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Διεθνοῦς Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου
γιὰ τὰ 100 χρόνια τοῦ περιοδικοῦ *Θεολογία*

Ἡ Ὀρθόδοξη θεολογία *ἐν πορείᾳ*
στήν "ἄυλη πραγματικότητα" τῆς ὕστερης νεωτερικότητας

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Ἐπόμενα Τεύχη:
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Τεῦχος 3ον (2024): *Πρακτικὰ Διεθνοῦς Ἐπιστημονικοῦ Συνεδρίου γιὰ τὰ 100 χρόνια τοῦ περιοδικοῦ Θεολογία Γ΄*

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Πέμπτη, 12 Ὀκτωβρίου 2023
Μέγαρο Μουσικῆς Ἀθηνῶν

Δ΄ Συνεδρία
Ἡ Θεία Λατρεία στὴν ἐποχὴ
τῆς ψηφιακῆς πραγματικότητας

Προεδρεῖο: Σεβ. Μητρ. Κίτρους κ. Γεώργιος
& Καθηγ. Παναγιώτης Σκαλτσῆς

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Existential Truth in Virtual Communication?
Exploring Metropolitan John Zizioulas' Theological Insights

By H.G. Maxim (Vasiljević),*
Bishop of Los Angeles and Western America

Introduction

I am deeply honored by the invitation extended to me by the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece and the esteemed editorial board of *Theologia* journal to participate in this symposium. I appreciate their watchfulness and eagerness to engage in such a crucial topic, as it holds profound significance for our time. My sense of gratitude is further enriched by a personal connection to this Church, as I pursued my studies in Athens and received invaluable support from it in numerous ways.

Embarking on an exploration of virtual communication and its profound implications for our understanding of existence is both a pertinent and increasingly pressing endeavor. Within the context of Orthodox Tradition, this inquiry gains heightened significance as it grapples with the contemporary phenomenon of "dematerialized reality".

Orthodox tradition, deeply rooted in tangible interactions and inter-personal relationships within a material culture, stands in contrast to the prevailing trend of reason-dominated traditions. It encompasses the entirety of human experience, engaging not only the intellect but also the practical aspects of daily life. This tradition is intrinsically linked to Eucharistic worship, shaping theology, piety, and material culture in a cohesive manner that underscores the importance of tangible, material concerns.

* Ὁ Πανιερώτατος Ἐπίσκοπος Λὸς Ἄντζελες καὶ Δυτικῆς Ἀμερικῆς κ. Μάξιμος (Vasiljević) τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Ἐκκλησίας τῆς Σερβίας εἶναι Καθηγητὴς τῆς Θεολογικῆς Σχολῆς τοῦ Τιμίου Σταυροῦ στὴ Βοστόνη.

However, the Orthodox Tradition faces formidable challenges in an age characterized by rapid scientific advancements, technological breakthroughs, and the proliferation of virtual realms. The advent of the metaverse, along with concepts like "augmented" reality and virtual environments, is reshaping our understanding of space and time, blurring the lines between the physical and the virtual. This paradigm shift poses a fundamental reevaluation of our anthropological and cosmological frameworks, challenging deeply ingrained beliefs.

In a world where technical environments are steadily encroaching upon and often replacing physical and social realities, the intersection of Orthodox Tradition and virtual communication presents a compelling arena for exploration. It prompts us to consider how these age-old traditions respond to the evolving landscape of dematerialization, offering its own perspectives on the *truth* of existence in our rapidly changing, postmodern era.

How will the Orthodox Church navigate the critical juncture and confront the profound challenges posed by a "dematerialized reality", when, as Metropolitan John of Pergamon used to say, the Church often gives the impression that it is either "worried and troubled about many things" or that it is indifferent to everything. Historically, Orthodoxy has remained somewhat distinct from the intricate historical path that encompassed events like the Renaissance, the Reformation, European Wars of Religion, the Enlightenment, and the various revolutions that have molded the modern world[1]. However, it must now grapple with this "new reality".

I draw inspiration from the theological wisdom of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, a towering figure in Orthodox theology, of the past and current century. My exploration centers on Zizioulas' view of the complex relationship between virtual communication and the fundamental Truth of existence, examined critically through his theological lens. Rooted in Zizioulas' theological framework is the Church's mission in the world. In a thought-provoking manner, he emphasized that theology, as a service

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1. Unlike the West, which experienced the Industrial Revolution, Romanticism, Modernity, and Post-modernity, the East did not witness the same prominence of individualism, the emergence of human rights, or the ascent of religiously neutral nation-states.

to the Church, is perpetually called upon to illuminate contemporary challenges[2]. With this insight as our beacon, we navigate the intricate dynamics between theology, technology, and our pursuit of a deeper understanding in the digital age.

