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Classical and Byzantine Christian Notions of the Self and Their Significance Today[1]

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Personhood as a Concept under Threat

We may tend to think today that the concept of the human person (and here I mean the term philosophically, the idea of spiritual subjectivity) is the unassailable focus of our Christian culture, the locus of some of our highest religious and intellective ideals, and the last bastion of the concept of social and political freedom. Even if we are aware of the revisioning of ideas of self that goes on apace in the worlds of cyber science, often called "Artificial Intelligence," we might think that this cannot assail the primacy of the place the idea has in our culture. But the same changes are also going on with great energy in the field of contemporary neuroscience. Here, new empirical understandings of the complexities of the brain have newly raised old questions about identity and personhood, once approached in the light of metaphysics and philosophy.

The movement around personality and personhood is not entirely in the direction of materialist reductionism, however. The old arms-length distance that science formerly employed, to hold away what they saw as the "suspicious" trades of the theologian and philosopher, have begun to be eroded more rapidly in this era than at any other time since the sixteenth century. And this is something of a problem, because formative training in the long ages of the great divorce we have witnessed between arts and

1. A lecture offered to the "Andrei Saguna" Faculty of Theology at the University of Sibiu (Romania), on the occasion of the bestowal of an Honorary Fellowship and a *Doctoratus Honoris Causa*.

sciences have rendered theologians unskilled in scientific method and produced generations of scientists who are rank amateurs in terms of philosophy—who now need philosophical rigour to advance beyond the frontier of the investigation of the brain's chemo-electrical synaptic functioning, so as to arrive at significant statements about personhood beyond the simple mapping of personality disorders. The same applies equally for physicists, to allow them to go beyond the long accepted impasse of two systems for explaining cosmological rule-ordering, so as to approach the single pressing question of the disparities of cosmic existence, one that might offer a coherently comprehensive account of *what it is that is*—which is, I suggest, the provoker of that other great metaphysical question which never goes away: *why it is that anything is at all?*

So, unquestionably we need today to learn new sets of languages. One common term of semantics that lies in our midst—a security checkpoint, as it were, between the armed camps of humanities and sciences; between religion and secularism; between philosophy and metaphysics; between the microcosm and the macrocosm—is the concept of the person.

This concept, we may think, is so central to all European thought, so basic to an understanding of everything significant, that we may even be tempted to take it for granted. We ought not to make that mistake. For most of the history of the idea "personhood" was not significant at all as a substantive—certainly not in the worlds of the great antique religious systems.[2] And in those systems of religion and philosophy that still follow the archaic matrices, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, this is still the case. Far from being a substantive, personhood is approached at best as an accidental, at worst as a deceit—*Maya*, that illusion of personal identity that prevents the seeker after truth from recognizing the structures of reality.

2. As Philip Cary puts it, "Human beings can describe themselves in emotional, ethical, and religious terms, without recourse to the conception of a private inner world. Indeed, before Augustine, everyone seems to have found it natural to do so, having no notion that there was an alternative" (*Augustine's Invention*, 9).

In the pre-Christian classical systems of cosmology which emphasized cyclical schemes of coming to being and coming into dissolution, personhood was an accidental category, and so it occupies a place in Aristotle's scheme of the natural order. One cannot derive a sure knowledge of the *genus* by application of so peripheral a notion as the individual (*to idion*). One needs to make an analysis of the *ethos* of the whole nature (*ousia*) by reference to its *teleotic* drive. The *telos* or the end goal of the nature, seen as an enclosed and driven system, renders the fractured approach of personalist understandings wholly irrelevant. *Prosōpon*, the Greek word for "person" (a thing which misleads so many readers of textbooks today), does *not* mean person in our sense of discrete subjective consciousness; it simply refers to an existent specimen—*to idion*. The semantic itself gives the game away, for *prosōpon* derives from the Greek for an actor's megaphone—the mask or "face" the classical actor wore on stage (with fixed clichéd aspects of happiness or sorrow or fear) to serve as an amplification system for the audience. *Prosōpon* was itself a cliché of singularity, not a mark of individuation. *Persona* is simply the Latin synonym, and *per sonare* literally means an actor's speaking tube.

