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The Reception of Chalcedon: Georges Florovsky and John Zizioulas on the Existential Significance of Chalcedonian Christology



Ortodoksia Special Issue:

New Approaches to Liturgy and Patristics (2025), 138–156

DOI: 10.61560/ortodoksia.147686

Abstract

Chalcedonian Christology is central to the Orthodox Christological doctrine. Whereas in modern western Christology its reception has been sometimes ambivalent, in Orthodox theology it has generally been positive. Two of the most prominent Orthodox theologians, Georges Florovsky and John Zizioulas, attempted to highlight the existential significance of this Christology. Florovsky underlined the personal involvement of God in the misery and tragedy of human life and its redemptive effect. He associated this with man's deliverance from both sin and death, which was accomplished not only at the incarnation but also at the cross (and by implication the resurrection), which is the highpoint of the Gospel. He also explained how Chalcedonian Christology may be used in order to shape our theological epistemology. Zizioulas, by contrast, focused one-sidedly on the problem of death, emphasised the incarnation and the resurrection and neglected both the problem of sin and the importance of the cross. Thus, he failed to highlight the existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology in a balanced and theologically satisfactory way.

Keywords: cross, George Florovsky, incarnation, John Zizioulas, neopatristic synthesis, phronema

Introduction to Chalcedonian Christology and Its Reception

It is not (only) about us.¹ We are certainly not the only Christians and we are almost certainly not the best Christians that have ever existed. There have been Christians before us (as there will be Christians after us) and these Christians have often asked the same questions and struggled with the same problems as we do. What is more, they often came up with very good answers, some of which have stood the test of time and become classic formulations of the Christian faith. They have been enshrined in the theological tradition of the Christian Church and are constant points of reference for Christian theology. Their reception is not only a matter of the Christian past but continues to take place through successive generations of theologians who seek to make the best possible sense of Christianity.

One such doctrinal point of reference is the *Definition of Faith* of the Council of Chalcedon, a classic summary of the Christological doctrine.² The Council of Chalcedon was convened in 451 AD, twenty years after the Council of Ephesus, which had dealt with Nestorius and his Christological teaching, and was later recognised as the Third Ecumenical Council. Nestorius's condemnation was eventually accepted by all parties involved in the Council but there remained a lingering disagreement between Cyril of Alexandria and John of Antioch over the exact wording of their common faith in Christ. However, two years after Ephesus, in 433, both subscribed to the so-called *Formula of Union*. Among other things, this document, first, acknowledged the double consubstantiality of Christ. In the Formula's own words, Christ is "consubstantial with the Father in divinity and consubstantial with us in humanity."³ Second, it recognised, perhaps somewhat implicitly but unambiguously, *the existence of two natures in Christ after the union*. As the Formula put it,

as to the expressions about the Lord in the Gospels and apostolic writings, we know that theologians treat some in common, as of one person, and divide others, as of two natures, and interpret the God befitting ones in accordance with Christ's divinity, while the lowly ones in accordance with his humanity.⁴

¹ I am paraphrasing the famous first sentence of Warren 2002, 17.

² For the *Definition of Faith* of the Council, see Norris 1980, 155–159.

³ Norris 1980, 142, modified.

⁴ Norris 1980, 142, modified.

One might be inclined to think that this would have sufficed for a satisfactory confession of Christological Orthodoxy. However, fifteen years later, Eutyches, a self-confessed follower of Cyril, seemed to be dissatisfied with the Christology of the Formula. Accused of heresy, he was summoned to appear before the Home Synod in Constantinople, in order to give necessary explanations. Eutyches initially denied the consubstantiality of Christ with us but later, under pressure, he accepted it. However, he was unwavering in his refusal to accept the doctrine of Christ's two natures. As a result, the Home Synod condemned him.