I. Lesson from Christology

As we contemplate this journey from a material world to a "de-materialized" one, questions naturally arise. Does the concept of the Incarnation retain its relevance in this new era of "augmented" reality? Are we on the verge of a profound shift in metaphysics, one that leads us towards the realm of transhumanism?

These questions are not only pertinent but also serve as a clarion call to Christians. It's a reminder that, at various points in history, there has been a tendency to downplay the material or incarnational aspects of Christianity. In more recent times, some have leaned toward a "spirituality" that places primacy on "noetic" prayer, shifting focus away from the Eucharistic gathering «ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό». Now, in the face of the encroaching dematerialized reality driven by new technologies, Christians are confronted with the consequences of this trajectory. It prompts us to reexamine our faith's incarnational core and its implications for our relationship with a rapidly changing world.

In order to "to discern the boundaries of beings" the Church must use *theology*. To evaluate what the Church accepts from the realm of culture, it requires specific criteria. The transformative power of the Church in the world begs the question: what is it transforming the world into? The Church's resounding response lies in its Christological foundation. Here are some lessons.

Christ, in assuming a place in history, did not assume every facet of culture. It's worth highlighting that Christ rejected certain cultural

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2. "The agenda of Theology is set by history. This was known to the Fathers of the Church who were in constant dialogue with their time. It was unfortunately forgotten at times by academic Theology"; Metropolitan Ioannis Zizioulas, "The Task of Orthodox Theology in Today's Europe," *Orthodoxes Forum* 29, 2 (2015), p. 262.

expressions within Israel, holding a notably critical stance towards the Pharisees and their social institutions, as well as certain cultural traditions like the observance of the Sabbath. As the *Gospel of John* poignantly notes, "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him"[3]. In *Luke's Gospel*, Jesus is often depicted as a "foreigner" and a "stranger" in this world, though this does not negate His hypostatic connection with it.

Christ, when entering specific cultural contexts, didn't merely adopt them but offered corrections and introduced transformative innovations. His teachings echoed the refrain, "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you", signaling His transformative intent[4]. He did not abolish but endowed cultural elements with deeper significance, proclaiming, "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill"[5]. His mission was not one of mere preservation but of renewal, encapsulated in the promise to make all things new[6].

In this exploration, we delve into the Church's engagement with culture, emphasizing the central role of Christology as the guiding light in discerning the transformative path it charts.

II. Truth of Existence

The quest for ultimate truth and the essence of existence leads us inevitably to God Himself, who exists in a profound Trinitarian manner, as distinct persons in perfect unity. In this pivotal moment for our civilization, the concept of personhood emerges as paramount. What, then, constitutes a person?

A person is a singular, inimitable, and irreplaceable identity placed within the communion of love. Unlike mere physical properties, this identity finds its foundation in the profound uniqueness that is freely acknowledged by another. In the life of the Holy Trinity, the Father,

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3. *Jn* 1, 11.
4. *Mt* 5, 21-22, etc.
5. *Mt* 5, 17.
6. *Rev* 21, 5.

the Son, and the Holy Spirit are Persons because each embodies an exceptional, non-reproducible, and indispensable identity, nurtured by the love that binds them together. The Father cannot be the Son or the Spirit, and vice versa.

In a parallel fashion, every human being, as a divine creation, possesses a distinctive, unparalleled, and irreplaceable personhood. Any endeavor to erase or diminish this uniqueness constitutes an assault on the very core of human personhood, resulting in the obliteration of the profound significance of humanity itself.

Hence, a definition of truth points to the "relationality" or referential nature of our shared existential foundation. Truth, in this existential context, is equivalent to the communion of persons. Zizioulas illustrates this with the example of an icon.

> For the Orthodox tradition, the icon shows a *presence*. The depicted person is present, and this person creates an immediate connection with us. An icon does not simply remind us of a depicted character, but rather *presents* it to us. However, the presence of the iconized person on the icon is in such a way that it retains its transcendence, so that its hypostasis is not exhausted in the material nature of the icon. Thus, according to St. Theodore the Studite, the honor and worship of an icon is not addressed to the nature of the icon, i.e., wood, color, etc., but to the *person* it depicts. The presence of an iconized character is hypostatic, personal, not natural. That is why it is necessary for the icon to have a name, so that it is not anonymous, which is why the name is written on the icons[7].