It was the Christians, however, who brought this idea of the centrality of personhood, the new concept of the substantive nature of the person, to the fore in human culture and thought; and it was Christians who in the age of Byzantium supplied the new and refined semantic for one of the greatest advances in thought about human consciousness that history records. *Prosōpon* became *hypostasis*. It was Christological and Trinitarian doctrine that drove this process on. I would like to focus on this in the first part of this presentation in order to draw some conclusions about what this might suggest to us in an age when the very place of personhood in centre stage on world philosophy and science is being attacked by twin forces of dissolution: first of all, the negative energy of a culture no longer understanding the value-systems society holds up for itself (this was why classical antiquity, rooted in a mythical system of values, fell before Christian logic); and secondly, the darker force of mechanization of the human spirit that seeks to reduce those unexpected and often uncontrollable bril-

liances of human individual spiritedness into a system that can depersonalize sufficiently, so as to enable collectivization and thus control. We have lived through a so-called "great age" in the last two centuries—not so much the great age of empire (as they fell too frequently in the course of time for that) but rather the so-called great age of *totalitarian collectivization*. These twin forces of value dissolution and mechanized collectivism operate relentlessly in human society—sometimes taking on a savage and dark form and oppressing generations at a time, when the energy of a totalitarian leader puts collective power to work subjugating persons; but sometimes also in eras of great social "drift" when the laziness of a society neglects its philosophical axioms, grows apart from or distant to them, and allows the great inner core of notions such as freedom and philanthropy to corrode and give ground before the growth of non-personal philosophies. One case in point is western capitalism in a global environment, that much vaunted "defender" of the rights of individual persons, which has raised consciousness in the developed West to such a pitch (a point of narcissism, one might even say), but clearly at the cost of enslaving and silencing countless hundreds of thousands of others, who work in the sweat shops of the world unseen and unheard. Ours is the age, the third in line after imperial Rome, and then colonial America, when slavery has been reinvented. It is not the *résumé* we might expect for our contemporary civilization, to be sure, but global slavery has been estimated in our time as embracing a minimum of ten, and a possible upper figure of thirty, million people on the face of the earth in conditions of true enslavement.

If Christians first brought the notion of personhood as a substantive to the world's agenda, we might be in a position to repair the notion in a time when it is clearly being damaged by those who either do not understand its universality (and dismiss the rights of persons), or those who do not seem to understand its function as a term of communion (and so elevate rights of persons as a privatist agenda separated from broader terms of social and moral culture). Let me base these statements by looking first into Platonic, then Aristotelian, then Byzantine Christian philosophies of personhood, for it is my thesis that the Christian personalism of the Byzantines, their synthesizing response to the work of the classi-

cal philosophers, is that which today still underpins the Eastern Orthodox conception of transfigured humanity, and of society as communion, which many parts of western culture appear to have lost sight of, by having lost the intellectual premises out of which the philosophy of personhood first arose. This happened in four acts: two Platonic iterations, one Aristotelian, and an overarching Byzantine Christian synthesis prefigured by the classical patristic age.

Briefly put, the force of the concept of individuation for the Platonic system is that it is *a process of the ascent of the psyche to the Ideal, an epistemic journey, which is its liberation and return to primary form*. In the Aristotelian system, the idea of individual consciousness is used as *a process of moral expression*. *It is the emergence of the individual as free agent*. In the late revisions of both these Greek schools which we now call Neoplatonism, reflection on individuation becomes *a process of inward focus for connection to the intelligible realities that signal the mystical connection of the individual to the Supreme Nous*. Finally, the Christian Fathers synthesized this collective material and subordinated it to a fundamental soteriological principle of a divine incarnation into history transfiguring the bondedness of human reality (the mortal *ousia*) into a liberative *epektasis*, a bounded infinity of the mortal rendered immortal by entering the fathomless reality of communion with the infinite God.

