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# Autonomy and Church Membership: Resolving Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Dilemma through John Zizioulas's Ecclesiology

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## Abstract

This article explores the theological implications of being a church member in a contemporary context that highly values individual autonomy, by engaging with John Zizioulas's ecclesiological framework. Initially, the article elucidates the notion of the 'autonomous self', drawing upon the intellectual contributions and life experiences of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It posits that Rousseau's dilemma of losing self or suffering from loneliness represents the challenge faced by those holding this autonomous anthropological assumption. The article subsequently employs John Zizioulas's constructs of ontological personhood and communion ecclesiology as counterpoints to this quandary. It contends that Zizioulas's trinitarian-informed theological anthropology offers an ecclesial means to surmount this existential dilemma, arguing that church membership is an act of participating in divine and familial communion.

## Keywords

Jean-Jacques Rousseau – John Zizioulas – communion – autonomous self – ecclesiology – ontological personhood

### Introduction: Leo's Dilemma

Leo, an 18-year-old youth, has been attending church since childhood but has not deeply engaged with the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup> Despite accompanying his parents to church, he lacks close friendships within the congregation and feels somewhat disconnected. Recently, the church initiated a spiritual mentorship programme pairing experienced group leaders with less-involved young members for regular one-on-one discussions. The aim is to foster inter-generational relationships and to provide guidance in faith and life. Leo is ambivalent about participating: on one hand, he desires greater involvement in church life; on the other, he fears that his mentor might disapprove of his current lifestyle or compel him to undertake additional church responsibilities. He is hesitant to modify his own preferences in order to accommodate others, but he feels isolated and somewhat lonely without deeper engagement in church activities. How should Leo navigate church membership in an era that values individual autonomy?

### The Concept of Autonomy and the Method of Theological Reflection

It is helpful to clarify key terms in the article here. In an 'age of autonomy' it is believed appropriate that each person should legislate or rule their own self regarding social commitment, morality and other aspects of existence.<sup>2</sup> For the autonomous self, matters such as religion, morality and the social fabric may be good but are only meaningful when they are accepted by individuals themselves.<sup>3</sup> This implicit anthropological presupposition often underlies people's daily decisions, in which *self* is the directing and determining agent.

This article seeks the theological meaning of being a church member in such an age through a conversation between Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the late Orthodox Metropolitan John Zizioulas. The article adopts Paul Tillich's 'method of correlation' in theological reflection, in which the questions raised by the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, are answered by Christian theology.<sup>4</sup> It

1 This scenario is hypothetical but typifies a situation that commonly occurs.

2 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 192–5.

3 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 195.

4 Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), pp. 154–6. The primary focus of this article remains on using Zizioulas to respond to Zizioulas.

will first demonstrate that Rousseau's concept of the autonomous self presents us with both the attraction and the limitations of modern anthropology which appear in our imagined scenario. By listening to this early modern thinker, we can better understand the contemporary. Then, the article will introduce Zizioulas's constructions of ontological personhood and ecclesiology. The thesis is that Zizioulas addresses the dilemma left unanswered by Rousseau by offering an alternative theological anthropology to the modern autonomous self. With these insights, we are informed that being a church member implies being in communion with God and others.<sup>5</sup>

## Jean-Jacques Rousseau

### *Why Rousseau?*

The Swiss-French *philosophe* and political thinker of the Enlightenment era, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) is an influential figure who stands at the beginning of the historical trajectory of the autonomous self. In terms of the concept of the modern self, Charles Taylor states that Rousseau is a 'crucial influence' for all the thinkers he reviews in *Sources of the Self* (1989). Rousseau is the 'starting point' of the shift in which modern culture turns to 'deeper inwardness' and 'radical autonomy'.<sup>6</sup> Rousseau's belief that 'individual sincerity' is the key to answering life questions started the 'post-Enlightenment individualist agenda of self-determining self-construction', which has lasted until today.<sup>7</sup> His persevering advocacy of individual sentiment inspired his successors, the Romantics, in whose thoughts institutional authority and Christian morality were replaced (according to Taylor) by personal preference and ecstatic aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, although Rousseau wrote in the eighteenth century, many of his ideas are more attuned to the modern age than are those of his contemporaries.<sup>9</sup>

5 Due to the limited space, the subsequent programme of *how* to solve the problem cannot be made here.

6 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 356, 363. Although Houston and Zimmermann criticise Taylor for dismissing the voice of Christian thinkers, their work lacks the voice of modern Orthodox. This article helps to fill that gap by considering the thought of Zizioulas. See Jens Zimmermann and James M. Houston, *Sources of the Christian Self: A Cultural History of Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018).

7 Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 118–27.

8 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 369; Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), pp. 105–61.

9 Paul Avis, *Theology and the Enlightenment: A Critical Enquiry into Enlightenment Theology and Its Reception* (London: T&T Clark, 2023), p. 190.

This part of the article argues for two things: first, that the assumption of an autonomous self underlies virtually all of Rousseau's works and determines his treatment of politics and education;<sup>10</sup> second, that with this anthropological axiom, Rousseau inevitably falls into a dilemma of losing freedom or living lonely. Moreover, this dilemma explains the difficulty the teenager in our scenario faces, and that requires a resolution.

