Of Shepherds and Sheep: Leadership, Individuality, and Togetherness According to the Fourth Gospel's Imagery

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Introduction

Orthodoxy typically focuses on the patristic tradition and, within this framework, tends to read the Bible through the lens of patristic interpretation. However, for the Church Fathers themselves, the Bible, as the testimony of the Prophets and the Apostles, is the root and foundation on which all later theology rests. Hence, before discussing any contemporary perceptions of Orthodox Christianity, including the relationship between individuality and community, their biblical foundations must be examined.[1]

From very early on, the image of the faithful as sheep and their ecclesiastical leaders as shepherds has been established in ecclesiastical language, iconography, and liturgy. This image has its roots in Holy Scripture. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel are presented as a flock of sheep with God or the Messiah as their shepherd (Gen 48:15; Ps 23; 79; Isa 40:11; Ezek 34). In the New Testament, the shepherd is Jesus Christ and, by extension, his disciples, while the faithful are referred to as sheep (Matt 9:36; 26:31; Luke 15:3–7; John 10:1–16; 21:15–17; Acts 20:28; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:2–4). However, because sheep are generally considered will-less, obedient animals lacking distinct personalities and self-awareness, ecclesiastical leadership often tends to implicitly believe that, correspondingly, the faithful should be governed by similar qualities. Therefore, they should not exhibit characteristics of differentiated individuality but should obey "indiscriminately" as a unified whole to their spiritual leaders, who have absolute spiritual responsibility for them.[2]

1 For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Christos Karakolis, "The Church Fathers Can Guide but Not Replace One's Own Understanding: An Orthodox Perspective," in Stefan Alkier, Christos Karakolis, & Tobias Nicklas (eds.), *The Promise of Ecumenical Interpretation: Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox* (Fortress, 2024), 53–67, as well as the relevant bibliography cited there.

2 See the historical and theological approach to the problem in Lawrence B. Porter, "Sheep and Shepherd: An Ancient Image of the Church and a Contemporary Challenge," *Gregorianum* 82:1 (2001): 51–85. See also the relevant study of Francesco Rotiroti, "The Violent Shepherd: Constructing Legitimate Violence in Pre-Nicene Christianity," *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung*

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This chapter examines whether the biblical text supports such an approach. As a test case, the chapter focuses on the Johannine parable (παροιμία according to Johannine terminology)[3] of the good shepherd (John 10:1–16), which metaphorically illustrates how the faithful interact with Jesus Christ and, by extension, how members of the Christian community relate to their leader.[4] Throughout the interpretation, references to approaches from the fields of neuroscience and narrative criticism will be critical. The cognitive functions and social behaviors of sheep are enlightened through neuroscientific insights. Furthermore, based on narrative-critical principles, the content of the parable is related to other parts of the Johannine narrative to gain a broader understanding of the function and theological significance of its imagery in John's Gospel. In conclusion, the chapter briefly summarizes the findings and relates them to the contemporary reality in the Orthodox Church and theology while raising relevant questions for further consideration.

The Parable of the Good Shepherd

The parable begins by referring to a sheepfold enclosed by a gate.[5] He who does not enter through it but climbs up and enters from elsewhere is a thief and a robber (10:1). The thief's purpose is to steal and slaughter the sheep (10:10). All who have come before Jesus are thieves (10:8). In contrast, the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep (10:2). The gatekeeper knows

für Rechtsgeschichte: Kanonistische Abteilung 109:1 (2023): 1–52, which focuses on early Christian witnesses.

3 See John 10:6; cf. 16:25, 29.

4 On the similarities and differences between the Synoptic parables and the Johannine *paroimiai*, see Christopher W. Skinner, "'The Good Shepherd Lays Down His Life for the Sheep' (John 10:11, 15, 17): Questioning the Limits of a Johannine Metaphor," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 80:1 (2018): 98–100, as well as the further bibliography he cites. To decide between using or avoiding the term "parable" is not important within the framework of this chapter. By adopting the term "parable" for characterizing John 10:1–16, I am following the rationale and argumentation of Ruben Zimmermann, "Are there Parables in John? It is Time to Revisit the Question," *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 9:2–3 (2011): 243–76; Mira Stare, "Gibt es Gleichnisse im Johannesevangelium?" in Ruben Zimmermann (ed.), *Hermeneutik der Gleichnisse Jesu: Methodische Neuansätze zum Verstehen urchristlicher Parabeltexte* (Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 321–64.