Individuation in Pre-Christian Greek Thought

The Platonic school is fundamentally responsible for the success of that all-pervasive image of the self as the "true inner reality," a private and clarified place where the self emerges and the boundaries of the divine and human become to some degree tangential. In the *Phaedo*, Plato considers what is meant by the immortality of the soul. For him, the soul has a certain kinship with that which is everlasting, immortal, unchanging. It has the quality of an Ideal Form. Philosophical inquiry into the soul, and other aspects of the good life, is the empirical *praxis* of immortality: such enquiry strengthens the bond between the soul and the Ideal Forms with which it has kinship. In Homeric writing, the Soul or Osyche had

been merely a fluttering and useless shade. For Plato, however, it is the adamantine core which frees itself from material limitation. To know the soul one must first know the Ideal Form.[3] The soul fell from the Ideal Forms and was imprisoned in material sensible reality. There is, thus, an important division between Intelligible and Sensible, between Ideal Form and material deformation, between Being and Becoming. True wisdom is gained by recollection of the knowledge that the soul possessed before its material decline. The way to this wisdom, Plato maintains, is by searching and true perception. This cannot be achieved if one already thinks (mistakenly) that one possesses a true perspective—a common illusion that suffocates humanity (his famous analogy of the prisoners in the cave).

Using Socrates as an ideal teacher, Plato begins with *aporia* ("puzzlement"), the systematic destruction of existing false premises, to arrive, by reduction and denial of false ideas, at a true conception (*orthos logos* or *orthodoxia*). The dialogue *Meno* pursues this track in seeking to define Virtue. The student of philosophy who begins to see is one who can eventually join with Socrates in setting puzzling questions himself—applying the aporetic method as a self-directed means of truth finding.[4] We already have the answer to what we seek; we need to stimulate the awareness of the Ideal Forms by Recollection. For this, he uses the verb *en-einai*—a "being in" or a "being possible." The point of the wordplay is that knowledge is possible for us because it is already in us. The dawning insight to which this reflective scrutiny leads us is a cardinal moment in philosophy and ethic, and it charts the emergence of self-knowledge.

Plotinos, the greatest of the Neoplatonic teachers, later married Platonist theories of divine intelligible reality with the Stoic moral motive of the inward turning to the life of the soul, thereby trans-

3. Gregory the Theologian, in his *Theological Orations* and his poem *Carmen Lugubre*, as well as Augustine later, in his *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, will reverse this path by making psychology the path towards theological insight.

4. Thus, the path to wisdom is synonymous (in both classical philosophical thought and especially in the Byzantine ascetic fathers) with the path to the emergence of the True Self.

forming Platonic metaphysics into a viable religious system that had immense attraction for Christians. For Plotinos, the archetypal model of the eye of the soul is the Supreme *Nous*, or *The One*—that divine reality which is the centre of all Existence, the Unity which all multiplicity innately yearns for. The World-Soul, or *Logos*, mediator of this unity to the disparate cosmos, revolves around this supreme Light like a satellite moon. Because of this, individual souls (which are akin to *Logos*) also revolve around the light in their individual existences but are ambivalently capable of orientating towards that light or facing outward into the darkness of non-intelligible reality. If the soul turns towards the light, it turns inward by a natural kinetic energy to noetic awareness. The awareness grows, for the elite, to the point of noetic union—the mystical apprehension of reality as "One beyond the Many." Here, late Platonic metaphysics has become close to being a spiritual religion.[5] St. Gregory the Theologian is much affected by this model, whereas his historic mentor, Origen of Alexandria, was much closer to the older "ascentive epistemic" imagery of Plato. Both Origen and Gregory, however, differ considerably from their Platonic sources in the way that both of them constantly evoke the biblical idea of transfiguration (*metamorphosis*) as a way of explaining the human *telos*.[6] For both, the *Logos* is personified and personifying in a way that for Plotinos it is decidedly not.

Aristotelian Presuppositions

Aristotle, in seeking to approach the definition of reality from a different perspective to the intellective (noetic/spiritual) idealism of Plato, marked a new beginning for reflective thought on the nature of the individual. The Platonic system left more than a large question mark hanging over the very validity, or at least utility, of

5. St. Augustine, of all the Fathers, is the closest to the Neoplatonic idea of selfhood here, in that he prefers an image of an "inner palace" of the self where one can enter to find a potential encounter with God; the Greek fathers more thoroughly mediate Neoplatonist ideas of how *Logos* serves to mediate Supreme Reality to individual *logoi*.