### *The State of Nature and the Goodness of Humanity*

The state of nature is Rousseau's speculated realisation of human autonomy. In this state, people depend only on things in the natural world but not on other people and thus are free from inequality.<sup>11</sup> In his *On the Origins of Human Inequality* (1755), Rousseau states that the 'savage man' is simply satisfied with the resources from the rivers and trees, where he finds food and a place to sleep.<sup>12</sup> He is subjected to 'few passions and sufficient unto himself' and is a stranger to war and social connection.<sup>13</sup> No class or other forms of inequality exist here; as Rousseau later mentioned in *Emile* (1762), 'nature makes neither the prince, the rich man, nor the nobleman'.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Rousseau extends this understanding of human life in nature to the nature of humanity, stating that the natural man 'lives for himself' since 'he is the unit, the whole'.<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth noted that the concept of nature in eighteenth-century Europe is 'humanized,' in which nature 'has been put to rights and formed in accordance with man's sensibility'.<sup>16</sup> This concept of nature in Rousseau's thought subsequently became 'very simply man himself'.<sup>17</sup> For Rousseau, the goodness of nature is reflected in the goodness of the 'human heart' where 'there is no original sin'.<sup>18</sup> And when one lives according to one's own heart, one is living according to the goodness of nature. This belief in people as autonomous entities in their natural condition provides an anthropological foundation that contrasts with the Christian tradition in terms of morality. For

10 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 14; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1993), p. 2.

11 David P. Gauthier, *Rousseau: The Sentiment of Existence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 28–30.

12 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, p. 26.

13 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, p. 51.

14 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 188.

15 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 7.

16 Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background & History* (London: SCM Press, 2001), pp. 41–2.

17 Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 213.

18 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 66.

Christianity, human nature is damaged and thus requires an external divine force to rescue it. Carl Trueman makes a comparison between the *Confessions* of Augustine and the *Confessions* of Rousseau.<sup>19</sup> Young Augustine, motivated by the enjoyment of sin, stole the pears and wasted them. Young Rousseau, however, motivated by sympathy, stole the asparagus to help M. Verrat. It is debated whether Rousseau recalls this story with Augustine's work in mind.<sup>20</sup> Yet the significance of morality is that the environment plays a passive role in Augustine's version; it merely provides the opportunity for original sin to function. However, in Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782), his first encounter with stealing stemmed from the desire of a pure, innocent heart to help others. It was later that the deformed working environment depraved Rousseau, so he learned to commit the crime of stealing from his employer's house.<sup>21</sup> In contrast with Augustine, who longs to be saved by God from his sinful nature, Rousseau pursues the 'sacred voice of nature' as the 'divine spark within us' that keeps us from selfish and worldly influence.<sup>22</sup> This natural goodness for Rousseau was claimed, as Paul Avis puts it, through 'introspection'.<sup>23</sup> The present section has shown that the ideal way of living in Rousseau's thought is a person who fully retains and performs in accord with their inner autonomous nature. Consequently, there is no space for human inequality, no temptation to sin, and no need for external salvific forces in his vision of the state of nature.

### *The Fall*

So, does Rousseau not have the concept of a fall into sin? He has one implicitly, but he attributes the fall to the state of civil society, rather than to spiritual forces. Rousseau often adopts the concept of freedom to express the self-sufficiency of human nature in relation to social interaction.<sup>24</sup> At the beginning of his *The Social Contract* (1762), the famous phrase 'man was born free' is followed by 'and everywhere he is in chains'.<sup>25</sup> This statement implies the omnipresent

19 Trueman, *The Modern Self*, pp. 109–10.

20 Although Grimsley argue against the connections between them, he fails to consider Rousseau's *Letter to Beaumont* which has several references to Augustine. See Ronald Grimsley, 'The Modern Self in Rousseau's *Confessions*: A Reply to St. Augustine (Review)', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23.4 (1985), pp. 592–3. And Christopher Kelly, 'Rousseau's Confessions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 305.

21 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 32–3.

22 Ronald Grimsley, *Rousseau and the Religious Quest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 61.

23 Avis, *Theology and the Enlightenment*, p. 100.

24 Gauthier, *Rousseau*, p. 27.

25 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Political Economy*; and *The Social Contract* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 45.

power of a master-slave relationship in society. The original founder of civil society was the one who ‘enclosed a piece of land [and] thought of saying, “This is mine”’.<sup>26</sup> Obtaining private property leads first to a dependency among people, then mastery.<sup>27</sup> Eventually, this authority becomes authoritarianism as the final stage of an unequal society.<sup>28</sup> Even the arts, sciences, and other human products are tools used by society to enslave humankind.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Rousseau’s critique of mastery is not only about economic and class asymmetry. One loses the freedom of nature once living according to an alien will. This is true for the privileged as well as for the oppressed.<sup>30</sup> Thus, ‘[c]ivilized man is born and dies a slave’.<sup>31</sup> To sum up, freedom of nature is taken away by society; people, both rich and poor, are no longer living for themselves but for the will of others. The state of nature is an idealised past, yet one to which it is impossible to return.<sup>32</sup>

