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The crisis of the modern human person and the theological response: between existential fragmentation and the call to communion

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Abstract: *The contemporary world is marked by profound anthropological, cultural and spiritual fragmentation, that affects every dimension of human existence. The modern human person increasingly experiences dislocation from self, from others, from the natural environment and ultimately from God. This estrangement generates crises of identity, meaning and community, which manifest in psychological instability, social polarization, moral relativism and the erosion of shared values. In this context, the present article analyzes the roots of this multifaceted fragmentation through a theological lens, drawing particularly on patristic anthropology and the broader tradition of Orthodox Christian theology. It argues that the modern crisis cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the spiritual deficit underlying current social, cultural and existential disorders. The study proposes that an authentic theological response to fragmentation lies, in the restoration of the human person in communion, an ontological and relational vision grounded in the imago Dei and fulfilled in the sacramental, ascetic and communal life of the Church. Such a perspective highlights that true human flourishing emerges not from autonomous individualism, but from participation in divine life and restored interpersonal relationships. Methodologically, the research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, that integrates theological analysis with insights from contemporary social sciences, including psychology, sociology and cultural studies. This allows for a holistic understanding of both the causes and the possible remedies of the modern anthropological crisis. The results underscore that the recovery of relational personhood, the reappropriation of ascetic-mystical anthropology and the centrality of liturgical experience offer a viable and comprehensive framework for addressing the existential fragmentation that characterizes modern society.*

Keywords: *modern crisis; theological anthropology; fragmentation; communion; Orthodox theology; personhood; existential crisis; patristic theology;*

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Introduction

The late-modern and postmodern periods have produced unprecedented socioeconomic, cultural and technological transformations. Globalization, digitalization and rapid scientific innovation have reshaped human experience in ways unimaginable to previous generations. Yet, despite this material and informational abundance, the modern person faces a deep and persistent sense of existential dissatisfaction. The very structures, that promised liberation and self-fulfillment, often generate new forms of captivity, overstimulation, emotional fatigue and the erosion of stable identity.

Alienation, loneliness, depersonalization and moral relativism have become defining features of contemporary life. The acceleration of daily existence, mediated largely through digital technologies, contributes to a pervasive sense of fragmentation: individuals are constantly connected yet increasingly isolated, exposed to endless information yet deprived of genuine wisdom. The search for meaning is progressively replaced by consumerism and performative self-presentation, while personal identity is destabilized by ideological polarization, cultural

fluidity and the loss of shared metaphysical foundations. In this environment, spirituality often becomes privatized, eclectic, or superficial, further intensifying the disintegration of the inner self.

Orthodox theological anthropology offers a distinctive and deeply rooted interpretive framework capable of engaging this crisis at its most fundamental level. It views the human person, not as an autonomous and isolated individual, but as a relational, ecclesial and theocentric being whose fulfillment is found in communion (κοινωνία) with God, with others and with the created world. This relational ontology challenges the reductionist anthropologies of modernity by presenting personhood, as participation rather than possession, communion rather than self-enclosure (Lossky, 1976, pp. 23-48).

Grounded in patristic thought and the living tradition of the Church, Orthodox theology understands human unity as a gift that must be nurtured through spiritual discipline, liturgical life and the cultivation of virtues. Thus, the crisis of modern fragmentation is not merely psychological or sociological but deeply theological, revealing humanity's estrangement from its true vocation. This article explores the tension between the forces, that fragment the modern human person and the Church's call, to restore unity through spiritual transformation, sacramental life and participation in the divine energies. It argues that only by recovering a relational and transcendent vision of human existence can contemporary society begin to address its profound existential disintegration.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, analytic and interdisciplinary methodology designed to investigate the complex phenomenon of modern fragmentation within its theological, philosophical and cultural dimensions. The approach is grounded primarily in theological analysis, yet it integrates insights from the humanities and social sciences in order to construct a comprehensive interpretive framework.

First, the research undertakes an in-depth theological examination of patristic sources, including major figures such as st. Basil the Great, st. Maximus the Confessor and st. Gregory Palamas. Their writings offer foundational perspectives on personhood, communion and spiritual healing. Alongside these classical sources, the study engages major modern Orthodox theologians, such as Dumitru Stăniloae, John Romanides and John Zizioulas, whose works translate patristic anthropology into contemporary language and address present-day challenges, related to identity and relationality. This dimension ensures historical continuity and doctrinal grounding.