6. Cf. the treatment in McGuckin, *Transfiguration of Christ*.

the scrutiny of contemporary existential forms (the sensible/sensory domain which was de facto illusory). For Plato, there was the perennial danger of mistaking the "shadow on the wall" of the cave for a perception into Ideal Form. With Aristotle, the concept of the *class*, or of *nature*, has become a dominant aspect of his taxonomy of existence. For him, it is the nature which is essential, and the individual which simply manifests it, or constitutes it "practically." The universal form, for Aristotle, was located within the collective character of the *genus.* Only here was a substantial form (*ousia*) capable of empirical description. Therefore, the close observation of the individual specimen, a serious empirical scrutiny, leads to the amassing of a clear understanding both of the generic class and the characteristics (accidents, *idiomata*) of the individual manifestation of that *genus*.

The key to this process of analysis of the substantial form was the study of *genesis*—that is, the manner in which a life form evolves, sets into motion its own peculiar and characteristic activities, and unfolds towards its natural *telos* ("goal"). The true definition of a thing is that which it is when it has attained the sum of its generic potential. This gave rise to a dynamic sense of nature as a "lived-out process." For Aristotle, *energeia* is that which moves the life form from potentiality to the perfected realization of its essence. For a human, the *bios*, the way a person directs the life force, is critically important. This is the very unfolding of the nature, not merely a product of it. Even in the Supreme Being the essence is an energy, an *actus purus*.[7] In the case of humanity, this process is the manner in which individuals, or "primary substances" as he describes them, unfold their life-force teleologically in the course of a life's activities, choices, and attainments—a teleological process which is the acquisition of human nature in the particular case of each individual, an arrival at authentic human nature which is only potentially present in individual members of the species from birth. It is, for example, from such arguments about teleology that Aristotle famously does not consider young people capable of moral identity—a position which was to

7. This was to have an immense impact on Latin medieval Christian thought, especially that of the great scholastic Thomas Aquinas.

be highly influential on Christian ascetics and their doctrine of the passions and *apatheia*.

In this system, the acquiring of a form of natural *stasis* ("stability"[8]) is quintessential to the emerging of true identity. In antique-biographical terms, the chief item of importance is the cataloguing of the accurate "empirical moment," that time and place and condition in which the *humanum* has finally emerged. Childhood and old age are not key areas of the Aristotelian reality of the person, as being chiefly conditioned by pupae-like emergence or senile decadence. This "attained" humanity is characterized as the *ethos* of a person. *Ethos* is a fundamental concept for Aristotle's thought, and it is a sought-after goal of much ancient autobiographical writing, seen as the depicting of the *ethos* of the self.[9] Aristotle's ideas were significant for drawing a strong connection in antiquity between a close psychological scrutiny and a program for moral *paideia* (educational philosophy). Philosophy in this genre was fundamental for defining anthropology and for attaining the goal of the *telos* of the *humanum*.

Christian Configurations of the Self

Clearly then, the purpose of Late Antique philosophy, pagan or Christian, in this era (that is, its *skopos*) was to embrace the issue of transcendentals. The Christians, among other schools of the time of the Second Sophistic, had a lively interest in matters of religious philosophy that had been left unresolved by the ancient greats. A prime example of this was Plato's theory of the soul's nature and the shape of its ascent. In terms of the former, Plato had left the philosophical tradition a dominant image of the Soul being somehow like a charioteer, and the way one resolves the problem of the chariot's direction being an *exemplum* of the good life. The soul-chariot is driven by two horses, one black (standing for the appetitive part of the soul, *to epithymitikon*), one white