This, however, was far from being the end of the story. In the so-called Robber Council of Ephesus in 449, presided over by Dioscorus of Alexandria,⁵ Eutyches was rehabilitated, while Flavian, the Archbishop of Constantinople who had presided over the Constantinopolitan Home Synod, was condemned. These and other relevant developments led two years later to the Council of Chalcedon,⁶ which condemned both Eutyches and Dioscorus and produced its famous *Definition of Faith*. The following passage contains the main points of the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon:

Following, therefore, the Holy Fathers, we all with one voice confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the very same perfect in divinity and the very same perfect in humanity, the very same truly God and the very same truly man, composed of a rational soul and a body, consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and the very same consubstantial with us as to his humanity, like us in every respect apart from sin. As to his divinity, he was begotten from the Father before the ages, but as to his humanity, the very same one was born in the last days from the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, for us and for our salvation: one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only Begotten, acknowledged to be unconfusedly, unalterably, undividedly, inseparably in two natures, since the difference of the natures is not destroyed because of the union, but on the contrary, the property of each nature is preserved and comes together in one person and one hypostasis, not divided or torn into two persons but one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Logos, Lord Jesus Christ – just as in earlier times the prophets and also the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us about him, and the Creed of our Fathers transmitted to us.⁷

5 For a recent account of Dioscorus and his role in the Christological controversy of his time, see Menze 2023.

6 For a helpful account of the above, see Price and Gaddis 2005, 24–40.

7 Norris 1980, 159, modified.

There is neither space nor need to offer even a brief analysis of this passage, which is probably the best known and most influential statement on Christology ever produced. Suffice it to say that despite its achievements, or perhaps because of them, Chalcedon proved controversial already from its inception. An uncompromising anti-Chalcedonian reaction began immediately and eventually led to the establishment of several 'anti-Chalcedonian' or, as they are currently called, Oriental Orthodox Churches, which have continued to reject Chalcedon to this day.⁸

Chalcedon has also been controversial in modern theology. For example, in the 19th century, Schleiermacher expressed his deep dissatisfaction with the conceptuality and terminology of 'one person – two natures,'⁹ which is characteristic of Chalcedon. In the following century, Wolfhart Pannenberg, perhaps the most prominent Protestant systematic theologian of recent decades, argued in his acclaimed Christological study, *Jesus – God and Man*, that Chalcedon was an unsuccessful compromise between Alexandrian and Antiochian Christology.¹⁰ Others, such as Karl Barth, have been far more open to Chalcedon, but interpreted it in ways that are not always compatible with the Christology of this Council.¹¹ Conversely, in both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox worlds the authority and orthodoxy of Chalcedon has by and large been taken for granted. But this brings us to our next question. In what ways has Chalcedon been received in modern and contemporary Orthodox theology? The following section will address this issue.

8 At this point, it should be noted that important progress has been made in the rapprochement between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches, resulting in two Agreed Statements (1989 and 1990). For a comprehensive account, see Chaillot (ed.) 2006. Despite the agreements, no further steps have been taken.

9 Schleiermacher 1989, 391ff.

10 Pannenberg 1996, 287 and *passim*. However, this assessment depended on Pannenberg's own version of Christology, which Chalcedon would have rejected as Nestorian.

11 For example, Barth denied the sinlessness of the human nature of Christ referred to by Chalcedon's short phrase "apart from sin" (χωρίς ἁμαρτίας); see, for instance, Barth 2004, 151–159. On the question of the compatibility of Barth's Christology with Chalcedon, see also McCormack 2008, 201–233.