The Metropolitan of Pergamon has warned that in the Church we cannot communicate with God without key elements of creation, such as time, place, and matter. True union of God and creation, as realized in Christ, can only occur through the symbols, types, and icons provided by the Church in its Mysteries. Communion with the Holy Trinity is thus conveyed to us through these sacred symbols and icons, a vital aspect of Orthodox Christian life that is gradually diminishing today.

> Orthodox believers never communed directly with God, but always through symbols and icons. When they pray, they make the sign of the cross, carry out

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7. J. D. Zizioulas, «Τὸ μυστήριο τῆς Ἐκκλησίας καὶ τὸ μυστήριο τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος», *Φρέαρ* 12/13 (2015), p. 488.

a certain type and symbol practice, and have some icon in the house. However, that is not enough for them, they consider the highest form of prayer and communion with God to be precisely the worship that takes place in the church with types and symbols[8].

Having said that, it becomes obvious the sanctity of person as a singular, inimitable, and irreplaceable identity faces unprecedented challenges in the era of modern technology. What are the characteristics of the "dematerialized reality" of Late Modernity?

III. Characteristics of the "Dematerialized Reality"

Today we find ourselves at the crossroads of modernity and theology, where the virtual realm intersects with matters of faith and existence. In this intricate landscape, humanity embarked on a path of "dematerialized reality" of late modernity – a reality shaped by Artificial Intelligence, digital technology, and the evolving terrain of virtual human interaction.

In a science-fiction film about computer dating, directed by Spike Jonze, the character Theodore develops what will end up being a tragic relationship with Samantha, an intelligent computer operating system personified through a female voice. The mirroring formation of the ego is known to have existed since the depths of prehistory. Yet now, as portrayed in the film *Her*, the love of a human for a fictitious being is enabled by modern technology, which stages reality in such a way that existential emptiness is artificially substantialized in a more dramatic way[9].

In this context, we grapple with profound inquiries that extend beyond conventional discourse. The Church must preserve the "*Imago Dei*" in an era where machines possess intelligence surpassing our comprehension. This raises the question of what type of ecclesiology we will have in the future, particularly as the Church navigates the digital frontier.

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8. Zizioulas, «Τὸ μυστήριο τῆς Ἐκκλησίας καὶ τὸ μυστήριο τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος», op.cit., p. 491.
9. Bishop Maxim Vasiljević, *Theology as a Surprise: Patristic and Pastoral Insights*, St. Vladimirs Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York 2018, p. 213.

Many anticipate that the ecclesiological landscape of the Parish/Diocese in the Digital Age will inevitably undergo transformation, presenting both new challenges and opportunities. Are we moving to a "digital church"? We already see how contemporary technology can serve as a religious substitute. Equally, the looming presence of "*deus technologicus*" prompts reflection within theology on the necessity of adaptation to this new reality. At the same time, in light of the demand for human upgrading, numerous concerns arise regarding its implications for Christian anthropology. A central question revolves around whether human beings in the Digital Age will remain anonymous or continue to be recognized as distinct persons, a matter that has long concerned theologians like John Zizioulas.

So, from the ethereal realm of mediated communication to the concrete implications of the Internet of objects and bodies, bioethical and theological concerns about the role of consciousness, corporeality, and intelligence are raised. Indeed, we delve into the complex questions surrounding human identity. Are we becoming cyborg sapiens? But how many theologians dive into the interface between Artificial Intelligence and the Orthodox understanding of personhood? A conference like this one is a rarity, which is indeed regrettable. There are serious implications for the realization of the Church in the age of "dematerialized" reality. From the philosophical considerations of digital technologies in the parish context to the intricate encounter of spatial and temporal dimensions with immaterial reality in Orthodox worship, we traverse a diverse and thought-provoking landscape.

Indeed, we have stepped in multifaceted dimensions of late modernity, where the boundaries of theology, technology, and human existence blur. Considering these developments, let's examine Metropolitan John's perspective on these issues.

IV. The Perspective of Metropolitan John of Pergamon

Metropolitan John Zizioulas adopts a *critical* yet *empathetic* stance as he examines the Westernization that has also touched the Orthodox

tradition. His critique of Western cultural assumptions isn't that of an outsider, but rather the perspective of someone intimately familiar with the challenges of our contemporary era. The approach of Orthodoxy towards the nuances of contemporary culture, if it aims to be both constructive and creative, necessitates a stance that transcends confrontation. It calls for the Church's compassionate and understanding engagement with the existential quandaries of modern humanity. The recognition that the person of Western heritage is not an external "other" but a part of our ecclesiastical fold –along with his progeny and the generations that follow– is paramount. Thus, according to Zizioulas, our critique should not emanate from a place of conflict between "us" and "them". Still, it should be imbued with the empathy and comprehension we would extend to our kin and our very own children.