5 One could discuss about whether in John 10, there is one or a combination of more than one parable; for the latter approach, see the articles in Ruben Zimmermann et al. (eds.), *Kompendium der Gleichnisse Jesu*, 2nd ed. (Güterlsoher Verlagshaus, 2015), 768–792. This question is, however, irrelevant for the current problem. Here, I adopt a unified view of 10:1–16, regardless of its integral parts or structure.

him and opens the gate for him (10:3). The shepherd calls his own sheep, each by name; they hear and recognize his voice, and he leads them out of the fold, and they follow him as he goes ahead (10:3–4). Instead, they will not follow a stranger whose voice they do not know (10:5). Furthermore, Jesus states that he himself is the gate of the sheep. Whoever enters through him will be saved, come and go, and find pasture (10:9). At the same time, Jesus is also the good shepherd, who sacrifices his life for the sake of the sheep (10:11). In contrast, the paid worker, who is not the shepherd and owner of the sheep, will abandon them when he sees the wolf coming, allowing the wolf to snatch the sheep and scatter them (10:12). In reality, the paid worker is not interested in the sheep but only in his wages (10:13). But Jesus is the good shepherd and, therefore, knows the sheep that belong to him, while they, in turn, know him (10:14). Indeed, Jesus' relationship as shepherd with the sheep corresponds to his relationship with God the Father. Just as the Father knows his Son Jesus and Jesus knows his Father, so too Jesus knows his sheep, and they know him as their shepherd (10:14b-15a). After Jesus reiterates that he will sacrifice his life for the sake of the sheep (10:15b), he reveals that there are other sheep as well that do not come from this particular sheepfold. Those too must be led; they will hear and recognize his voice, and all the sheep will become one flock with one shepherd (10:16).

Neuroscientific and Narrative-Critical Foundations

In their study "Intelligence, Complexity, and Individuality in Sheep," Lori Marino and Debra Mershkin summarize comprehensive neuroscientific research on sheep behavior, emotions, cognition, and personality.[6] According to the authors, the reason for their study is the erroneous perception of sheep in our culture, particularly in Christian theology, as lower animals on the scale of nature. Humans view them as exclusively utilitarian and thus exploit them for their wool, milk, skin, and meat. The misconception that sheep are generally docile, passive, and homogeneous members of a group without individual characteristics also contributes to their devaluation.[7] However, the aforementioned researchers have demonstrated that such conclusions could not be further from the truth: Sheep are highly social animals, able to distinguish the faces of other sheep and human beings who come into contact with them;

6 Lori Marino & Debra Mershkin, "Intelligence, Complexity, and Individuality in Sheep," *Animal Sentience: An Interdisciplinary Journal on Animal Feeling* 25:1 (2019): 1–26.

7 Marino & Mershkin, "Intelligence," 2–4.

they express a wide range of emotions and interact in various ways with one another; and they form individual relationships and social bonds beyond the necessity of finding and sharing food. Indeed, it turns out that sheep have distinct personalities, shaped by their personal experiences and evidenced by their different reactions and behaviors to corresponding stimuli.[8]

The unfavorable conditions of sheep farming in modern civilization, including the radical restrictions on their movements, do not allow for the full expression of their unique traits and personalities. However, ancient shepherds were surely well aware of these characteristics from their experience and daily interaction with their sheep, which we should not ignore when reading ancient texts that refer to sheep and, in our case, the relevant references in John's Gospel.[9] In addition, neuroscience has shown that in the absence of the security provided by a trustworthy shepherd, sheep tend to make decisions based on past experiences, weighing how much they should cling to the flock for greater safety or move away from it to find better food on their own.[10] The Johannine parable implicitly agrees with this conclusion when stating that the sheep will not follow the voice of a stranger and will not obey him but will follow solely the voice of their shepherd, whom they know and trust (10:4–5). In any case, sheep do not follow the shepherd simply because they are docile and passive animals; rather, they consider it safer and more advantageous to follow him than to stray away.