The Reception of Chalcedon and Its Existential Significance: From Sergius Bulgakov to Georges Florovsky and John Zizioulas

Sergius Bulgakov and the undermining of Chalcedonian Christology

Before moving on to Georges Florovsky, it is worth making a brief reference to Sergius Bulgakov's reception of Chalcedon in order to sketch out the theological background from which Florovsky's theology emerged. Reading Bulgakov, it is easy to see that Chalcedon was not without its implicit critics, even in the Orthodox world. More precisely, Bulgakov's attitude to Chalcedon was ambivalent – to say the least. On the one hand, he characterised Chalcedon's Definition of Faith as a "dogmatic miracle."¹² On the other, he contended that "this miracle turns out to consist in a compromise, an external, mechanical union of two heterogeneous and mutually antagonistic conceptions that unexpectedly and miraculously yielded a chemical (instead of mechanical) union, forming a dogmatic crystal."¹³ Moreover, Bulgakov undermined Chalcedonian Christology with his bizarre theory of Sophia and divine humanity.¹⁴ It would take us too far afield to analyse Bulgakov's theory in detail or to expose its shortcomings. For the time being, it is sufficient to quote the following passage:

It is thus necessary to conclude that, insofar as it hypostasizes the human nature, the hypostasis of the Logos *is*, in a special sense, a human hypostasis too, that it is proper not only to God but also to Man, that is, to the God-Man. In order to be a human hypostasis, the hypostasis of the Logos must be human or, more precisely, *co-human*; and for this reason the hypostatization of man's nature by this hypostasis does not destroy or coerce it but corresponds to a primordial interrelation between the two. On the other hand, man must also be capable of *receiving* and *encompassing* within himself, in the capacity of the human hypostasis, the divine hypostasis. In other words, by his initial essence man must already be divine-human in this sense; he must bear hypostatic divine-humanity within himself and represent, in this capacity, an ontological 'site' for the hypostasis of the Logos.¹⁵

¹² Bulgakov 2008, 68.

¹³ Bulgakov 2008, 61–62.

¹⁴ Brandon Gallaher attempts to mitigate or even deny Bulgakov's pantheism by referring to his Chalcedonian ontology. However, such an attempt is doomed to failure. Bulgakov's pantheism is too obvious to be denied. For Gallaher's brave, learned, and sophisticated but ultimately unsuccessful attempt, see Gallaher 2014, 381–408.

¹⁵ Bulgakov 2008, 186; italics in the original, underlining added.

So, God is somehow human and man is divine,¹⁶ even before and irrespective of the incarnation. This form of pantheism undermines Chalcedon. Bulgakov's aforementioned quotations imply that Chalcedon, as Bulgakov allegedly discovered some fifteen centuries later, had unconsciously and miraculously produced a Christological version of Bulgakov's own theory of eternal 'divine humanity' ahead of its time. Such an assumption is deeply unconvincing – to say the least. Bulgakov read Chalcedon through the lens of his own theological presuppositions. Zizioulas would later do something similar. But before we say more about this, it is necessary to turn our attention to the work of Georges Florovsky.

The reception of Chalcedon by Georges Florovsky

Florovsky was a friend and colleague of Sergius Bulgakov, who was also briefly his confessor, and it was Bulgakov who invited him to teach patristics at St Serge in Paris. However, Florovsky became highly critical of Bulgakov's 'sophiology,' although he refrained from mentioning Bulgakov by name in his critique. Florovsky would suggest a very different approach reflecting his wider theological project, known as 'neo-patristic synthesis.' As Florovsky famously claimed back in 1948, "we are perhaps on the eve of a new synthesis in theology – of a *neopatristic* synthesis [...]. Theological tradition must be reintegrated, not simply summed up or accumulated. This seems to be one of the immediate objectives of the Church in our age."¹⁷ So, according to Florovsky, this synthesis must first of all be patristic, it must "follow the Fathers."¹⁸ But for Florovsky, "'to follow' the Fathers did not mean just 'to quote' them. 'To follow' the Fathers meant to acquire their 'mind,' their *phronēma*".¹⁹ Florovsky was not arguing for a "theology of repetition." This is why his synthesis was not merely patristic but "*neo-patristic*." His "return to the Fathers" had to be a creative return.²⁰ 'Neo-patristic synthesis' was a creative reformulation of patristic theology in response to the diverse challenges of the modern era.²¹

16 For Bulgakov, "man consists of an uncreated, divine spirit, hypostatized by the creaturely I, and of a created soul and body;" Bulgakov 2008, 186, n. 1.

