

John Zizioulas on Natural and Human Rights

In his address to the Academy of Athens, published in 1998, John Zizioulas called for individual human rights to be reconceived in terms of personhood and grounded in relational ontology, not natural law. He left unexplained what constitutes a right on this basis. Aristotle Papanikolaou grounded human rights in the logic of divine-human communion, reaching “a natural law–like conclusion without the natural law”. For the Life of the World grounds dignity in the divine image but leaves its affirmation of natural law unconnected to human rights. Both affirm principles of justice, yet neither thereby grounds an unconferred right, a claim within a normative order independent of positive law.

This paper argues that Zizioulas’s rejection of natural law concerns nature conceived apart from grace, the “biological hypostasis”, rather than nature as understood in Cappadocian accounts of its law. For Basil, love of God is not taught but implanted at creation as a seed-like logos. For Gregory of Nyssa, human nature is free and its own master, and to enslave it is to legislate against God. Nature here is not merely a given but a vocation to communion. Its law is the form of freedom, not its limit.

Natural rights, I argue, supply the missing link between natural law and human rights: unconferred and unwritten claims against unjust legislation that obstructs the free exercise of a person’s ontological capacity for communion. They complete Zizioulas’s reconception of human rights on its own terms: if the person enables nature to exist, the law of nature is itself the expression of graced freedom.

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