Accordingly, one cannot conclude that the Gospel of John uses the metaphor of the sheep to indicate that believers should exhibit absolute obedience, follow their leaders unquestioningly, and demonstrate homogeneous behavior. Instead, the metaphor implies that believers should follow their leaders conditionally, while still retaining their individuality, which could, under certain circumstances, lead them to make different decisions and take varied actions. Indeed, Cornelis Bennema, in his narrative-critical study "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John" (2013), convincingly demonstrates that John's account presents characters with distinct individual qualities, specific reactions, inner lives, development, and complexity.[11] These characters belong to various groups and subgroups,

8 See the results of the study in Marino & Mershkin, "Intelligence," 16.

9 Cf. Ezek 34; Matt 18:10–14; Luke 15:4–7. See also the relevant analysis in Skinner, "Good Shepherd," 111–12; cf. also Matteo Colombo and Chiara Raucea, "Sheep in Aesop's and Phaedrus's fables," *Animal Sentience* 4:25 (2019): 1–3.

10 B. Dumont & A. Boissy, "Grazing Behaviour of Sheep in a Situation of Conflict between Feeding and Social Motivation," *Behavioural Processes* 49 (2000): 131–38.

11 Cornelis Bennema, "A Comprehensive Approach to Understanding Character in the Gospel of John," in Christopher W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (T&T Clark, 2013), 57–58.

which they express and represent, but from which they are also occasionally differentiated. Among the Gospel's characters, alliances, agreements, conflicts, and regressions can be observed. Furthermore, the emotions prompting these behaviors are recorded or implied, such as love, hatred, curiosity, fear, envy, anger, etc.[12]

As already established, sheep also possess a rich emotional world and distinct personalities. Hence, in the Johannine parable, each one follows the shepherd after hearing him call it by its name. On the other hand, the shepherd's presence maintains the sheep's unity and prevents their individual traits from playing a divisive role within the flock. Thus, the Johannine analogy between sheep and believers, not only in terms of collectivity but also of individuality, becomes clear.

The Sheep as Community and as Individuals

It is striking that, despite the undeniable individuality of sheep, the parable emphasizes their inseparable unity. Accordingly, the sheepfold contains them all. The sheep follow the shepherd when he calls them by name and leads them out of the fold. They all recognize his voice and follow him. On the other hand, they do not follow the voice of strangers, from whom they will flee. Safety, life, and pasture are provided to all sheep in the flock without exception. Even those sheep that do not currently belong to the flock and are in other folds will eventually join the original fold's sheep, and together they will form a single flock with one shepherd.

Based solely on the parable's focus on collectivity, one could conclude that the fourth evangelist indeed portrays believers as passive and submissive members of a single community under the absolute authority of their shepherd. However, a close reading of the parable – and, by extension, the gospel narrative as a whole – can present believers in a different light. First, the parable seems to presuppose more than one flock in the sheepfold.[13] One can reach this conclusion from the detail about a doorkeeper opening the door for the shepherd (10:3), which implies that he also allows other shepherds in.

12 See the analyses of Johannine narrative characters in the following: Christopher W. Skinner (ed.), *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (T&T Clark, 2013); Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, & Ruben Zimmermann (eds.), *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (Eerdmans, 2016); also in the monographs of Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Fortress Press, 2014); Susan E. Hylen, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Westminster John Knox, 2009).

13 Cf. Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Eerdmans, 1981), 357.

Characteristically, after entering the sheepfold, the good shepherd calls "his own sheep" by name and takes them out (10:3), thus differentiating them from all the other sheep present in the fold. Therefore, his flock has unity by itself, but not with any other flocks or sheep that belong to different shepherds.