17 Florovsky 2020a, 191; italics in the original. The phrase 'neopatristic synthesis' appears in written form for the first time in 1947; on this, see Gallaher and Ladouceur (ed.) 2020, 1, n. 2.

18 Florovsky emphasised repeatedly the importance that Chalcedon attached to the authority of the Fathers; see, for instance, Florovsky 1972a, 103 and Florovsky 2020b, 221.

19 Florovsky 2020b, 224–225.

20 Florovsky 2020c, 297.

21 Williams 1993, 294.

Christology was a key component of this synthesis. In Florovsky's own words, "the synthesis must begin with the central vision of the Christian faith: Christ Jesus, as God and Redeemer, Humiliated and Glorified, the Victim and the Victor *on the Cross*."²² According to Florovsky, "Christ's mystery is the centre of Orthodox faith, as it is also its starting point and its aim and climax."²³

More precisely, for Florovsky Christology means Chalcedonian Christology. Florovsky believed that "the Chalcedonian dogma on the unity of the God-man is the true heart of revelation, the experience of faith and Christian contemplation."²⁴ He would go so far as to argue that "one can evolve the whole body of Orthodox belief out of the dogma of Chalcedon."²⁵ This, however, must not be understood in a restrictive sense, as if the Church now lived in an iron age and had only to look in awe at the life and legacy of the first Christian centuries. For Florovsky, "the current overemphasis on the 'first five centuries' dangerously distorts theological vision, and prevents the right understanding of the Chalcedonian dogma itself."²⁶ This implies that the doctrine of Chalcedon can be understood in the best possible way only in the light of the entire history and theology of the Church. And this brings us, I think, to Florovsky's own attempt to highlight *the existential significance* of the Christological doctrine of Chalcedon.

Florovsky believes that the Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon is neither "a piece of poetry," nor "a metaphysical statement," or even "a metaphysical miracle." It is a "statement of faith" and even "an existential statement."²⁷ The existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology lies in the fact that "our Redeemer is *not* a man but God *himself*."²⁸ The fact that God "intervene[d] *in person* in the chaos and misery of [our] lost life" not only reveals "the true character of God" but also establishes "a *personal* relationship

22 Florovsky 2020c, 297; italics added.

23 Florovsky 2020c, 298.

24 Florovsky 2020d, 123.

25 Florovsky 2020c, 298.

26 Florovsky 2020b, 226.

27 Florovsky 1972b, 12–13. Gallaher and Ladouceur suggest that Florovsky may have been influenced by his former Paris student John Meyendorff, who, under the spell of French existentialism and personalism, contrasted rationalist scholastic theology with 'existential' Christian theology, especially in its Palamite hesychastic form; see Florovsky 2020b, 224, n. 7. However, in this article Florovsky makes it clear that St Gregory Palamas' "existential theology" [...] differed radically from those modern conceptions, which are currently denoted by this label" (232).

28 Florovsky 1972b, 13; italics in the original; cf. Florovsky 2020e, 83.

between God and man." God's providence is not exercised from "an august distance" but through his loving identification with the destiny of man, of every man, including "'the little ones,'" with whose "destiny" God is "so intimately concerned."²⁹

This identification, however, culminates in the cross. For Florovsky, "*the climax of the Incarnation was the cross.*" This was "*the turning point of human destiny.*"³⁰ This would not have been the case, of course, if the crucified were not the Son of God. If the incarnation is God's personal entrance into the misery of human life, the cross is His personal entrance into the tragedy of human death. This, however, brought about the defeat of death and the inauguration of everlasting life.³¹ For Florovsky, the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection are inherently and intimately connected. Christ's death is, for Florovsky, "a resurrecting death."³² Through personal communion with the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ man is redeemed and inherits everlasting life.