### *The Objectives of Education and Politics*

Based on Rousseau’s understanding of human nature and depravity, his treatment of education and politics will now be addressed in order to introduce his dilemma, which will be presented in the next section. Although Rousseau has nostalgic feelings for nature, he does not advocate for anarchism. Based on his anthropological assumption, in terms of education, Rousseau aims to raise a child into a ‘man’ who lives according to his true nature and not in accord with fallen society.<sup>33</sup> Rousseau’s fictionalised character Emile ‘thinks not of others but of himself ... he is alone in the midst of human society, he depends on himself alone’.<sup>34</sup> In terms of community life, Rousseau’s social theory aims to realise people’s autonomy by finding a form of association in which one will ‘obey himself alone’ and ‘remain as free as before’.<sup>35</sup> In this society, man can ‘think only his own thoughts’.<sup>36</sup> The concept of thinking

26 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, p. 55.

27 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, pp. 52–3.

28 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, p. 79.

29 His early publication, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750) set this tone for his lifelong writing.

30 ‘Whoever is master cannot be free.’ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to Beaumont, Letters Written from the Mountain, and Related Writings* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, 2001), p. 261.

31 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 11.

32 Rousseau, *On Inequality*, p. 14.

33 Geraint Parry, ‘Thinking One’s Own Thoughts: Autonomy and the Citizen’, in *Rousseau and Liberty*, ed. Robert Wokler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 106.

34 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 204.

35 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, pp. 54–5.

36 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 67.

one's own thoughts appears in both *Emile* and *The Social Contract* as the goal of education and politics. Its meaning is clearer if we recall that Rousseau considers the loss of freedom to mean having one's will imposed upon by others, as in the *Letters from the Mountain* (1764), where he states that liberty 'consists less in doing what you want than in not being subject to the will of another; it consists further in not subjecting another's will to our own'.<sup>37</sup> In short, an ideal education or social system results in the respect and protection of the individual's autonomy. In practice, that means that one's will would not be subordinated to that of others, nor theirs to one's own.

Rousseau suggests some practical means to achieve such an ideal. For example, the pedagogy of *Émile* is conducted not by delivering information but by stimulating his curiosity. The tutor raises questions to provoke *Émile* to search for answers by himself. Although sometimes *Émile* does ask questions, the tutor's answers aim to trigger further curiosity rather than to satisfy it.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, the tutor appears in front of *Émile* as a companion rather than an authority. When *Émile* was learning the skill of carpentry, the tutor learned with him.<sup>39</sup> Obviously, for the sake of maintaining the autonomous gift of nature, Rousseau resists imposing external values on *Émile*, otherwise *Émile* would learn to rely on alien authority and would be 'a mere plaything of other people's thoughts'.<sup>40</sup> The tutor must not give precepts since 'only one's autonomous discoveries are to be trusted'.<sup>41</sup>

However, *Émile*'s independence is only apparent. To protect and nourish the natural character of children, Rousseau states that '[f]rom the outset raise a wall round your child's soul'.<sup>42</sup> For example, the tutor controlled the environment, so when *Émile* got lost in a forest, it was a lesson for him to use stars to find the way home. *Émile* could run barefoot since the sharp glass on the ground had been checked and removed by the tutor.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the tutor internalises his own will in *Émile*, so 'no doubt he ought only to do what he wants, but he ought to want to do nothing but what you want him to do. He should never take a step you have not foreseen, nor utter a word you could not foretell'.<sup>44</sup> He is thinking his own thoughts, but they are from the tutor. Here,

37 Rousseau, *Letters from the Mountain*, p. 260.

38 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 224.

39 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 196. It is worth noting that two model teachers in Rousseau's early life, M. Gaime and M. Gatier, were both these kinds of characters. See *Confessions*, p. 88, p. 106.

40 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 157.

41 Parry, 'Thinking One's Own Thoughts,' p. 104.

42 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 6.

43 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 123.

44 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 100.

we see a controlling figure as the ‘minister of nature’ who only speaks nature’s voice rather than his own.<sup>45</sup> Since this figure fully represents nature, others can surrender their wills to this figure without losing their freedom. A similar case can be seen in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), where the miserable Saint-Preux, who is tortured by his memory of young love, seeks help from M. Wolmar. The latter arranges the situations, forcing Saint-Preux to face himself, and eventually to be liberated from delusion.<sup>46</sup> In terms of social theory, the society composed of individuals in contract functions by laws, which are made according to the general will. Although the specific content of this general will is unclear in Rousseau’s theory, its supreme power is unquestionable.<sup>47</sup> Because the general will reflects the common good and the will of all, it exists to preserve freedom within society and possesses an authority that transcends all. Those who contravene it may be legally compelled to adhere to it, thereby being ‘forced to be free’.<sup>48</sup> Again, as in his educational theory, we see a robust controlling force that aims to protect individual freedom. Rousseau even states, in some earlier versions of *The Social Contract*, that this protection under contract is better than the state of nature.<sup>49</sup>

This point leads us to see the paradox in Rousseau’s ideas, which has often brought him criticism. On the one hand, his championship of the innate nature and freedom of individuals is attractive, while on the other, his employment of a highly controlling method to ensure that one’s will remains undisturbed by others is questionable.<sup>50</sup> The question is whether this kind of subjective independence is true freedom. Is the ‘appearance of freedom’ fake freedom?<sup>51</sup>

45 Geraint Parry, ‘*Émile*: Learning to Be Men, Women, and Citizens’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, ed. Patrick Riley, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 251.