As it follows from Zizioulas' method, the task of theology, he says, is to search for ways of connecting the Gospel with the existential needs of the world. Therefore, it is necessary for theologians to first feel, explore and understand what every human being deeply longs for, and then to point out how the Gospel and theology can give meaning to that longing. Thus, the purpose of Zizioulas' social and cultural engagement is in something very important.

> What is the goal that a society and a culture of personality seek: a community that is not a sum of individuals who are self-affirming and self-defining, but a complex of relationships through which springs an absolute otherness of personality. In this community, the individual does not exist for the sake of the whole, as Plato would have it in the 10th book of his *Laws*. But neither individually can it exist without the whole[10].

While it may appear that Metropolitan John has a negative view of modern technology, his approach is nuanced, as he considers both the negative and positive aspects of technological advancements.

Let's explore some of these elements in more detail.

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10. J. D. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, *The One and the Many*, *Studies on God*, *Man*, *the Church*, *and the World Today*, Western American Diocese, Sebastian Press, Alhambra, CA 2010, p. 405.

A) New reality and the concept of time

Metropolitan John asserts that the emerging reality is antagonistic toward the concepts of time and patience. In today's culture, marked by haste and a desire for instant gratification, patience is increasingly scarce, leading to a loss of meaningful human relationships.

> The Apostle Paul calls us to cultivate this patience and his message is very timely today. Because our age is hostile to patience. Our age is an age of haste. We want to get everything quickly. We want to quickly obtain information, and technology helps us in this. You see, people no longer wait to read the next day's paper to see what happened today. They want to know what is happening at this moment. And speed has become the ideal of our culture, which abolishes time. Nothing is left to mature over time. This prevails in human relations today as well. People want to quickly establish a relationship which may need time to develop –a time of patience– but man is not patient today. There are many examples we could point to that demonstrate that patience has disappeared from our lives. Look at the way we deal with nature. We do not leave nature's fruits to ripen. We are in a hurry, we cut it before it is ripe because we want to quickly acquire either the food that nourishes us or a financial benefit, and thus our culture is constantly a culture of haste, without patience. So, we lose expectation, we lose patience, and that is why we also lose patience with people. We don't tolerate them. If someone is unpleasant to us, we reject him, we don't want to exercise patience to live with him, to endure. How many families are broken up today precisely because there is no patience. Because we want to be happy immediately, to get what we think is good. By banishing patience, we banish the very meaning of our lives. We chase away our happiness[11].

Therefore, it is essential for us to cultivate patience in our lives. The Gospel, often described as the seed of the word of God, requires patience to yield its fruit, and this process doesn't happen instantly. Through the grace of God, the Church encourages us to acquire the challenging virtue of patience. By doing so, we can follow in the footsteps of the saints who have endured life's trials with patience while eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Lord's Kingdom, which promises love, peace, justice, and the ultimate abolition of death in this world.

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11. J. D. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, *Receive One Another: 101 Sermons*, Bishop Maxim Vasiljević (ed.), transl. Rev. fr. Gregory Edwards, Western American Diocese, Sebastian Press, Alhambra, CA 2023, pp. 436-437.

B) Concerns about the "dematerialization" of matter

The rise of digital technology has largely severed the human link with the material world, as virtual communication and relationships transcend physical boundaries, prompting inquiries about the *future* of humanity and disrupting conventional concepts of personhood. If we were to follow these thoughts of Zizioulas, we would find that this type of technology, based on the "dematerialization" of matter, makes even our bodies redundant in communication.

> When we reach digital technology, which is now an inseparable component of our lives, the relationship of the human being with the material world almost completely disappears. This type of technology is based on the "dematerialization" of matter, making even our bodies redundant in communication. Human relationships take place on internet, many people claim to have thousands of "friends" on Facebook without ever shaking hands with them, all while the world is preparing to welcome artificially intelligent beings, some (or some?) of which have already arrived. Is this the end of *homo sapiens*, the human being as we knew it? Some thinkers, like Harari, seem to think so. It seems certain that this is the end of the human being as the Fathers knew it[12].

