothing". When this formula is applied in the context of human creativity, it needs to be amended, so as to assert that freedom is the power to create an absolute newness. It follows that the power to create an absolute newness is what makes human beings different from all other creatures.⁴⁶ It also follows that the power to create an absolute newness according to the unrepeatable logic of one's hypostasis is precisely the ontological constitutive principle of personhood. This is crucial if one wishes to become a person and this is why freedom is not only a privilege, but an obligation of each human being, as Berdyaev explains.⁴⁷

CONCLUSION

By way of a brief conclusion I need to raise a question about Maximus' concept of freedom and personhood. It is important to stress that Maximus works in the specific context of Cyrillian Chalcedonianism, which means that his main concern is to defend the integrity of human *nature*. There is only one person mentioned in the Chalcedonian definition, and that is the person of Christ. This is why Maximus is not defending human personhood. In order to understand his concept of the human *hypostasis* we need to bear in mind the concept of the personal *logos*. However, this notion could hardly respond to a highly demanding call for a freedom conceived as freedom to create absolute newness. We would need a considerable hermeneutical struggle in order to extract this sort of freedom from Maximus' vision of personhood, although this is not altogether an impossible

46 'The Fathers define the human being with the help of the imago Dei, and speak of its capacity to be λογικὸς (rational) as its distinctive characteristic. But they qualify rationality with freedom: the human beings are distinguished from the animals by his or her freedom to take a distance from nature and even from his or her own nature. Freedom, the αὐτοεξούσιον, is not for the Fathers a psychological faculty, but it relates to the acceptance or rejection of everything given, including one's own being, and of course God himself.' *Communion & Otherness*, p. 39.

47 'Those who are not free are not needed by God, they do not belong in the divine cosmos. Hence freedom is not a right: it is an obligation. Freedom is a religious virtue.' Berdyaev, p. 159.

mission. Meanwhile, Berdyaev's argument about a monophysite tendency in the theology of the Fathers, which I have modified, arguing about a tendency towards impersonalism, seems to be valid; and along with it another of Berdyaev's claims appears to be valid: that "Christianity has not yet revealed itself in fullness as a religion of freedom."⁴⁸

48 "Ours is sometimes called the post-Christian age. But I personally, from what I know of the history of the world and of Christianity, am convinced that Christianity in its true dimensions has never yet been properly grasped by the great mass of people." Sophrony Sakharov, *On Prayer*, (Tolleshunt Knights: The Stavropegic Monastery of St John the Baptist, 1996), p. 61.