46 Judith N. Shklar, ‘Rousseau’s Images of Authority (Especially in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 163–9.

47 Anthony Gottlieb, *The Dream of Enlightenment: The Rise of Modern Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), p. 235.

48 Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, p. 58.

49 The version published by Oxford University Press which this article cites does not have this paragraph. See *The Social Contract*, p. 70. But see the early French version: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social: ou principes du droit politique* (Suivant la copie imprimée à Amsterdam: Chez M. M.Rey, 1762), p. 44.

50 Regarding the tension between autonomy and obedience to law, see John Hope Mason, ‘Forced to Be Free’, in *Rousseau and Liberty*, ed. Wokler, pp. 121–5. Regarding the tension between autonomy and heteronomy, see Parry, ‘Thinking One’s Own Thoughts’, p. 99.

51 Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 100.

### *The Dilemma of Rousseau*

This section explores the dilemma arising from Rousseau's assumption of human autonomy: the tension between surrendering one's will and sacrificing freedom, or retaining one's will while suffering from isolation. The section begins by addressing the former, building on the previous section's concluding query. Is *Émile's* subjective independence freedom? For the later Rousseau, the answer was negative. The way Rousseau describes *Émile's* freedom (as described in the previous section) has a parallel in *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (1780), a work of his late years and published posthumously.<sup>52</sup> The difference is that in the latter work Rousseau talks about his miserable destiny, surrounded by imagined enemies and he himself 'can neither say a word, nor take a step, nor lift a finger unless they know it and want it'.<sup>53</sup> As seen above, the 'appearance of freedom' for *Émile* was advocated, yet the late Rousseau, who 'appears to be free', is a slave.<sup>54</sup> *Émile* failed as a thought experiment. According to Rousseau's expectations, *Émile* should grow up to maturity; however, his reliance on his tutor precludes him from achieving true independence. In *Émile et Sophie* (1783), as *Émile* fails to develop an independent sense of self, his marriage ultimately disintegrates in the absence of his tutor's guidance.<sup>55</sup>

As a church member, Leo in the opening story is concerned about this: he is afraid of losing his sense of self and freedom when conforming his will to that of the adults. He knows that even when adults grant him choices, these options are pre-filtered. Entrusting oneself to others for a subjective sense of freedom seems not genuine freedom. This may explain why Rousseau himself did not choose this path in life. He entrusted himself neither to a life tutor, nor to an omnipotent figure like M. Wolmar, nor to a group of friends. Instead, he opted for the other side of the dilemma: refusing to surrender his will to anyone, and consequently facing loneliness. In his later years, he led a tumultuous life marked by governmental persecution. Despite David Hume aiding his escape to Britain, Rousseau suspected betrayal. He severed ties with the *philosophes* who contributed to the *Encyclopédie* such as Diderot and he had no friends. Childless, as he had placed all five of his offspring in the Paris foundling hospital, and estranged from the beloved Madame de Warens, he was plagued by psychological torment.<sup>56</sup> Rousseau maintained his early critique of human civilisation, science, art, and academia, refusing to yield his will to anyone.

52 Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Transparency and Obstruction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 217.

53 Rousseau, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques, Dialogues*, pp. 39–40.

54 Rousseau, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques, Dialogues*, p. 36.

55 Gauthier, *Rousseau*, pp. 48–9.

56 Barth, *Protestant Theology*, pp. 191–6.

Since he successfully distanced himself from all of these, he never experienced a true sense of belonging.

Should our young church member emulate Rousseau by not surrendering his will to anyone while maintaining a sceptical stance towards the adults in the church, he would struggle to find his own voice amidst a cacophony of voices, trusting none. He would experience the pervasive loneliness among contemporary youth in the church, appearing free and independent, yet internally isolated.<sup>57</sup> Eventually, he would try to find deep relationships outside the church or even outside Christianity. Rousseau's personal dilemma typifies the quandary faced in the age of autonomy. Operating under the premise of the self as an autonomous entity, one is confined to either surrendering one's will at the expense of freedom, or retaining will but enduring isolation. Rousseau's philosophy exemplifies the former, while his life illustrates the latter.

In the following section, John Zizioulas's theology will be employed to confront the dilemma of the autonomous self as delineated by Rousseau. I will demonstrate how Zizioulas transcends this dilemma by reconceptualising the foundation of the human person, elucidating pathways to attain freedom through relationships within an ecclesial framework, yet without sacrificing one's otherness.