Second, the research incorporates documentary analysis of contemporary philosophical, sociological and psychological literature. By examining key themes such as modernity, postmodern alienation, digital culture, loneliness and the fluidity of personal identity, the study situates the theological inquiry within a broader intellectual context. Thinkers from both secular and religious backgrounds contribute to illuminating how fragmentation manifests in lived experience and public discourse (Zizioulas, 1997, pp. 56-79).

Third, the methodology includes a comparative analytical component, contrasting secular anthropological models, often centered on autonomy, individualism, or materialism, with Orthodox theological anthropology, which emphasizes communion, spiritual growth and relational personhood. This comparison highlights the strengths and limitations of each framework and clarifies the unique contribution that Christian theology offers to contemporary debates.

Fourth, the study employs hermeneutical reflection, interpreting modern crises through the lens of Christian spiritual and liturgical experience. This interpretive method recognizes that liturgy, ascetic practice and ecclesial life are not merely ritual or ethical phenomena, but epistemological and anthropological lenses through which reality can be understood. Such hermeneutics enable the study to draw connections between existential fragmentation and humanity's departure from its spiritual vocation.

The aim, of this methodological approach, is not empirical measurement or statistical demonstration, but rather a theological interpretation of existential phenomena observable in contemporary society. By synthesizing patristic wisdom, modern theological insights and interdisciplinary analysis, the study seeks to articulate a coherent and spiritually grounded response to the crisis of the modern human person.

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research reveal several significant insights, that illuminate the depth and complexity of modern existential fragmentation.

First, the study demonstrates that the crisis facing contemporary humanity is fundamentally anthropological rather than merely sociological. The core issue is not simply structural or cultural instability, but the erosion of a coherent understanding of what it means to be human. When personhood is no longer rooted in transcendence, relationality, or moral purpose, identity becomes fluid, unstable and vulnerable to external pressures.

Second, the research indicates that technological progress, despite its undeniable benefits, frequently intensifies fragmentation rather than alleviating it. Digital technologies promote forms of disembodied interaction, reducing human presence to images, data and mediated communication. Hyper-individualism is reinforced through personalized digital environments, that isolate individuals from communal rhythms and shared experiences. Social media, though designed to connect, often results in superficial relationships, performance-driven identities and heightened emotional insecurity. Thus, technology functions not only, as a tool, but as an anthropological force shaping the way individuals perceive themselves and others.

Third, the study highlights how contemporary ideologies, such as relativism, utilitarianism and transhumanism, further distort the understanding of the human person. Relativism undermines stable moral reference points; utilitarianism reduces value to productivity or efficiency; and transhumanism reframes the person, as a malleable entity, open to technological manipulation. These ideological frameworks tend to reduce the human being to biological material, psychological impulses, or programmable data, thereby weakening any sense of inherent dignity or spiritual vocation (Yannaras, 2008, pp. 45-78).

Fourth, the research confirms that patristic theology offers a profoundly holistic vision of the human person, presenting humanity as a harmonious unity of body, soul and spirit. This anthropology resists dualistic, reductionist, or mechanistic models. Instead, it situates human identity within the dynamic reality of communion with God, affirming both the sacramental value of the body and the transformative potential of the spiritual life. Patristic thought emphasizes that fragmentation is healed not by external adjustment but through the restoration of inner unity.

Fifth, the analysis shows that the theological response to fragmentation is the renewal of relational personhood, achieved through spiritual life, ascetic struggle and participation in the ecclesial community. The liturgical and sacramental life of the Church reintegrates the human being by reorienting body and soul toward God and community. Ascetic practice cultivates self-

awareness, purifies desire and frees the person from the passions, that fuel fragmentation. Ethical communion, expressed through love, humility and self-giving, rebuilds authentic relationships in a fractured world.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that theology does not provide technical solutions to the modern crisis. Instead, it offers a radical anthropological reorientation, addressing the root causes of existential disintegration. Theology situates the human person within a larger spiritual and communal horizon, allowing for a reintegration of identity, purpose and relationality. This integrative perspective suggests, that the true healing of the modern human person, requires not merely social reforms or technological regulation, but a renewed vision of humanity, grounded in communion with God and one another (Romanides, 2008, pp. 45-58).