For Zizioulas, God's being is the source of communion, which has consequences for the entire society. Only faith in the Triune God, revealed in Christ, can show a way out of the impasse of the modern world. However, the late Metropolitan of Pergamon was very concerned about what would happen to our reality, above all to the human person and its *freedom*, which is a constituent of existence, if modern technology exceeds certain limits. At the end of the last millennium, he spoke about the challenges that await us when, specifically, in 1997 in Belgrade, he expressed a characteristic thought:

> We are approaching the beginning of the third millennium after Christ and man is called to stop, at least temporarily, the frantic gallop in which it moves and to think a little. But what should he think about? I am afraid, namely, that today's man, even when he stops to think for a while, will not think about anything else, but how to increase his economic and material power or how to advance even

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12. J. D. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, "Patristic Anthropology and the Modern World", *Philotheos* 19, 2 (2019), pp. 204-217. Zizioulas here refers to Harari's, *Homo Deus: A brief History of Tomorrow*, Harpercollins, New York 2017.

more in science, in knowledge, to improve technology and everything else that busy today. However, what he should be thinking about today is the question: what is man himself?[13].

This leads Zizioulas to ponder whether we are bound by our past or deserving of a future.

C) Do we remain slaves to our past or are we entitled to a future?

Bearing in mind this Christocentric anthropology, Metropolitan John rightly expressed his concern due to the emergence of digital technology which, with the help of algorithms, threatens the very notion of human nature. He managed to comment on the latest trends in his posthumously published book *Remembering the Future*. His main objection to the phenomenon of digital technology but also biotechnology, therefore, genetic engineering etc., can be summarized as follows:

> Here is, therefore, an ethical principle that emerges from Christian eschatology: everyone is entitled to a future. This principle becomes extremely significant in our time because of the rapid and wide spread of technology, especially in the form of digital communication, which encourages and allows unlimited access to information. "What happens to our lives," Stefano Rodotà asks, "in an age when 'Google remembers everything'?"[14]. The collective memory of the internet which gathers every trace we leave behind us and stores it forever, not only exposes us to the danger of being used by others against our will and interest, but it also enslaves us in our past depriving us of the possibility to make a new beginning. In the name of every one's right to information and knowledge we are enslaved in our past. Technology takes away from us our future[15].

But, what should be done about this situation?

D) A cooperation with science

Zizioulas would support the idea of collaboration between science and theology.

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13. J. D. Zizioulas, "Man and His Identity", *Iskon* 4 (1997), pp. 18-20.
14. S. Rodotà, *Il mondo nella rete*, *Quali i diritti*, *quali i vincoli*, Laterza, Roma & Bari 2014.
15. J. D. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, *Remembering the Future*, *Toward an Eschatological Ontology*, Bishop Maxim Vasiljević (ed.), St. Sebastian Press, Alhambra, CA 2023, p. 54.

It would be futile to expect that legal means or moral imperatives could stop scientific research in its tracks. When it offers –as it does– the possibility of truly great benefits, it proves too alluring and, once begun, it is almost impossible to check its development. No one knows where this road will take us. Man's intervention into nature can only remain benign for the human person as well as material creation if our human consciences remain vigilant, and we see God behind every being. In other words, our culture must recapture the concept of sanctity. Only the Church can offer this because the Church is the only sacred space left[16].

Zizioulas proposes a cooperation with science and not a Manichean approach which would make the Church a ghetto.

The Church knows, or should know, that it is the guardian of the sanctity of the world and of the human person. The Church's head gave it this mission and woe to us if we neglect it. With spiritual discernment, the Church is called upon to raise its voice every time scientific developments threaten this sanctity. However, more than an attitude of protest, the Church is called to develop an attitude of cooperation with science, "so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed" (*Heb*. 12:13)[17].

Zizioulas delved into this subject, particularly the repercussions of genetic interventions on the distinctiveness of the human individual.

Both technology and genetics, which offer tempting advantages to social and economic life as well as to human health, simultaneously threaten to annihilate the human person[18] [...]. There are many more examples of dangers to the person, both from technology, with its *potential to catalyze the freedom of the person*, and from biology, which will soon be able to invade the individuality of each person after or even before his birth[19].

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16. J. D. Zizioulas, *Receive One Another: 101 Sermons*, *op.cit*., p. 132.
17. J. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, *Illness and Healing in Orthodox Theology*, Bishop Maxim Vasiljević (ed.), St. Sebastian Press, Alhambra, CA 2016, p. 51.
18. John Zizioulas referred to an example: "On a television show, a professor of genetics, supporting the cloning of even humans, gave as an example the hypothetical case of a mother who lost her ten-year-old child, saying that this mother would be happy to have an identical copy of her lost child. This is a complete breakdown of the concept of the person as a unique and irreplaceable being. Man would be nothing more than an animal if he reacted to the death of a loved one by replacing them with an identical copy" (*Receive One Another: 101 Sermons*, pp. 131-132).
19. J. D. Zizioulas, *Receive One Another: 101 Sermons*, pp. 131-132.