### John Zizioulas

Karl Barth observes that theologians often critique Rousseau for his Pelagian soteriology and moral shortcomings, overlooking his pivotal role at the intersection of ages and his innovative anthropology.<sup>58</sup> To engage with Rousseau meaningfully, one should thus extend beyond moral decisions to engage with his presuppositions concerning human autonomy. In this connection, the voice of Zizioulas is helpful. Zizioulas 'acknowledges [freedom] as his deepest theological preoccupation'.<sup>59</sup> Though both focus on the theme of freedom, a difference between Zizioulas and Rousseau is that Zizioulas sees freedom as a theological-ontological matter rather than a matter of making decisions. With this concern in mind, Zizioulas constructs an ecclesiology grounded on a theological anthropology informed by the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>60</sup> This article

57 David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), p. 175.

58 Barth, *Protestant Theology*, pp. 207–18.

59 Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 146.

60 Paul McPartlan, 'John Zizioulas', in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 467–86.

will now set out two arguments. Firstly, this anthropology helps us to address Rousseau's dilemma. Secondly, this ecclesiology provides us with directions for addressing the contemporary issues of losing freedom in church or being lonely outside.

### *The Concept of Person in Light of the Trinitarian Personhood*

The following two sections intend to justify the first argument – the relevance of Zizioulas' theological anthropology. In his influential work on ecclesiology, *Being as Communion* (1985), Zizioulas states that '*historically* as well as *existentially* the concept of the person is indissolubly bound up with theology'.<sup>61</sup> Citing the contribution of the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers, in whose doctrine of the Trinity the *hypostasis*, the basic mode of existence, is no longer identified with substance but with the person, Zizioulas argues that the person is no longer an adjunct of being or substance.<sup>62</sup> Rather, the person is the 'constitutive element' of beings.<sup>63</sup> The substance of God never exists in a 'naked state' without the hypostasis. Instead, the divine substance 'is consequently the being of God only because it has these three modes of existence'.<sup>64</sup> Zizioulas considers the divine persons as three modes of existence and the Father as the cause of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit. The first person transcends the ontological necessity of substance by being God as *Father*, freely begetting the *Son* and bringing forth the *Spirit* while being conditioned by them.<sup>65</sup> This demonstrates the ontological freedom of God. Zizioulas refers to the 'ecstatic character' of God, whose 'being is identical with an act of communion'.<sup>66</sup> God is Trinity 'not because the divine *nature* is ecstatic but because the Father as a *person* freely wills this communion'.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in this trinitarian communion, there is absolute otherness between the three persons, yet they cannot be conceived apart from each other.<sup>68</sup>

61 John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 27. Italics original.

62 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 36. Also see John Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), pp. 49–51. For a critique of Zizioulas's understanding of the distinction between 'substance' and 'person' in Patristics, see Lucian Turcescu, "Person" versus "Individual," and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa, *Modern Theology* 18.4 (2002), pp. 527–39. For Zizioulas's response, see John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), pp. 171–7.

63 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 39.

64 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 40–1.

65 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 44.

66 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 44.

67 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 44. Italics original.

68 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 5.

How does this feature about God relate to mankind? Zizioulas believes that because God's freedom is grounded 'not in His nature but in His personal existence', there is hope for human beings, who do not share God's nature, nevertheless to become truly free persons.<sup>69</sup> God as communion is seen as the model for human personhood and for the Church.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the concept of person or hypostasis is essentially theological and ontological in terms of anthropology. Theologically, it is inconceivable without understanding it through the hypostasis of the divine persons. Ontologically, it is the decisive definition of the very being of humans. It is not that I first have a substantial *self* and then seek relationships with others, but I am who I am through relationships.

The first distinction between Zizioulas and Rousseau emerges here: whereas Rousseau posits that individuals exist autonomously before developing relationships (so *Émile* aims to become a 'man' before entering society), Zizioulas contends that human 'identit[ies] emerge only in relation to other beings'.<sup>71</sup> We do not first exist as an isolated self and then seek relations, but are recognised through our relations and 'defined through otherness'.<sup>72</sup> The argument will turn back to this comparison later with more elaboration of Zizioulas's theology in the next section.

This section will now consider the theology of creation and fall in Zizioulas's thought in dialogue with Rousseau's concept of nature and fall. Rousseau's dilemma will then be addressed, based on this dialogue. For Zizioulas, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* implies that God creates the world out of nothing as a free act.<sup>73</sup> The ecstatic character or love of God results in the creation of the world in order that it may have communion with God.<sup>74</sup> In his *Communion and Otherness* (2006), Zizioulas further unpacked the anthropological implication of *creatio ex nihilo*, stating that God calls Adam into a relationship. This invitation across the absolute distinction between the Creator and the creature grants Adam otherness from God. By responding with a 'yes' to God's invitation, Adam affirms being other than God in an ontological sense.<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting that Zizioulas emphasises that this call cannot be launched 'automatically' in the sense of human 'self-affirmation or self-existence', but can only be initiated by God.<sup>76</sup> Although this is an ontological call, it does have

69 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 44.

70 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 5.

71 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 39.

72 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 39.

73 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 39.

74 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 46.

75 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 16–17, pp. 41–2.