The anthropological roots of modern fragmentation

The contemporary crisis of the human person is deeply rooted in the anthropological shift, introduced by modernity, which reconceptualizes the individual as autonomous, self-sufficient and fundamentally detached from tradition, community and transcendence. This paradigm, emerging from Enlightenment rationalism and later intensified by secular humanism, proposes an anthropology in which the self becomes the primary locus of meaning and authority. While this model promised freedom and self-realization, it has increasingly revealed its inner contradictions, producing multiple forms of existential fragmentation.

Identity fragmentation arises, as individuals attempt to construct personal identities, in a cultural environment, marked by fluidity, competing narratives and constant change. Without stable reference points, metaphysical, moral, or communal, the modern subject faces a continuous process of self-reinvention, often leading to inner instability and psychological fatigue. The absence of a shared teleology weakens the coherence of personal identity and erodes the sense of belonging (Taylor, 2007, pp. 67-84).

Moral fragmentation is another consequence of this anthropological shift. With relativism, becoming a dominant cultural ethos, ethical norms lose their transcendent grounding and acquire a provisional, subjective character. This undermines shared moral frameworks, generating confusion, ethical inconsistency and the dissolution of communal responsibility. The moral life becomes privatized, negotiated and contingent upon individual preference rather than rooted in an objective understanding of the good. Relational fragmentation follows naturally from the primacy of autonomy. Interpersonal relationships, traditionally embedded in stable communal structures, are increasingly shaped by utility, affective volatility and digital mediation. The rise of online interactions and the commodification of social ties result in fragile connections, that fail to nurture authentic relational depth or long-term commitment (Eftimie, 2017, pp. 21-28).

Spiritual fragmentation represents the most profound dimension of the crisis. The decline of religious practice, the marginalization of transcendence and the growing emphasis on immanent self-fulfillment impoverish the inner life. As the spiritual horizon narrows, individuals often experience existential emptiness, loss of meaning and heightened anxiety. The contemporary "search for meaning" frequently becomes a search without orientation, lacking a coherent vision of the human purpose.

Patristic anthropology stands in sharp contrast to these fragmented conditions, offering a holistic vision of the human person as a unity of body, soul and spirit, called to communion with God and with others. For the Fathers, fragmentation is not merely psychological or sociological, but fundamentally theological: it originates from the rupture of humanity’s communion with

God. When humanity turns inward, away from divine grace and toward autonomous self-assertion, the natural unity of the person disintegrates. In this perspective, the modern crisis reveals not only social or cultural dysfunctions, but a deeper spiritual rupture requiring a theological response rooted in the restoration of communion (Zizioulas, 2007, pp. 23-47).

Patristic anthropology and the vision of the human person

Within Orthodox theology, the human person is not conceived as an isolated, self-sufficient entity, but as a being whose very identity is constituted through relationality. This relational anthropology reflects the Trinitarian God, whose eternal life is communion and whose image humanity bears. Patristic thought thus situates the human person within a theological horizon in which freedom, identity and purpose are inseparable from relationship, both with God and with others.

The imago Dei is the foundational element of this anthropology. Human beings are created in the image of the Trinitarian God, which means that personhood is modeled not on autonomy but on relational existence. As the divine Persons exist in perfect love and mutual indwelling (περιχώρησις), so human persons realize their identity through communion, reciprocity and self-giving love. The loss of communion therefore distorts the human vocation at its core.

This vocation is ultimately expressed in the call to deification (θέωσις), participation in the uncreated life of God through grace. Deification does not imply ontological fusion or absorption, but the transformation of the human being by divine energies, restoring the integrity of human nature and orienting it toward its eschatological fulfillment. In patristic theology, theosis represents both the goal of human existence and the key to overcoming existential fragmentation, since only in union with God can the human person recover its true coherence.

Patristic anthropology also underscores the unity of body and soul, rejecting both dualistic and mechanistic anthropologies. The human person is a psychosomatic whole, in which the material and spiritual dimensions are harmoniously integrated. Fragmentation arises when this unity is disrupted, either through the subjection of the body to passions or through the neglect of its sacramental role in salvation. The Incarnation of Son of God affirms the dignity of the body and its indispensable place in the economy of salvation (Stăniloae, 1996, pp. 23-46).