8. The moral goal was *hexis*—the stable acquisition of virtue; it was seen as the natural expression of *arete*.

9. A key motivation in the first Christian autobiography, St. Gregory the Theologian's *De Vita Sua*.

(standing for the irascible part of the soul, *to thymikon*). The charioteer stands for the reasoning faculty in a human (*to logistikon*) who struggles to control the forces of the soul, especially the more unmanageable black steed. This appetitive soul is the part of human experience and consciousness driven by instinct, desire, and self-reference. The irascible soul is that which seeks nobler and more elevated forms in life. The principle of reason, or adjudication, tries to mediate between the two struggling "drives" that make up the *psyche*. It is a very lively image that held a great sway. It proposes the philosophical life as quintessentially the one which seeks to integrate human faculties, in a moral habituation that privileges higher things over base instincts, exemplifying the Socratic principle that the unexamined life is not worth living.

Now the Byzantine Christians, in the synthetic tradition of the Cappadocian Fathers' muted Origenianism, developed the Platonic psychology in a very distinct way that gave birth, in effect, to a vibrant new form of philosophical anthropology. Into Plato's strongly dyadic view (two horses pulling differently under the attempted mastery of the mind) they introduced more of a genuinely triadic structure to rework from its foundations the doctrine of the soul (*psyche*). While the Apostle Paul often spoke of the binary war of flesh (*sarx*) and spirit (*pneuma*), it was equally noticeable to the Fathers how the New Testament tended to address the issue of the constitution of the human as a triadic correlation of body, soul and spirit. This triad was brought into dialogue with Platonic "psychology" by the Fathers, beginning with Origen, so that the core of the human consciousness now became the lower soul (*epithymitikon*), the higher soul (*thymikon*), and the spiritual intelligence (*Nous*). Writers of the Origenian intellectual tradition—notably Gregory the Theologian, Evagrius Pontike, Maximus the Confessor, Dionysios the Areopagite, and Elias Ekdikos (along with many other monastic theorists)—applied this doctrine pervasively in the Byzantine world's ascetical theory of mystical contemplation. St. Gregory the Theologian habitually calls Christianity in general, and the ascetical life in particular, "our philosophy."

Among the Fathers, the lower soul was seen to be the body consciousness attuned to instinctive life. It had a range of needs and

desires (fight/flight/acquisition) dominated by material concerns. It had also a range of perceptions, moving from simple material awarenesses (hunger, fear) to more elevated sensibilities (empathy, affection). At the top range of the lower soul's *skopos*, it overlapped with the lower range of the middle soul. The middle soul represented a more emotive and more abstracted range of consciousness (dealing in perceptions and deductions and higher questions of motivation), but it was still intimately linked with its lower neighbour—sometimes guiding it, sometimes being led by it. At the middle soul's upper range, however, it was akin to its next higher neighbour in the triad—what the Byzantines addressed as the highest soul, the *nous.* But the idea of the *nous* was substantively redefined in Christian ascetical writing from what it had meant in classical antiquity. It no longer simply connoted intelligence or reason (*logos*)[10]; that form of human ratiocination was seen to reside usually in the upper regions of the middle soul. *Nous* was particularly and distinctively that aspect of graced awareness that constituted a human being most distinctively, and differently from all other created species. For the Byzantine ascetical philosophers, it was the *locus* of the Divine Image in humankind. In its lower range the *nous* would process reflection and thinking, while in its higher ranges it would process transcendental awareness and be the place where the consciousness of the divine image within human consciousness took place and where awareness of God's descent by grace into humanity also registered.

The Byzantine philosophers thus proposed *nous* as the synthetic term covering the dynamic correlation of *logos* and *pneuma*. This reworking of Platonic psychology by the Byzantines into this triadic and flexible view of anthropological constitution, as a system of correlated influences and mediations, gave great dynamism to a new view of human nature and provided a transcendentalism which Plato's theory lacked. If we had more time to explore this, it could be demonstrated that this was none other than an extended patristic theology of the *anastasis* of Christ understood as the