76 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 41–3.

a practical consequence, which is ‘to exist in the way God exists.’<sup>77</sup> Since God lives in *perichoresis* (the dynamic circumincession of the divine persons) and creates the world for communion in an ecstatic act, we, as the images of God, by living the ecstatic way God lives, live out our ‘true nature’ according to God’s design.<sup>78</sup>

Here, we observe another distinct divergence between Rousseau and Zizioulas. For Rousseau, human nature is meant to remain autonomous, which seems to have an isolating effect, whereas Zizioulas contends that true human nature is realised by participating in communion according to the divine design. Human beings derive their existence and otherness from God. The Fall represents a situation where humans elevate themselves as the ultimate reference of existence, thereby rejecting communion with both God and others. In this context, one falls from being a ‘person’ to becoming an ‘individual.’<sup>79</sup> Zizioulas borrows this distinction between person and individual from the Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev.<sup>80</sup> ‘Personhood’ signifies an otherness that exists in communion; a person enjoys ‘freedom simply to be yourself’—yet not freedom *from* others, but freedom *for* others.<sup>81</sup> Conversely, the fallen individual becomes ‘an entity independent ontologically from other human beings.’<sup>82</sup> He further posits that remaining within the confines of ontological necessity results in death for the individual.<sup>83</sup> According to Zizioulas, eternal death is the outcome of isolating oneself from others, as corroborated by the teachings of the Desert Fathers.<sup>84</sup> Since the individualism engendered by the Fall is an ontological issue, it transcends mere moral rectification and requires a ‘new birth’, providing a segue into Zizioulas’s ecclesiology.<sup>85</sup>

Both Rousseau and Zizioulas regard the freedom inherent in nature as the act of being oneself. However, for Rousseau, this freedom signifies an existence uninfluenced by the considerations of others. Conversely, Zizioulas’s theology of creation posits that human nature is intrinsically designed in and for communion. Concerning the notion of a fall, Rousseau interprets it as an external intrusion on one’s will, while Zizioulas, in contrast, views the fall as

77 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 165.

78 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 64–5, pp. 165–6.

79 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 164.

80 Norman Russell, *Fellow Workers with God: Orthodox Thinking on Theosis* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009), p. 124. Also see Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 164, 226.

81 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 9.

82 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 159.

83 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 105.

84 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 3.

85 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 3.

the egocentric reorientation whereby one perceives oneself as the ultimate point of existence.

Here, Rousseau's dilemma, which presupposes humans as isolated and autonomous, choosing whether and when to engage with others, offers our young man a false choice between allowing external wills to intrude upon him or remaining in isolation. Zizioulas challenges this privileging of self over otherness in his critique of Western 'consciousness-centred philosophy'. He traces the lineage from Augustine's embrace of Plato, through the Cartesian influence on modern philosophy, to the psychological turn towards the self in the works of Sigmund Freud as examples of fallen individualism that considers the self as 'thinking its own thoughts'.<sup>86</sup> Zizioulas states that such an 'autonomous self' problematically blurs ontological distinctions between humans and animals, both endowed with functional consciousness.<sup>87</sup> Zizioulas reveals this dilemma to be illusory by asserting that human ontology is fundamentally relational. The created self can never be understood as a naked substance without the mode of existence, that is, in communion with others. 'It is the other and our relationship with [them] that gives us our identity, our otherness, making us "who we are," that is, persons.'<sup>88</sup>

### *A Communion Ecclesiology*

This section substantiates the second argument, positing that Zizioulas's ecclesiology, grounded in trinitarian personhood, offers solutions to contemporary church issues of losing freedom or being lonely and feeling alienated. Initially, I explicate Zizioulas's treatment of the concept of new birth within the ecclesial context. Unlike Rousseau, for whom the transition of human beings from natural status to societal status does not entail a foundational change (as the natural goodness remains),<sup>89</sup> Zizioulas situates the Fall within an ontological framework that necessitates rebirth. Baptism effects an ontological transformation in personhood. Believers begin to participate in the holy communion of the triune God.<sup>90</sup> This communion finds its tangible expression in the Church, where the previous and fatal 'biological hypostasis' is supplanted by 'the hypostasis of ecclesial existence'.<sup>91</sup> 'Ecclesial

86 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 43–7.

87 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 210–11.

88 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 166.

89 Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 208.

90 Philip Rosato SJ, 'The Ordination of the Baptized: The Laity as an Order of the Church', in *The Theology of John Zizioulas*, ed. Douglas Knight (Abingdon, Oxon., UK: Routledge, 2007), p. 161.

91 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 53.

being is bound to the very being of God.<sup>92</sup> An individual becomes a person through membership of the church, by taking on God's relational way of being as an 'image of God'.<sup>93</sup>

For Zizioulas, salvific transformation coincides with ecclesial belonging. It is within the local church that the baptised person encounters the 'whole Christ', manifested in the Eucharist. And communion within the local church has intrinsic value in terms of the communion of saints. Unlike the Roman Catholic tendency to understand each local church as part a member of a universal entity, Zizioulas views each local congregation as a 'Catholic Church' or 'whole church' by virtue of the presence of the whole Christ.<sup>94</sup> Consequently, the experience of new birth in the local church gains full significance through communion with God and the universal ecclesial body.