V. Dangers to avoid: the challenge of technology and secularization

So far, we have observed both positive and negative aspects of the Church's engagement with technology, but one aspect that warrants particular attention and discernment is the threat of secularization posed by the challenge of virtual communication.

A central tenet of Zizioulas' thought is that everything within history must undergo an eschatological transformation to achieve genuine existence.

> History must be eschatologized in order to acquire being: its events are subject to death unless they acquire a future; they are "being-unto-death". This eschatologization, however, does not lead to an identification of history with the Kingdom of God[20].

How is this connected to our topic? The culture in which we live is subjugated to the *representation of reality*, either as an evidence-based representation of how things were or are (naturalism) or as a representation with a freedom that distorts the identity of the beings that are represented (modern art). Even a regular user of technology can recognize the pressing need for "information asceticism" or "digital apophatism" in our culture. By that we mean abstinence from giving the ultimate priority to virtual reality. It is also an antidote to secularization.

But, what is secularization according to the late Metropolitan John?

> It is the absolutization of the "forms" (schemes) of history, those that come and go, such as nations, states, and social institutions. The Church does not reject these *forms* (μορφώματα), but transforms them with an eschatological breath, which underlines their relativity and derives from them what is destined to live forever, to survive in the eschaton. Secularization, therefore, is not only a matter of methods, but also of spirit and mentality. That is, it is not enough that the

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20. J. D. Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, *op.cit.*, p. 159. Furthermore, to the above he adds something that could be perceived as overly bold by some. "However, if our Liturgy and our monasticism lose this orientation, how will we avoid secularization? The world does not need a secularized and modernized Church. It needs an eschatological vision. And the Church alone exists to offer this vision" (*Ascetic Ethos and Monasticism*, ed. Hieromonk Vasilije Gavrilović, Sebastian Press, Alhambra, CA 2024, p. 51).

Church does not rely on the means and methods of this world, but also that it does not engage in aspirations of a secular character, as if she is "of this world"[21].

That gives us a reason to ask the question of the Internet. Metropolitan John Zizioulas was the first one, as far as I am aware, to raise this question at a theological level by asking, can the Church counteract globalization by sanctifying and utilizing technology – tools often seen as contrary to its essence and drivers of uniform globalization[22]?

Aware of the problem, the metropolitan says that the answer to it, unfortunately, cannot be so simple and easy. Just as it is not a simple and easy answer whether there is a "neutral" technology. And then he asks the question: what should the Church do in this case in order to avoid secularization?

Let us listen to what this Orthodox hierarch, who spent a large part of his life in the West, has to say about it.

> The first thing I think we should do is to understand that the means of technology, communication, etc., are *not* innocent but extremely dangerous for the very message that the Church wants to convey through them. Like any historical reality, these media contain evil in their nature, much more so today when the development of these media threatens our freedom, sanctity, and dignity of our person and our natural environment. This will, if nothing else, make the Church more vigilant in the use of these means[23].

Having pointed out this first important aspect by which the Church protects itself from secularization through technology, Zizioulas moves on to the next.

> The second thing the Church must do in order not to secularize itself by using these means is to keep them away from those *institutions* and acts of its life which are by their very nature destined to convey the eschatological message to this world. The Church primarily has two such institutions: monasticism and the

21. J. Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon, Ἔργα Α΄, Ἐκκλησιολογικὰ μελετήματα, Domos ed., Athens 2016, p. 526.
22. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, *op.cit*., p. 527.
23. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, *op.cit*., pp. 527-528.

Divine Eucharist. Monasticism, by its very nature, has been a voice of protest against the secularization of the Church since its inception[24].

Metropolitan John states that during a visit to Mount Athos, in one of the monasteries, they proudly showed him a room with the latest computers and said: "These are the most modern computers in the world, and we were the first to get them". According to him, it is contrary to the monastic vocation.

It is not by chance that a monk dresses in a black robe and takes a vow (oath) to withdraw from the world and die for the world. It represents an oxymoron, reaching the point of grotesqueness, that a monk uses worldly methods to attract people to Christ. Missionary work is not a monk's job. His job is to be "the voice of one crying in the wilderness", a silent but very loud reminder to all of us that "the present form of this world is passing away". If monasticism is secularized, it will lose its power to protect the Church from secularization[25].