10. It has been disastrously translated as *logos* in too many modern versions.

grace of redemption. Plato's theory was seen by the Fathers as defective largely because he had wished to resolve the correlation (*to syntheton*) of soul and body by the intellective dismissal and eventual physical dissolution of the body. By contrast, this elevation of the material form to graced sacramental stature is an important and lasting contribution of Christian Greek philosophy to the importance of the empirical process; it was chiefly made by the fourth- and fifth-century Greek Fathers, who thus stand out as the first wave of significant Byzantine philosophers, although it is a view that is deepened by the sixth- to tenth-century ascetical writers. Empiricism in their hands, however, is not rendered into material reductionism, but into a vision of the human person as transcendental process of transfiguration.[11]

Following from this, the next major achievement of Byzantine patristic philosophy was the doctrine of personhood. In classical Hellenistic thought, following Aristotle's lead, the concept of the person meant *to idion*: something individual, particular, proper—and (accordingly) eccentric. For Aristotle, we may recall, the individual could not serve as the exemplar of true study: it had to be the species, the collective. The individual was the domain of the eccentric, the peripheral. Once again, the Greek Fathers radically changed this widespread view and, by dint of their relentless focus on matters Christological and Trinitarian (in a wide arc of authors taking one another forward, from Origen, through Athanasius and Gregory the Theologian, to Cyril of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor), they brought forward the notion (and semantic) of personhood (*hypostasis*) to the status of a substantive primary category (and we note that *hypostasis* semantically means "a substantive," that stability which "stands under"). Allying it with their doctrine of the human soul, and attributing the possession of a human soul to the divine Logos made flesh in the God-Man, whose incarnation was thereby a paradigm of the deified regeneration of the human race (*palingennesia, theiosis*), the Greek Fathers were finally able to assert that the Human person was a creature whose transcendence was released from the boundaries of a mortal na-

11. The Orthodox conception of redemption as *theiopoiesis*; see further McGuckin, "Deification in Greek Patristic Thought."

ture, to have once more afforded to it the gift of immortality and the possibility of communion with God. The person (first of all, that of the God-Man whose single divine *Hypostasis* both explained and energized the way the incarnation saved the human race) thus became a concept of immense centrality and importance. It thereby started upon a trajectory which would have incalculable results in the history of Christian civilization. Without the major Byzantine Christological contributions, the idea of personhood may well have left Western civilization as untouched by its allure, as it did (for example) in Asian Buddhism, where it remains stalled in the role of an illusory notion (*Maya*).

The Christian Fathers, in short, combined all three available philosophical models of selfhood creatively. To Plato's idea of ascentive epistemology (wisdom as an uplifting way to achieve identity), they added Aristotle's quest for the definitive *ethos* of a nature as well as Plotinos's concept of the awareness of divine potency as the giving of identity's core in the act of communion. They are driven to this synthetic position by their own twin imperatives, the retelling of the tale of human identity through and in the person of Christ, who is the infinite Logos fully inhominated, whose person is thus necessarily substantive because it carries the weight of the second *hypostasis* of the Godhead borne up by the transfiguration of frail flesh. The doctrine of the Incarnation substantivizes, or hypostatizes, the concept of spiritual personhood as the quintessential ethos of the Self, and the ground of communion between Godhead and Manhood. The Christian Fathers, therefore, creatively synthesized classical Greek philosophy with biblical and Christological imperatives, so as to make a distinctly new philosophico-religious statement.

Though the Greek Fathers are the lead in the Evangelical synthesis of this tradition of selfhood, the Christian revisioning of Plato's psychology goes on throughout the life of Christian Byzantium. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, after the Byzantines had recaptured their capital, the Paleologan emperors presided over a last revival of philosophy. In this late flowering, there was a steady stream of significant commentaries produced on Aristotle, Plato, and the Neoplatonic writings of Proclus. Significant examples are the works of Sophonias, Leo Magentenos,

Theodore Metochites, Nikephoros Choumnos, Nikephoras Gregoras, Plethon (the most radical of the Byzantine Neo-Platonists), Gennadios Scholarios, and Bessarion—the last two of whom bring us into the final era of the last days of the empire, which fell to the Ottomans in May 1453. The course of Byzantine philosophy in the time of the Greek Fathers shows a wide range of theologians who were readers of a large and broad library of philosophic texts, including Plato and Aristotle as staples, but also the Stoics, Pythagoreans, and elements of Cynic diatribe. Their greatest achievement, philosophically speaking, was their adaptation of the idea of the self to be a hypostatic force, a sacramental reality capable of bearing the weight of a substantive, and of serving dynamically as a transcendental point of encounter with the divine.