Furthermore, the Holy Fathers describe the human person, as an active moral agent, capable of synergy (συνέργεια) with divine grace. Human freedom is not abolished by divine initiative; rather, it is strengthened and healed through cooperation with God. This synergistic anthropology preserves both the divine gift of salvation and the ethical responsibility of the human person, integrating moral agency into the process of spiritual transformation.

St. Maximus the Confessor provides a particularly profound vision of the human vocation. For him, the human person serves as a mediator whose task is to harmonize the fragmented dimensions of creation, intelligible and sensible, heavenly and earthly, spiritual and material. Human fragmentation is therefore not only psychological or individual; it has a cosmological resonance. Healing the human person contributes to the restoration of the entire cosmos, anticipating the eschatological reconciliation in Jesus Christ. Thus, the patristic vision situates anthropology within a broad theological and cosmic framework in which the renewal of the human person becomes the first step toward the transfiguration of creation itself (Maximus the Confessor, 2003, pp. 35-67).

The modern crisis through a theological lens

When examined, through a theological lens, the contemporary human crisis reveals itself not merely, as a sociological or cultural disorder, but as the manifestation of a deeper spiritual rupture. Orthodox theology interprets the present fragmentation of human existence as the consequence of a progressive loss of transcendence and a distorted understanding of personhood. These elements combine to create a cultural environment in which meaning, identity and human flourishing are profoundly undermined (Meyendorff, 1999, pp. 56-67).

One of the primary sources of the modern crisis is the loss of transcendence. As secular paradigms have increasingly restricted reality to the material and psychological dimensions, meaning has been reduced to subjective experience or utilitarian satisfaction. The dismissal of the transcendent deprives the human person of a stable ontological horizon, resulting in existential insecurity, spiritual disorientation and an inability to articulate a coherent vision of the good. Without transcendence, the human person becomes trapped within the limits of immanence, seeking fulfillment in achievements, consumption, or emotional states that cannot ultimately satisfy the deeper longing for communion with God.

This loss is closely connected to the idolization of the autonomous self, a core feature of modern anthropological models. The self is often elevated to an absolute reference point, detached from tradition, community and divine guidance. Such self-centered autonomy paradoxically produces not liberation but anxiety, loneliness, and, in extreme cases, narcissism. The human person, understood theologically, is not fulfilled by self-assertion but by self-transcendence, by opening toward God and others in love. The autonomous self therefore becomes a fragile construct, unable to sustain the weight of ultimate meaning (Hart, 2004, pp. 23-35).

Another contributing factor is the separation of knowledge from wisdom. Modernity has achieved remarkable scientific and technological progress, yet this advancement often unfolds without a corresponding ethical or spiritual grounding. Knowledge becomes instrumental, oriented toward efficiency and control rather than truth and moral discernment. Theological wisdom, however, insists that knowledge must serve the transformation of the person and the cultivation of virtue. When knowledge is divorced from wisdom, society faces the danger of technological mastery combined with moral disorientation, a combination that intensifies the fragmentation of both individuals and communities.

The crisis is also evident in the displacement of community. Although digital technologies create unprecedented forms of connectivity, they frequently mask a deeper interpersonal isolation. Relationships are often reduced to interactions mediated by screens, lacking the embodied, sacramental quality, that characterizes authentic communion. The community, which in Christian theology is the natural space of personal flourishing, is replaced by networks of convenience, often fragile and easily disrupted.

From the perspective of the Church, these various forms of fragmentation find their root in the theological understanding of sin, as the distortion of relational love (ἀγάπη). Sin is not merely moral transgression, but a rupture of communion, a turning away from God and from others. When the human vocation to communion is disrupted, fragmentation inevitably manifests at all levels: spiritual, psychological, moral, relational and even ecological. Thus, the modern crisis reflects a wounded anthropology, one in which the loss of agape leads to the disintegration of personhood and society (Clément, 2000, pp. 45-57).

Communion as the theological answer to fragmentation

In the face of the multifaceted fragmentation, that characterizes modern existence, Orthodox theology proposes communion, as the fundamental antidote and the core of the human vocation. Communion is not merely a sociological ideal or a moral principle, but the very structure of reality as revealed in the Trinitarian life of God. Within this framework, human fulfillment is inseparable from participation in divine and interpersonal communion, which restores integrity to the human person and reorients existence toward its true purpose (τέλος).