As in Rousseau's ideal society, Zizioulas's vision of communion comprises free persons and serves to enhance their freedom.<sup>95</sup> However, unlike Rousseau, who aims to preserve individual autonomy, Zizioulas's ecclesial framework encourages persons to 'love everyone and everything that exists'.<sup>96</sup> Being informed by the ecstatic character of trinitarian personhood, the human ecclesial hypostasis willingly 'break[s] one's will' with a 'free submission to the will of another'.<sup>97</sup> To love others, we must submit our will. Our young Leo may avoid the problem of loneliness and alienation if he responds to the invitation. But, does he lose his identity within the church? The answer is both affirmative and negative.

In the affirmative sense, upon entering communion, what one relinquishes is the illusion of individual autonomy—the naïve belief that the self is entirely self-governing, impervious to external influences at both ontological and experiential levels. Such illusions dissipate upon joining the church. Thus, when Leo decides to commit to ecclesial communion, what is shed is his individualistic self. Moreover, it is not only the youth who might harbour presupposed notions of autonomy; elders within the church may share similar presuppositions. If the adults within the church operate under an anthropology akin to Rousseau's, the outcome manifests as a struggle over whose will should prevail, the youth's or theirs. Therefore, both the young person and the adult

92 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 15.

93 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 15.

94 John Zizioulas, *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop during the First Three Centuries* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001), pp. 108–13.

95 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 18.

96 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 76.

97 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 166.

need to give up the modern anthropological assumption of autonomous selfhood.

As for the negative sense, the church is not only an institution with an authority over Leo that requires him to obey but also a 'way of being'.<sup>98</sup> Each divine person within the triune communion is distinct, informing our conviction that the otherness of each human being must be upheld. When both Leo and adults adopt a view of human relations in the church that is informed by trinitarian personhood, they understand that participating in ecclesial relationships does not negate anyone's identity. Rather, it affirms one's true personhood through divine communion. Each person is needed and is identified by one's existence rather than by one's qualities or capacities.<sup>99</sup> Leo is not accepted based on performance, appearance, personality or any external conditions; rather, he is accepted simply for who he is. As Matthew 16:25 says, 'For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' Self-identity and true freedom are found not in individual autonomy but in the Christian way of life. '[T]he person who dies to self in discipleship to Jesus will discover life in this fundamental sense.' However, 'those persons who try selfishly to guard their existence ... will tragically end up losing the very thing they tried to protect.'<sup>100</sup>

### *Some Critiques of Zizioulas*

This section considers some critiques of Zizioulas which are relevant to our discussion. One critique centres on ethics. Paul McPartlan contends that Zizioulas fails to enrich the Orthodox tradition by developing the ethical dimension of ecclesiology despite acknowledging the absence of such a dimension.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, Scott MacDougall criticises Zizioulas's ecclesiology for its lack of a viable ethical framework and its failure to apply the truth of communion to broader social contexts owing to an over-realised eschatology.<sup>102</sup>

In response, it may be said that Zizioulas deliberately refrains from employing the term 'moral commandment' as the impetus for Christian practice since he believes that ontological transformation inherently precipitates ethical alterations.<sup>103</sup> Accordingly, he uses the term 'consequence' to delineate actions

98 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 15.

99 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 111–12.

100 Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*. Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33 B (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2008), p. 484.

101 McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, p. 298.

102 Scott MacDougall, 'More than Communion: Toward an Eschatological Ecclesiology' (PhD Thesis: Fordham University, New York, 2014), pp. 192–7.

103 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 57.

informed by trinitarian personhood, such as loving others.<sup>104</sup> For Zizioulas, love is actualised within the ecclesial framework, as the church serves to ‘transcend exclusivism’, embracing those previously overlooked.<sup>105</sup> While he may not have outlined systematically how to implement the ethics of his ontological ecclesiology, and may even avoid the term ‘ethics’ to preclude the misconception that virtuous behaviour can be enacted without ontological transformation, he certainly provides ethical direction rooted in trinitarian theology. For example, young Leo and the adults should contemplate their community life and assess whether they have drawn appropriate consequences with regard to their approach to those in the neighbourhood of their church.

Another point of contention pertains to clerical authority and communal life. Miroslav Volf disputes Zizioulas’s undue emphasis on the bishop’s constitutive role in the church, arguing that this focus stems from Zizioulas’s concept of the Father’s monarchy in the Trinity. The Father constitutes the Trinity, while he himself is only conditioned by the Son and the Spirit.<sup>106</sup> Volf contends that this asymmetry between the ‘one’ and ‘many’ manifests itself in ecclesial structures, relegating the laity to passive roles in Eucharistic practices presided over by the bishop.<sup>107</sup>

Although Volf’s critique is specifically targeted at the necessity of clergy within the liturgical context, his caution against excessive clerical authority is relevant to other aspects of church life. Is a church member vulnerable in front of an authoritative clergy in respects such as spiritual abuse and sexual misconduct? To examine this critique, returning to a comparison between Rousseau and Zizioulas is beneficial. In the aftermath of his mother’s death following his birth, coupled with his belief that his father left him for financial gain, Rousseau consistently yearned for a parental protector who could both love him and exercise full authority over his will.<sup>108</sup> This quest remained unfulfilled even through his extraordinary relationship with Madame de Warens whom he called ‘mother’. This longing is projected onto the tutor in *Émile* or M. Wolmar in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, yet sadly, such exemplary moral figures did not exist in his life. Consequently, Rousseau continued to isolate himself to avoid those in society who, he believed, sought to control his will without genuinely loving him. What underlines Rousseau’s quest is a dream for

104 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 140, 145, 149, 165.