As for the Divine Liturgy, John Zizioulas presents the following argument against secularization – televising the Liturgy.

We have seen that it [=the divine Eucharist] is par excellence the eschatological event of the Church. By its nature, it is a "gathering in one place," a personal and bodily community among people, as it will be in the Kingdom of God. When this physical gathering is not realized, for example when it is transmitted via television, then the eschatological message of the Church is lost. The most eschatological moment of the Church is secularized[26].

There is no valid objection to this argument, which concludes with the following point.

If, therefore, the worldly technology of individualism and digital reality is used in order to transmit the eschatological message of the Church, then that message will be absorbed and disappear by the means by which it was transmitted[27].

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24. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, op.cit., p. 528.
25. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, op.cit., p. 528.
26. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, op.cit., p. 528.
27. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Α΄, op.cit., p. 527.

What is the solution then? If we do not eliminate the use of technology, there remains only one solution.

> To the question of whether the Church should avoid technological means in order not to secularize itself, the answer is: it can use these means if it preserves unadulterated from these means those institutions and acts which by their nature are carriers of the eschatological character of the Church in order to give through them the testimony of the Kingdom of God[28].

It offers a sense of solace to receive affirmation from the eminent theologian John Zizioulas, who posits that the Church can integrate technological tools without succumbing to secularization, as long as it preserves the sanctity of its Divine Eucharist and monasticism.

The timely and sobering voice of John of Pergamon is particularly relevant as he delves into *theological* arguments once more.

> The Church has always used the things of this world but has always developed *eschatological antibodies*. Bishops, for example, who exercise governance have always used the world's means of governance. However, when they serve the Liturgy, they transfer the Kingdom to history. So let them preserve that service unadulterated by worldly means (media). This is the only way to protect the Church from secularization[29].

In bringing his remarks on secularization to their conclusion, Zizioulas wanted to emphasize that the concern behind these remarks is not to refuse technology. He ended the talk by reminding: "'*In the world*', but '*not of the world*'. *The Church must never forget this*"[30].

Conclusions

To distill the essence of my presentation, let me encapsulate the main points epigrammatically:

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28. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Αʹ, op.cit., pp. 528-529.
29. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Αʹ, op.cit., p. 529. *Emphasis added.*
30. Cf. J. Zizioulas, Ἔργα Αʹ, op.cit., p. 533.

1. A person-centered tradition facing the challenges of virtual reality should uphold the sanctity and uniqueness of human persons while engaging with the evolving technological landscape. In theological terms, this means recognizing that even in the midst of the digital age, human beings remain created in the image of God, with inherent dignity and worth.

2. Our culture of impatience affects not only our relationship with time but also our interactions with nature and other people, leading to broken relationships and a loss of the deeper meaning of life. Together with the Apostle Paul's call for patience, Metropolitan John of Pergamon insisted that this is especially relevant in today's culture, which is characterized by haste and a desire for instant gratification.

3. While technology can enhance human capabilities, it should not redefine or diminish the essence of what it means to be a person. As theologians explore the interface between Artificial Intelligence and Orthodox understanding of personhood, they must emphasize that human personhood transcends mere intelligence or technological augmentation.

4. The solution to the dilemma of whether the Church should abstain from using technology to prevent secularization lies in its ability to employ these technological means while safeguarding the purity of those institutions and practices that inherently carry the eschatological essence of the Church: the Eucharist and monasticism. Through these preserved elements, the Church can continue to bear witness to the Kingdom of God.

5. Our culture is in dire need of "information asceticism", signifying a restraint from granting virtual reality ultimate priority.

In the ever-evolving relationship between technology and faith, the late Metropolitan of Pergamon extends a reassuring hand, affirming that the Church can cautiously engage with the digital age without losing its sacred essence. He reminds us that throughout history, the Church has carefully adopted worldly tools while crafting eschatological "antibodies" to ward off the specter of secularization. So, let us tread this intricate path with confidence, preserving the sanctity of the Divine Eucharist and the monastic flame, hoping that the Church's timeless message will

endure in this digital age. As many times in history, so also today the Church must navigate through virtual communication toward the truth of existence, guided by the steadfast light of Christology.