At the ontological level, human existence finds its meaning and coherence in relationship with God. The human person is created not as an autonomous being, but as one whose essence is fulfilled through participation in divine life. St. Gregory Palamas articulates this in his theology of the divine energies, emphasizing that while God's essence remains transcendent, His uncreated energies make authentic communion with Him possible. Through these energies, the human being experiences deification, not in an abstract or symbolic manner, but as a real transformation, that restores unity within the self and harmonizes the fragmented dimensions of existence.

The Church constitutes the concrete, historical space where this restoration is enacted. As the Body of Jesus Christ, the Church reestablishes unity at both the personal and communal levels.

The holy Liturgy plays a central role in healing fragmentation. By engaging the whole person, body, mind and soul, the liturgical experience integrates human faculties into a unified movement toward God. The communal participation in prayer, hymnography and sacramental action reorients individuals from isolation toward communion, reinforcing the relational nature of human identity.

The sacramental life further reconnects individuals with both community and transcendence. Baptism introduces the believer into the communal life of the Church; the holy Eucharist nourishes and sustains communion with Jesus Christ and with the ecclesial body; confession restores broken relationships through repentance and forgiveness. These sacramental realities address fragmentation not theoretically but experientially, grounding the healing of the person in concrete spiritual practice (Schmemann, 1997, pp. 56-68).

Communion also has an ethical dimension, expressed primarily through Christian love (ἀγάπη) and ascetic practice. Love moves the person beyond ego-centered existence, fostering relationships characterized by humility, forgiveness and self-giving. Asceticism, far from being an individualistic discipline, serves to heal the passions, that distort relational life. By purifying the heart and restoring interior clarity, ascetic practice enables authentic encounter with others and cultivates virtues, that sustain communal harmony (Eftimie, 2019, pp. 49-54).

Finally, communion informs the Church's cultural witness. In a world dominated by individualism, consumerism and technological mediation, the Church offers a counter-narrative grounded in relational identity and spiritual purpose. Through its theological vision, ethical practices and communal life, the Church challenges reductionist anthropologies and proposes a model of human flourishing rooted in communion. This witness extends beyond ecclesial boundaries, contributing to broader cultural healing by affirming that true identity and meaning are discovered not in isolation but in relationship, with God, with others and with creation (Stăniloae, 2003, pp. 78-96).

Conclusion

The crisis of the modern human person is, at its core, a crisis of identity, relationality and meaning. Contemporary society, shaped by rapid technological progress, shifting cultural norms

and pervasive individualism, has amplified the existential fragmentation, that disconnects individuals from God, from one another and from their own interior depths. This fragmentation manifests in unstable identities, weakened moral foundations, distorted relationships and a profound spiritual emptiness. Viewed theologically, these symptoms reveal not merely sociocultural dysfunctions, but the deeper rupture of humanity's vocation to communion.

Orthodox theological anthropology offers a holistic and restorative vision capable of addressing this crisis. By presenting the human person, as a relational being, created in the image of the Triune God, it identifies communion, not autonomy, as the proper mode of human existence. Patristic tradition affirms that human fulfillment lies in participation in divine life, deification and in the harmonious integration of body, soul and spirit. This theological framework reframes the modern crisis not simply, as a failure of structures or ideologies, but as the consequence of a distorted anthropology, that severs the person from transcendence and community.The theological response to modern fragmentation is therefore not a withdrawal from contemporary life, nor a nostalgic return to pre-modern social structures, but a transformative engagement rooted in spiritual healing. Liturgical participation restores unity by immersing the person in the communal life of the Church. Ascetic practice clarifies the inner world, healing the passions, that fuel egoism and relational breakdown. Ethical communion, marked by love, humility and self-giving, rebuilds authentic relationships in a fragmented world (Behr, 2006, pp. 78-89).Ultimately, the recovery of communion, with God, with others and within the self, emerges as the essential path toward overcoming the fragmentation of the modern person. This recovery is not merely therapeutic but ontological, restoring the human being to its true identity and purpose. The Church's witness, grounded in its sacramental, spiritual and communal life, offers a compelling counter-narrative to the isolating tendencies of contemporary culture. Only through the rediscovery of communion, as the foundation of existence, can the modern crisis be meaningfully addressed and the human person restored to wholeness.

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