For Florovsky, all of this has specific implications for modern man, who often oscillates between "a new Nestorianism" and "a new Monophysitism" – the two Christological heresies condemned by Chalcedon. According to this "new Nestorianism," modern man

does not take the Incarnation in earnest. He does not dare to believe that Christ is a divine person. He wants to have a *human* redeemer, only assisted by God. He is more interested in the human psychology of the Redeemer than in the mystery of the divine love. Because, in the last resort, he believes optimistically in the dignity of man.³³

Conversely, according to Florovsky, a new Monophysitism appears in theology and Church life whenever "man is reduced to complete passivity and is allowed only to listen and to hope."³⁴ This dilemma, which is evident in the theological tension between liberal and 'neo-Orthodox' theology, was for Florovsky "a re-enactment of the old Christological struggle on a new existential level."³⁵ This existential predicament cannot be overcome unless proper at-

²⁹ Florovsky 1972b, 13; italics in the original.

³⁰ Florovsky 1972b, 13; italics added.

³¹ Florovsky 1972b, 13–14.

³² Florovsky 2020c, 300.

³³ Florovsky 1972b, 14.

³⁴ Florovsky 1972b, 14–15.

³⁵ Florovsky 1972b, 15.

tention is given to theology and in particular to Chalcedonian Christology. In Florovsky's opinion, the existential alternative to this is death.³⁶

Finally, for Florovsky, Chalcedonian Christology is bound up with ecclesiology. Florovsky claimed that "the theology of the Church is but a chapter, indeed a crucial chapter, of Christology."³⁷ Florovsky used to emphasise that the whole Christ includes His body, the Church, and one of his favorite passages was Augustine's "*totus Christus, caput et corpus*."³⁸ He believed that the existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology is to be found only in the Church, through an encounter with "the divine Redeemer" who is "in the midst of his faithful flock."³⁹

The reception of Chalcedon by John Zizioulas

John Zizioulas studied under Florovsky at Harvard. The latter's influence on the former (as well as the former's departure from the theology of the latter) can easily be seen on many aspects of Zizioulas's theological production. So, in a well-known article on the existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology,⁴⁰ Zizioulas criticised, in a way reminiscent of Florovsky, the "dogmatism [that] is expressed in formulas which we learn by heart without ever searching out their existential meaning."⁴¹ He, on the other hand, sought to uncover and highlight the existential meaning of Chalcedonian Christology.

Zizioulas's main argument was based on the doctrine of creation. For Zizioulas, the fact that creation came into existence out of nothing means that it is constantly threatened by the prospect of annihilation. Creation is subject to the tragedy of death.⁴² Zizioulas associated death not with the fact that we are sinners but with the fact that we are created. In this way, he seems somehow to conflate creation and the fall. If, however, our tragedy is due to our being created, is not, therefore, the Creator responsible for it? Zizioulas's answer to this question would probably be that as long as man was in communion with God, death was kept at bay. But after the fall and the disruption

36 Florovsky 1972b, 15.

37 Florovsky 2021, 277.

38 Florovsky 1972b, 16.

39 Florovsky 1972b, 16.

40 Zizioulas 2006a, 250–269. See also the Appendix, which includes his conversation with Philip Sherrard, 270–285.

41 Zizioulas 2006a, 284.

42 Zizioulas 2006a, 257.

of this communion, man, and along with him the entirety of creation, succumbed to the tragic reality of death, which is creation's natural condition.⁴³ However, if this is so, without qualification,⁴⁴ one might ask with Panagiotis Kantartzis, "then why is the devil still alive?"⁴⁵

At any rate, for Zizioulas, Chalcedonian Christology is the solution to the problem, for it highlights the union of God and man in Christ. This union of created and hence mortal human nature with the uncreated and immortal God bestows immortality to humanity and the world. Understandably, the key event in this process is Christ's Resurrection. However, in contrast to Florovsky, Zizioulas has nothing to say about the cross. In his opinion, "Christ is 'the Saviour of the world' *not because he sacrificed himself on the Cross, thereby wiping away the sins of the world*, but because 'he is risen from the dead having trampled death by death.'"⁴⁶ This surprisingly restrictive claim is followed by a typical criticism of Western theology:

The West (Catholic and Protestant) has viewed the problem of the world as a moral problem (transgression of a commandment and punishment) and has made of the Cross of Christ the epicenter of faith and worship. However, Orthodoxy continues to insist upon the Resurrection as the centre of its whole life precisely because it sees that the problem of the created is not moral but ontological; it is the problem of the existence [...] of the world, the problem of death.⁴⁷

So, for Zizioulas, the emphasis on the cross is a typical feature of moralistic and forensic Western theology and must therefore be rejected. For him, the real problem is not, as the West pretends, sin but death and therefore the emphasis should not be on the cross but on the incarnation and the Resurrection. "How is the world to live?" asks Zizioulas. And he answers: "I would say that the answer lies in a Christology which puts emphasis on the

⁴³ On this, see also Zizioulas 2008, 88–101.

⁴⁴ See the nuanced discussion in Florovsky 1976a, 104–105. Florovsky makes it clear that the body dies – the soul is immortal (105).

⁴⁵ Kantartzis 2021, 38. Sherrard asked Zizioulas an easier question, namely whether angels and human souls, which are created, are also mortal (Zizioulas 2006, 272). Zizioulas replied that he had never denied the immortality of the soul (Zizioulas 2006, 279–281).

⁴⁶ Zizioulas 2006a, 261; italics added.

⁴⁷ Zizioulas 2006a, 261.

Resurrection."⁴⁸ While this is certainly true, Zizioulas's tendency to neglect sin and the cross seems to justify the criticism of Eastern theology which sees in it an anti-evangelical theory of purely natural redemption. And indeed, if the Gospels are anything like "passion narratives with extended introductions," as Martin Kähler famously put it,⁴⁹ then to remove the cross from one's Christology is certainly not in conformity with the Gospel. Florovsky is much closer to the mark when he claims that "the highpoint of the Gospel is the Cross; the death of the incarnated."⁵⁰ For Florovsky, "salvation is completed on Golgotha."⁵¹ This, however, does not mean that Florovsky downplays the importance of the resurrection. On the contrary, he believes that "the fulfillment of redemption is in the resurrection."⁵² In fact, Florovsky attributes our salvation to both the cross and the resurrection. In his own words, "the ultimate victory is wrought [...] by death and resurrection."⁵³ However, the resurrection depends on the cross, because, according to Florovsky, "the Resurrection only reveals and sets forth the victory achieved on the Cross."⁵⁴

Zizioulas, like Florovsky, moves on from Christ to the Church. As Christ has a divine hypostasis, man must likewise acquire a new hypostasis, through baptism, in order to escape death, which is the result of his created, biological hypostasis. Zizioulas concludes his article by asserting that "if Christ saves us from anything, it is from death."⁵⁵ His underestimation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is also reflected in his sacramental theology, when he claims, for example, that "the priestly aspect of the Eucharist did not consist in the notion of sacrifice, as it came to be understood in the Middle Ages, but in that of offering back to God His own creation. It is a great pity, indeed, that sacrificial notions came to occupy the meaning of priesthood for centuries [...]"⁵⁶ On this point, too, he parts company with Florovsky, who believes that priesthood and the Eucharist must be understood in sacrificial terms.⁵⁷

48 Zizioulas 2006a, 267.

49 Kähler 1964, 80, n. 11.

50 Florovsky 2016, 144. Florovsky makes exactly the same point in 1976a, 96.

51 Florovsky 1976a, 99.

52 Florovsky 1976a, 109.

53 Florovsky 1976a, 104.

54 Florovsky 1976a, 138.

55 Zizioulas 2006a, 269.

56 Zizioulas 2021, 104. Thanks go to Fr Chrysostomos Nassis for reminding me of the connection between Christology and the sacraments in this context.