105 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 57.

106 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 78–9.

107 Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp. 112, 214–15.

108 Rousseau, *Confessions*, pp. 54–5; Shklar, ‘Rousseau’s Images of Authority’, pp. 155–9.

'family' on both personal and societal levels.<sup>109</sup> The former centred on Émile's tutor, and the latter on M. Wolmar, who oversees a community where everyone knows each other, is happy, and is willing to follow him. These self-sufficient and loving figures might well be regarded as his imaginative projection of a god figure.<sup>110</sup> Rousseau's parental image can be seen as a surrogate for God as conceived by Zizioulas and, indeed, the Christian tradition. Zizioulas notes that early Christians employed familial terminologies to describe the church, referring to each other as 'brothers' with a common 'Father' in heaven.<sup>111</sup> The relational hierarchy within the triune God informs all human interactions.<sup>112</sup> Consequently, ecclesiastical authority diverges from secular institutions; it originates from divine communion and functions within relationships.<sup>113</sup> Zizioulas provides the answer that Rousseau seeks: an authoritative protector who exercises power within the context of love, thus ideally precluding abuse. For Rousseau, religion was centred on 'nature and the human heart'.<sup>114</sup> These two spheres can be interpreted through the lens of individualism. Consequently, Rousseau, seeking a sense of security, unfortunately found himself isolated from the church community and experienced loneliness.

However, practice often falls short of the ideal and problems remain with regard to Zizioulas's conception of church structure. James Keenan, through an examination of sexual abuse incidents in the Catholic Church, argues that the root issue of abuse is not mere clericalism but a deeper hierarchicalism.<sup>115</sup> While Zizioulas's relational understanding of hierarchy and power may mitigate some manifest forms of abuse, it tacitly accepts existing hierarchies and fails to offer specific institutional safeguards against bishops who abuse their power, disregarding the ecstatic nature of the triune God in these relational hierarchies. As Roger Olson asks, 'Could not one rather interpret the monarchy of the Father to justify "benevolent despotism"?'<sup>116</sup> This weakness in Zizioulas's ontological ecclesiology would be readily apparent to those who, like Rousseau, are sceptical of all institutions. While Zizioulas distinguishes

109 'Neither master nor slave belongs to a family, but only to a class', Rousseau, *Émile*, p. 442. For how the concept of family underlines his idea of a contract society, see Mason, 'Forced to Be Free', p. 129.

110 Shklar, 'Rousseau's Images of Authority', p. 162.

111 Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 56–7.

112 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 141–5.

113 Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 173–4.

114 Avis, *Theology and the Enlightenment*, p. 192.

115 James F. Keenan, 'Hierarchicalism', *Theological Studies* 83.1 (2022), pp. 84–108.

116 Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 114.

the church from secular institutions, Rousseau, having experienced sexual misconduct in a Catholic almshouse, includes the church among his objects of critique.<sup>117</sup> Being a church member, no matter the specific denominational form of institutional structure, does not immunise anyone from the misuse of authority.

### Conclusion

While this article opened with a specific imagined dilemma between autonomy and belonging in a modern age, we may now see its general implications for contemporary ecclesiology. Through engaging in dialogue with Rousseau, a seminal thinker with regard to modern notions of autonomy, the article has employed Zizioulas's ecclesiology to inform our understanding of being a church member in an age of autonomy. First, it argued that baptism into the church ontologically imparts an ecclesial hypostasis derived from God. Christians acquire a new mode of existence; they become relational beings and true persons rather than isolated individuals. Second, being a church member entails enacting the consequences of this ecclesial hypostasis, namely, engaging in communion with God and others within the church while continually opening oneself to those previously excluded. Third, Rousseau's stance allows us to discern limitations in Zizioulas's framework from an ecumenical perspective. Although Protestants do not ascribe essential roles to clergy based on the clergy's ability to perform the Eucharist and may be sceptical towards the hierarchy in both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic churches, they still accord special reverence to certain individuals. Ontological transformation does not guarantee against the misuse of power. As for how to apply Zizioulas's understanding to concrete local church life—a shortfall in his ontological approach—further discussion is required and probably calls for contributions from other thinkers. However, the benefits of Zizioulas's view should be recognised. Unlike Rousseau, for whom being a church member can be seen as posing an existential dilemma, for Zizioulas, being a church member means partaking in a divine, familial communion that inherently values every member's existence.

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117 Rousseau, *Confessions*, pp. 65–7.