

# Webinar “Called to Unity – Towards an Ecology of relationships Together for Europe, 2 March 2024

## Cosmic Personhood: From imago Dei to Imago mundi

**Prof. Dr. Nikolaos Asproulis**, Deputy director, Volos Academy for Theological Studies; Lecturer, Hellenic Open University; Chair, PanOrthodox Concern for Animals

### Introductory remarks

In his “Conjectural beginning of human history” Immanuel Kant provides an interesting interpretation of the Genesis account focusing on the special role attributed to human being because of his reason. As he puts it human becoming “conscious of...reason as a faculty ... can extend itself beyond the limits within which all animals are held” (165) pointing out its superiority over the non human creatures, as with reason human “elevates...entirely above the society of animals” (167). According to Kant “the first time (human) he said to the sheep: Nature has given you the skin you wear not for you but for me, then it took it off the sheep and put it on himself (Gen, 3,21) he became aware of a prerogative that he had by his nature over all animals, which he now no longer regarded as his fellow creatures, but rather as means and instruments...” (167).

In a different context and age the French existentialist Jean Paul Sartre famously argued that “hell is other people”. Although one might say that the above references seem to be irrelevant at first sight to our discussion a closer look may show that both point to the lack or rather to the negation of relationship as a constitutive element of (human) being and life itself.

In what follows after a brief exploration of the theology of personhood as it has been expressed by the Greek fathers and further developed by the late John Zizioulas, a special emphasis will be given to the ontological bond and interdependence among human and non-human creatures, the negation of which boldly affect environmental sustainability.

### Personhood: Its origin and basic features

Since the very beginning the early Church struggled to overcome any natural, national or other local constraints and links, aiming chiefly at witnessing to a new mode of being, accounted for the divine-human communion. By virtue of the ecclesial experience of the early Fathers, the Church, was primarily considered, not as a new religious institution ready to replace the old ones, but as a new “mode of existence”, as a “way of being”, existentially and deeply bound with the reality, namely God, human and non human beings and the whole world. By virtue of and through their Eucharistic experience, where a spirit of mutuality, interdependence, solidarity, evolving love and personal relationship was evidenced, the Fathers defined God as the relational being par excellence. This experience, far from being a sterile propositional and authoritarian understanding of self-revelation of God in history, led them in working out a new perception and transformation of the classic ontology, by ascribing communion itself to the very core of being, previously unthinkable in the closed philosophical thought of antiquity.

By building on this long development in the patristic time, described as an ontological revolution in ontology, the late Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas conceptualized their vision in a theology of personhood which can be summarized as follows:

- a. Personhood is otherness in communion and vice versa: In a Christian perspective personhood emerges through communion that is in relationship. Apart from communion, no person, either divine or human, but perhaps also non-human exists by itself, as a self-sufficient and self-defined close identity. Without downplaying its particular integrity, each being is inconceivable without communion. At the same time however, communion does not obscure personal otherness and particularity, insofar communion does not exist by itself but for the sake of the persons that commune to each other.
- b. Personhood is closely linked to freedom. The introduction of the concept of cause in ontology, renders freedom a constitutive aspect of personhood, since only free persons seek for communion. In other words communion is a voluntary free act and not something inescapable and deterministic. In this sense personhood means freedom of being other, of simply being one's self.
- c. In this light personhood is simultaneously an hypostatic and ecstatic identity: Unless being ecstatic, that is inherently moving towards the other, personhood is not hypostatic too. Being hypostatic, personhood is regarded simultaneously as a loving entity, open to the other.

For one to open oneself to the other, to love the other "as yourself" does not mean to just follow a moral obligation, but to constitute one's own being as such, as communion. In order to constitute one's own self as communion in love and vice versa, a necessary sacrificial ethos is necessary, in view of the Cross, where the "priority of the Other over the self reaches its climax". An orientation then of self-emptying, a kenosis, is clearly presupposed, which ascribes repentance, metanoia, and unlimited forgiveness to the very heart of the Christian existence, as the very base that prevents any natural qualities, such as national, physical and other local ties of affecting humanity itself. Such a repentance is not a moral obligation, but naturally stems from the very constitution of one's own self as communion in otherness and vice versa.