57 On this, see Florovsky 1976a, 156–159.

In addition, Zizioulas interprets the Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon in unconventional ways. For example, he associates the Chalcedonian adverb ἀσυγχύτως ('without confusion') with freedom.⁵⁸ This is a strange association. This adverb was used to indicate that the two natures of Christ, although united "without division," were not confused with one another; divinity remained divinity and humanity remained humanity. Zizioulas, however, uses it in order to identify freedom with otherness, and more precisely with "natural" otherness, that is to say, with the preservation of the "otherness" of the two natures of Christ. However, in other writings, for example in his celebrated *Being as Communion*, he would identify freedom with personhood. In this context, he would claim that Jesus Christ is our savior "because He realizes in history *the very reality of the person*." Moreover, he would point out that this is an existential issue and he would credit Chalcedon with identifying person "with the *hypostasis of the Son of the Trinity*."⁵⁹ Zizioulas understands this 'reality of the person' largely as freedom *from natural necessity*.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, too, Zizioulas would conceive human freedom in a way analogous to God's, that is, as freedom from anything that may exist independently of our will. For example, he would write that understanding the Church as an institution is problematic, because "the 'institution' is something presented to us as a fact, more or less a *fait-accomplit*. As such, it is a provocation to our freedom."⁶¹ Zizioulas's understanding of freedom differs from Florovsky's. According to the latter,

Indeed, man is granted freedom, but it is not a freedom of indifference. Man's freedom is essentially a responsive freedom – a freedom to accept God's will. "Pure freedom" can be professed only by atheists. "To man is entrusted, of man is expected, merely the echo, the subsequent completion, of a decision which God has already made about him and for him". There is but one fair option for man—to obey; there is no real dilemma. Man's purpose and goal are fixed by God.⁶²

58 Zizioulas 2006a, 260.

59 Zizioulas 1985, 54 and 55; italics in the original.

60 See, for instance, Zizioulas 1985, 55–65. For Zizioulas, "the person belongs to an entirely different category from the nature – it belongs to the realm of freedom;" Zizioulas 2006, 277. By contrast, "nature entails necessity by definition" (278).

61 Zizioulas 1985, 140.

62 Florovsky, 1976b, 256. The quotation is taken from Brunner 1954, 178.

Zizioulas and Florovsky seem to represent the poles of the dilemma between an absolute freedom of indifference bordering on hubris, on the one hand, and the positive freedom to respond to God's will, on the other. The voluntary crucifixion of Christ, as a free, loving response to the will of God the Father to sacrifice Himself for the salvation of the world, grounds the concept of freedom proposed by Florovsky.

Comparison and Conclusions

There are important convergences and divergences between Florovsky's and Zizioulas's reception of Chalcedon. Both are opposed to Bulgakov's pantheistic attitude and affirm the absolute distinction between God and creation. Both take a positive attitude towards the Christological teaching of Chalcedon. Both seek to show and highlight its existential significance. And both move from Christology to ecclesiology, which, at least for Florovsky, is a chapter of Christology.

However, from that point on their paths diverge. Florovsky expressed the classical theology of the Church in a well-balanced way. The incarnation is significant, but its climax is the cross, as well as, of course, the resurrection. Our redemption is the redemption from both sin and death. Furthermore, Florovsky drew an analogy between the Nestorian–Monophysite dilemma and the modern tension between liberal theology and neo-Orthodoxy.

Zizioulas, for his part, allowed his reception of Chalcedon to be shaped, at least in part, by an existentialist agenda. For him, sin appears as almost insignificant. He does not emphasise the fact that we are sinners but the fact that we are created and, therefore, in his opinion, mortal. Death is not presented as the result of our fall through sin, but of the fact that we are created. Therefore, the incarnation is salvific not because, as Florovsky would underline,⁶³ it brings about the healing of our humanity – since, in the words of St Gregory the Theologian, “what is not assumed is not healed”⁶⁴ – but only because it secures our immortality through union with God, who is immortal by nature. Unlike Florovsky,⁶⁵ Zizioulas does not emphasise *theosis* as sanctifica-

⁶³ Florovsky 2020e, 84–85.