What This May Mean in our Own Time

What might the patristic Byzantine reformulations of the idea of self have to suggest to us today? One of our current societal problems is that this doctrine of selfhood has been profoundly forgotten in a theological curriculum that, since the Enlightenment, has progressively neglected the dominant Christian ascetical tradition, where it is lodged, in favour of apologetic dogmatic theology and pastoral studies. One way forward would be to restore Ascetical Theology to its rightful place as the major stream of thought behind classical Christianity. This would suggest that Christian history is not the record of this or that doctrinal controversy; it is, rather, a sustained essay on soteriology, with personhood as the primary *locus* where the human encounters the divine and is redeemed by the communion. This is obviously not simply an individualistic approach to theology but contains within its core idea of communion the notions of ethical and social transfiguration. Such a view of communion as a fundament of personhood would serve to correct a widespread malaise of narcissism that has crept into secular, non-religious reflection on doctrines of the rights of persons.

This leads us to another great problem, for, having given the idea of the person as substantive to Western civilization, Christian

theorists neglected to re-engage with it when, from the early twentieth century onwards, the concept was radically reinterpreted by psychological deconstructionist views. These medical therapeutic approaches, from Freud onwards to our own era, when psychiatry has more or less become a profoundly "chemical" field, argued that the human self is a working model that (often) goes wrong. This brought a reductionist view centre-stage, one that drove out the former transcendentalism from which the idea was first born. Worse than this, perhaps, this modern idea of the self, or the person seeking therapeutic redress, has evolved into the concept of the person with a range of rights over and against other persons. The idea has thus become oppositional, and narcissistically driven; whereas of old, in Christian patristic hands, it was conceived as a *kenotic*[12] gift from the Lord of humility that sought to explain the principle of social communion. In other words, its premises have today been more or less drastically reversed.

The modern human rights agenda, stripped of its transcendentalist basis, however, becomes morally unsustainable. In the Christian system, the self was a critically important and sacred thing, precisely because the person was a representation of the covenant of God with humanity. As we may recall, the key to the Byzantine genius in reinterpreting Aristotle was to redefine empiricism as no longer meaning material reductionism. The close empirical analysis of the self, for them, demonstrated that the essence of achieved human personhood was the observation that the human nature was not a closed *ousia*, such that we were locked into our *genus*. Quite the contrary, it was posed as an ever energized stretching out (*epektasis*) that is the very root of all our brilliant and multifaceted culture yet transcends even that to impress upon our root human consciousness a transcendental force that makes us ask not only what it is that is, but why it is. This "why?" is the dynamic move that at once explains the ascentive thrust of human

12. Derived from *kenosis*, self-emptying out (Phil 2:6–11) that motivated the divine Logos to assume humanity as a sacrificial gift of self to liberate enslaved selves. Modern thought of rights of persons has very little left within it of this *phronema* of the Lord of Glory assuming humility as the vehicle of his majesty.

personhood—the strange issue of the qualitative nature of existence[13]—as well as (for Christian philosophy) the quest for that Person who is at once the Why, being the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Byzantine philosophy demands human personhood be seen as essentially *teleotic*. Unlike Aristotle, it goes further in explaining what *Telos* involves, for it knows who *Telos* is.

The human rights agenda, as we have it today in all its fragility, is such a powerfully important force for the good, that surely it is critical that we should not let it sink (as unquestionably it is sinking) because the transcendental imperative it was first designed to express has been muffled and obscured by reductionist simplification. Christians, who once gave this idea to western civilization as a gift from the Fathers, need to be more efficiently heard redrafting those premises we once brought to the making of Europe, the concept of spiritual personhood at the core of moral and societal values.

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13. The truly distinctive aspect of the human *genus* on earth: its sense of the moral emerging from the sense of worship.