### **From imago Dei to imago mundi**

In light of the current climate crisis, how can this theology of personhood be interpreted from an ecological perspective? Without doubt the biblical story of creation became an instrument granting the human being the position of the sole master of the earth. The climate crisis we face nowadays is without an exaggeration the result of a human perception defining its relationship to creation in terms of superiority, manipulation, possession and domination. As it has been stated by Pope Francis in his *Laudato Si*, "Modernity has been marked by an excessive anthropocentrism." If that is the case a necessary "shift from the direction of an excessive anthropocentric stance to considerations of an inclusive planetary justice and solidarity" (30) is badly needed. To this end one has to revisit the traditional theological anthropology of the *imago Dei* by working a redefinition of the image of God in a more inclusive ways through the lens of a personalist ontological view, described above. By such a com-passionate theology one is able to express its concern for creation and non-human creatures in its entirety. Thus, If one defines the human from the standpoint of a personalist, relational ontology, then the human cannot be understood without a clear reference, relation and connection to a You, and an It: "Every part of creation matters," or every single creature of God matters: *Imago Dei* is incomplete, unless the whole creation is recognized as being a constitutive part of it. Patristic tradition is quite illuminating here: In his effort to address the role of the body in attaining the divine light against the accusations against him of that time (14th c.), Gregory Palamas argues that "every kind of

creature, as he himself participates in everything and is also able to participate in the one who lies above everything, in order for the image of God to be completed.”

Such an inclusive understanding of *imago Dei* points, perhaps unconsciously, to the concept of *imago mundi*. By this, contemporary theologians attempt to re-define human identity in light of the urgent climate crisis. If the image of God in human cannot fully manifest, without taking into account, all creatures, this clearly means that fauna and flora, meaning non-human creatures, as well as the whole creation, do share in the salvation and the Kingdom of God. After all this is the ultimate goal of the divine plan: the salvation of the entire world, not only of humanity. Otherwise, the non-human creation would have been created in vain (“Man and beast thou savest, O Lord” (Ps. 36:6b), and the Pauline premises that the whole earth will be saved, and Christ would “unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9-10) would sound irrelevant.

Thus in this light when an animal, like an abused dog, is cut off from any other animal of its own species or from a human as its owner, so as to meet the necessary requirements of being included in this communal/relational understanding of the *imago Dei*, to the extent that a) this animal shares in the same animality, that is the same creaturely nature with humanity as well as b) being found in a constant and unbreakable relationship with its Creator, God the Father, it can be clearly considered as belonging to this communal/relational re-definition of the image.

It is the time now, to approach the biblical account of Adam and Eve creation from the angle of this personalist/comunion ontology, which stresses the deep ontological interdependence of all creatures in the light of God’s love and providence.

The *imago Dei* is then considered as the means through which communion is extended to all creation with the result of establishing an unbreakable ontological bond between humans and non-human beings that cannot be reduced to mere rational (or even moral) capacities, also shared to some degree by non-human creatures. This extension by no means should be considered as an outcome of natural fluidity, but as an internal opening of the *imago* through the visitation of the Spirit of God, who supervises, sustains and sanctifies the creation in its entirety.

### **By way of conclusion**

We have been familiarized for many centuries now with a lifestyle that supports an inevitable break between the human and nature, both in terms of practice and theory. If that is true, and in order to address the present climate crisis, a new model of anthropology is required beyond any dated human exceptionalism or problematic anthropomorphism, where attention is given to those parts of the *imago* that link the human to the rest of creation (e.g., animality, communion) and not to those parts, which deepen or stress their discontinuity (e.g. freedom, reason). By redefining the image of God in a more inclusive way, theology can provide an integral anthropology that would account for the particular place and reception of non-human creatures not only in our discourse, but also in our practice (e.g. pastoral care).