⁶⁴ Florovsky insists on this point; see for instance Florovsky 1976a, 95–96.

⁶⁵ Florovsky 2020e, 86.

tion through ascesis and participation in the divine life.⁶⁶ Furthermore, while Zizioulas considers the resurrection to be of paramount importance because it signifies the destruction of death, the cross of Christ, on which, according to Florovsky, he redeemed us from sin,⁶⁷ seems insignificant. For Florovsky, “the only true key to the story of the Gospels is precisely the Cross.”⁶⁸ In Zizioulas, this key seems to have been lost. One wonders why, according to Zizioulas, Christ had to die *on the cross* or whether immortality in sin and hell is a *desideratum*.⁶⁹ Zizioulas builds the argument of his article on the existential significance of Chalcedon largely on Athanasius’s classic treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*.⁷⁰ In this treatise, however, Athanasius gives due weight to man’s fall and sin as well as to the meaning and significance of Christ’s crucifixion. Zizioulas, by contrast, criticises such emphasis as a moralistic trait of Western theology that must be rejected.

In addition, in Zizioulas the dialectic between sin and redemption is largely replaced by the dialectic between natural necessity and personal freedom. The point is not so much to become holy as to become person, which is largely understood as freedom from natural necessity and biological death. Characteristically, Zizioulas does not understand baptism in terms of the remission of sins but as giving human beings “a new identity different from that which nature gives them through their biological birth.”⁷¹ In this context, spiritual death, for Zizioulas, is not due to our fall into sin but to “a fall to essential anonymity,” in which we receive our identity “not from the hypostasis-relationship with God, but from nature.”⁷²

In conclusion, Zizioulas took on from his teacher not only the vision of the ‘neo-patristic synthesis’ but also specific ideas, which he sought to develop further. For example, his focus on the existential significance of Chalcedonian Christology and his treatment of it on the basis on Athanasius’s *On*

66 Zizioulas sporadically refers to this issue; see, for instance, Zizioulas 2006a, 81–88 and 2006b, 301–306. It is certainly not one of his main concerns. Zizioulas does address such issues in his posthumous book, Zizioulas 2024a, but this was published too late for me to consider it.

67 Florovsky 2020e, 86.

68 Florovsky 2020e, 85.

69 Zizioulas rejects this but without adequately and satisfactorily explaining how it fits with the main argument of his article; see Zizioulas 2006a, 281. In a later, posthumously published work, Zizioulas argues, with good reason, for the traditional Christian belief in the eternity of hell; see Zizioulas 2024b, 235–244.

70 For the Greek text and English translation, see Athanasius, *De Incarnatione* 1971, 134–277.

71 Zizioulas 2006a, 278.

72 Zizioulas 2006a, 282.

the Incarnation of the Word were taken directly from Florovsky.⁷³ But Zizioulas lacked Florovsky's Orthodox intuition. As a result, his theology is not always fully in line with either the patristic tradition or with the teaching of Florovsky. His synthesis is more 'neo' and less 'patristic.' It is true that Zizioulas has offered us some occasional but valuable treatments of the meaning and significance of the cross of Christ.⁷⁴ But these were not adequately integrated into his theology. Consequently, in contrast to Florovsky, Zizioulas's reception of Chalcedon reflects neither the patristic *phronema* nor the teaching of the Church in their catholicity.

⁷³ See, for instance, Florovsky 1972b, 13 and 1976a, 104–107.

⁷⁴ See, for example, two of his sermons in a book published shortly after his death: Zizioulas 2023, 176–183 and 479–485.

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