May the theology of Metropolitan John illuminate our path towards genuine and intimate encounter with the Triune God –the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit– united in an unbreakable communion of love which in our lives finds its fullest expression in the person of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. As we journey, let our love encompass all that belongs to Christ: our fellow human beings and the entire creation, bound together personally and tangibly within His Church.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΉ

Ἡ ἀλήθεια τῆς ὕπαρξης στὴν εἰκονικὴ ἐπικοινωνία;
Ἐξερευνώντας τὶς θεολογικὲς τοποθετήσεις
τοῦ Μητροπολίτη Ἰωάννη Ζηζιούλα

Πανιερ. Ἐπισκόπου Λὸς Ἄντζελες καὶ Δυτ. Ἀμερικῆς
κ. Μαξίμου (Vasiljević), *Καθηγητοῦ*
Θεολογικὴ Σχολὴ τοῦ Τιμίου Σταυροῦ (Βοστόνη)

Στὴν παροῦσα μελέτη διερευνῶνται οἱ βαθειὲς ἐπιπτώσεις τῆς εἰκονικῆς ἐπικοινωνίας στὴν ἀλήθεια τῆς ὕπαρξης, μὲ ἑστίαση στὴ θεολογία τοῦ Μητροπολίτου Περγάμου Ἰωάννη Ζηζιούλα. Στὸ πλαίσιο τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Παράδοσης, ἡ ἔρευνα ἐμβαθύνει στὶς προκλήσεις ποὺ θέτει ἡ ἀπο-υλοποίηση τῆς πραγματικότητας στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχή. Ἀντλώντας ἔμπνευση ἀπὸ τὶς θεολογικὲς θέσεις τοῦ Ζηζιούλα, ἡ ἐργασία ἐξετάζει κριτικὰ τὴν πολύπλοκη σχέση μεταξὺ τῆς εἰκονικῆς ἐπικοινωνίας καὶ τῶν θεμελιωδῶν ἀληθειῶν τῆς ὕπαρξης.

Ἡ συζήτηση ξεκινᾶ ἐξετάζοντας τὴ σημασία τῆς Ἐνσαρκώσεως σὲ μία ἐποχὴ ἐπαυξημένης πραγματικότητας καὶ διερευνᾶ τὰ χριστολογικὰ θεμέλια τῆς Ὀρθοδόξου Παραδόσεως. Δίδεται ἔμφαση στὴ σημασία τοῦ προσώπου, ἡ ὁποία ἔχει τὶς ρίζες της στὴν κοινωνία τῆς ἀγάπης ἐντὸς τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδος, καὶ στὶς ἐπιπτώσεις της στὴν ἀνθρώπινη μοναδικότητα καὶ ταυτότητα.

Ἐν συνεχείᾳ, στὴ μελέτη διευκρινίζονται τὰ χαρακτηριστικὰ τῆς ἀπο-υλοποιημένης πραγματικότητας στὴν ψηφιακὴ ἐποχή, μὲ ἔμφαση στὶς ἀνησυχίες σχετικὰ μὲ τὴν ἀπώλεια τῆς ὑπομονῆς, τὴν ἀπο-υλοποίηση καὶ τὴν πρόκληση τῆς ἐκκοσμίκευσης. Μέσα ἀπὸ τὴν ὀπτικὴ τοῦ Ζηζιούλα, ὑπογραμμίζεται ἡ ἀνάγκη τῆς Ἐκκλησίας νὰ περιηγηθεῖ τὰ ψηφιακὰ σύνορα, διατηρώντας παράλληλα τὴν ἱερότητα τῆς Θείας Εὐχαριστίας καὶ τοῦ μοναχισμοῦ.

Συμπερασματικά, ἡ μελέτη ὑποστηρίζει ὅτι μία προσωποκεντρικὴ παράδοση πρέπει νὰ διατηρεῖ τὴν ἱερότητα τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων προσώπων ἐν μέσῳ τεχνολογικῶν ἐξελίξεων. Ὑποστηρίζει τὸν «ἀσκητισμὸ τῆς πληροφορίας» καὶ τονίζει τὴ σημασία τῆς διατήρησης τῆς ἐσχατολογικῆς οὐσίας τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἀπέναντι στὴν ἐκκοσμίκευση. Ἐν τέλει, καλεῖ σὲ μία προσεκτικὴ ἐνασχόληση μὲ τὴν τεχνολογία, καθοδηγούμενη ἀπὸ τὶς διαχρονικὲς ἀλήθειες τῆς Χριστολογίας, φωτίζοντας ἕνα μονοπάτι πρὸς τὴ γνήσια συνάντηση μὲ τὸν Τριαδικὸ Θεὸ μέσα στὴν Ἐκκλησία Του.