

The Person in the Orthodox Tradition

Preface to the Second English Edition 2021

The first edition of this book was published in Greek thirty years ago, in 1991. Other editions followed, and it made a particular impression, because there was much discussion at that time about the person in God and in human beings, under the influence of Western theology and German idealism. It was a first attempt to provide some answers from the point of view of Orthodox theology to the various philosophical and theological currents that were coming to Greece then from the West.

In 1996 this book received an award from the Academy of Athens, the largest intellectual and cultural institution in Greece, in accordance with the opinion of the “Moral and Political Sciences Section and the decision of the plenary session” with the following rationale:

“This work attempts a new approach to the Orthodox tradition concerning the theological concept of the ‘Person’. This difficult subject is treated by the writer on a consistently high theological level, with originality and scientific method, and it opens new fields for further research.”

The chapters of the book will be briefly summarised, to introduce readers of the English edition to its deeper meaning.

The first chapter demonstrates that, when the Fathers of the Church, particularly those of the fourth cen-

tury, expounded various theological issues, they were not philosophising, although they knew philosophy, but were criticising the heretics' philosophy and their philosophical way of thinking. This is a decisive point. Theology is the revelation of God to the saints and the empirical message of the saints, whereas philosophy is speculation about God.

The second chapter defines the concept of the person according to the Fathers of the Church. It begins by referring to the subject of the person in the Triune God and defining essence, nature, hypostasis and person. It then points out that the Fathers, with some exceptions, did not define humans as persons, but above all as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Moreover, the Fathers do not make a distinction between persons and individuals, as do more recent theologians influenced by Western philosophy. For the Fathers, person, hypostasis and individual are identical. Next, the asceticism of the person, especially according to St Sophrony the Athonite, is emphasised, as the means by which the human being progresses from being in God's image to being in His likeness. Within this perspective, the subjects of love, freedom and social problems are discussed.

The third chapter analyses the concept of hypostasis-person from the philosophical and theological viewpoints. An attempt is made to demonstrate that the teaching of the holy Fathers about God as person is on a different plane from the personalism of Western theology, which looks at the person in the con-

text of philosophical and psychological presuppositions. Also, the Fathers regard the human being in terms of God's image and likeness, and, when they use the term 'hypostasis' for a human being, their understanding of it is completely different from that of philosophy and Western theology.

The fourth chapter specifically discusses experience and the terminology of the person, setting out the fact that the experience of God granted to the saints who behold God is not the same thing as the terminology used to refer to God. After a brief reference to the views of contemporary theologians on so-called 'interpersonal relations', the teaching of the Fathers of the Church on experience and the terminology of the person is presented. In particular, an amazing poem by St Symeon the New Theologian is analysed, which shows that the Fathers who beheld God saw Him in the Light, and that they expressed this using the terms of their era.

The Fathers, therefore, used the terms 'essence', 'hypostasis' and 'person' in order to express their own experience, to safeguard it from the mistaken beliefs of heretics, and to offer Orthodox guidance to the faithful. At the same time, the inability of these theological terms to express the mystery of the Holy Trinity is noted.

As a consequence, the attempt by contemporary theologians to correlate the theology of the Holy Trinity with sociology is criticised, because this leads to conclusions that are not Orthodox. This is clear

from the fact that there is absolutely no resemblance between what is created and what is uncreated, so what happens in the relationships between the Persons of the Holy Trinity cannot be attributed to human beings and the creation

In general, the manner of existence of the Persons of the Holy Trinity and the relations between Them are unknown to human beings, and for that reason they cannot be used as a model for the relations between people in society. It is regarded as a major theological error for someone to penetrate into the innermost recesses of the mystery of the Holy Trinity, to make conjectures about relations within the Holy Trinity, and to interpret human and social relationships on the basis of the manner of existence of the Persons of the Holy Trinity. Only those who speculate and philosophise produce such mistaken interpretations. It is necessary to interpret these matters through the saints' asceticism and their experience of divine vision.

The fifth chapter explains that the saints are the bearers of the divine revelation, as they reached deification, the vision of the uncreated Light. That is to say, from being in God's image they progressed to being in His likeness. In this way, through their own experience of the revelation, they answered the questions that preoccupied the Greek philosophers: the cosmological problem and the problem of 'being and becoming' that had concerned pre-Socratic philosophy and classical and modern metaphysics.

The importance of the body is stressed in the regeneration of human beings and in deification, in which the body also participates, as shown by the sacred relics of the saints. The fact is that sacred relics provide answers to questions about the existence of God, as God's grace dwells within them, about what human beings are, and about how death, a major social problem, is overcome, as well as answers to so-called cosmological and ecological questions. It is from this perspective that we should look at the teaching of the Fathers of the Church about the person in God and the value of human beings.

The sixth chapter expounds the major issue of freedom from the theological point of view. It explains how freedom was expressed before and after the Fall; what is meant by the natural and the gnomonic (deliberative) will; that in Christ there are no 'hypostatic wills'; and how the saints experience freedom. Then the meaning of freedom from death, thoughts and passions is set out according to the Fathers of the Church. There is an analysis of what constitutes the freedom the nous according to the ascetic tradition of the Church. Fools for Christ's sake are described as the extreme form of freedom in Christ, which is also experienced to varying degrees at every level of Christian life.

Overall, this book criticises the philosophical-ontological interpretation of the person, the mistaken Trinitarian view of human beings and society, the erroneous application of the term 'interpersonal relations' to God and humans, the philosophical

interpretation of freedom, and so on. It explains that much of what is said today about the person is a departure from patristic theology.

It should be noted that, as the Academy of Athens commented, the analysis of the subject of the person in this book “opens new fields for further research.” In fact, from 1996 until today I have developed this subject further, writing various texts in which views on the person are analysed to an even greater extent.

I have written an article about 120 pages long in Greek on ‘Objections to the “Ontology of the Person”: A Research Chronicle’, in which I present the whole course of my investigation into this subject up until today. I am also preparing a new book in Greek, the title of which can be translated as *The ‘Ontology of the Person’*, a Critique of Theological Personalism, which will be published later and will include articles containing wider-ranging analyses of this serious issue.

Basic theological principles that have been stressed in my writings to date include the following. When the Fathers of the Church speak about God, they introduce the term ‘person hypostasis’ to express the experience of God’s revelation to the Prophets, Apostles and Fathers. The Persons of the Holy Trinity have the same nature - essence - energy particular hypostatic properties. Will-volition is an appetite of nature, not of the person. The Persons of the Holy Trinity have one will, communion of nature and mutual co-inherence (perichoresis) of persons. Just as

in ancient times the essence was identified with the energy, so in our day the energy-will is identified with the person-hypostasis. This is not part of the Orthodox Tradition, since so-called ‘hypostatic wills’ were condemned by the Sixth Ecumenical Council as heretical. Freedom is not connected with the person, because in that case each Person of the Holy Trinity would have His own freedom and the unity of the Persons of the Holy Trinity would be broken up.

In addition, the Fathers mainly spoke about human beings in biblical terms, that they were created in the image and likeness of God. Contemporary personalistic theories, however, have been influenced by scholasticism, nominalism, German idealism, existentialism and psychologism. St Sophrony the Athonite, who writes about the human being as a hypostasis through his own experience of divine vision, is different.

All in all, this present book lays the foundations for criticism of contemporary personalism, and this criticism is, of course, developed further in subsequent books.

*Written on the Second Sunday of Lent
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the Feast of St Gregory Palamas,
in the Bishop's Residence in Nafpaktos*

† Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and St Vlassios