Furthermore, the depiction of the good shepherd calling his own sheep by name implies that he has assigned each one a unique name.[14] Thus, each individual sheep responds positively to his call (10:4), indicating that the sheep do not act as unwilling members of a group; rather, each shares a personal relationship with the shepherd, just as he has a personal relationship with each of them. This individualization is also supported by the fact that the good shepherd begins to lead the flock only after the last sheep has left the fold (10:4). It is further substantiated by Jesus' claim that he knows his own sheep – implicitly distinguishing them from a crowd of sheep in the fold – and that his own sheep know him as well (10:14). According to Marino and Mershkin, the ability of a living being to remember and distinguish specific individuals of its own or another species indicates self-awareness, individuality, and personality.[15] Sheep from other folds share a similar personality, as they will eventually hear the shepherd's voice, recognize it as familiar, and follow him as well (10:16; cf. 11:52).

In the Johannine narrative, there are followers of Jesus who eventually differentiate themselves from him. The most striking example is Judas Iscariot, who, like all other disciples, was called by Jesus and initially seemed to follow him (6:70–71), only to finally betray him, choosing to belong to another flock and follow another "shepherd," namely the devil (13:2, 26–30). A similar case involves those disciples of Jesus who are scandalized by his words about the bread of life and no longer follow him (6:60–66). Finally, many rulers believe in Jesus, i.e., they "recognize his voice," but out of fear of losing their privileges, they do not confess their faith in him, resulting in their failure to "follow the good shepherd" (12:42–43).[16]

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14 According to Zumstein: "In dieser Gleichnisrede dient dieser Brauch (dass ein Hirte bestimmten Schafen einen Namen gab) allerdings dazu, zwei typisch joh Aspekte zu verdeutlichen: a) einen Individualisierungsprozess (der Hirte knüpft keine Beziehung mit der Herde als solcher, sondern mit jedem einzelnen Mitlgied); b) mit der Verleihung eines Namens tritt die wahre Identität einer Person zutage." Jean Zumstein, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 388 n. 30.

15 Marino & Mershkin, "Intelligence," 6–7.

16 See the relevant analysis in Christos Karakolis, "Recurring Characters in John 1:19–2:11: A Narrative-Critical and Reader-Oriented Approach," in R. Alan Culpepper & Jörg Frey (eds.), *The Opening of John's Narrative: Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2015 in Ephesus* (Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 17–37.

When connected to the parable of the good shepherd, these examples suggest that different behaviors may be observed even among sheep initially belonging to the good shepherd, although the parable itself does not reference such cases. Like any imagery, it does not and cannot fully capture the complexity of reality. On the other hand, the parable warns believers about the consequences they will face if they follow a hired worker instead of the shepherd. In this scenario, if the wolf arrives, the hired worker will prioritize his own safety and abandon the sheep because they are not his (10:12–13). Here, the responsibility for any bad outcome lies not only with the specific hired worker but also with the sheep who followed him, despite not recognizing his voice, instead of following the shepherd. By heeding the voice of a stranger, the sheep ultimately find themselves in the jaws of the wolf and lose their unity, as the wolf "snatches" and "scatters" them.

In addition to the sheep from other folds that hear the voice of the good shepherd and follow him, there are certainly other sheep in those folds that hear his voice but do not recognize him as their own and fail to follow him (10:16; 11:52). Once again, individuality among the sheep is implied, as well as their ability to choose whether to follow the good shepherd.

The Importance of the Shepherd

Having established that the parable of the good shepherd speaks not only about the sheep's collectivity but also their individuality, it is important to address the role of the shepherd within the parable. The shepherd serves as the guide, protector, and leader of the sheep. He is responsible for their grazing and safety, as well as for keeping them together. No dog is mentioned, indicating that the shepherd is solely responsible for holding his flock together through his voice and presence. He knows that his flock consists of individuals with whom he has a personal relationship. Furthermore, the good shepherd of the parable does something unexpected. He not only risks his life to protect the sheep but also ultimately sacrifices his life for their safety (10:11, 15, 17–18). In reality, no shepherd would be expected to do such a thing.[17] However,

17 See Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 393; Skinner, "Good Shepherd," 106–9. Susan Hylen ascertains that 10:11 and parallels do not necessarily imply the death of the shepherd but only risking his life. Cf. Susan E. Hylen, "The Shepherd's Risk: Thinking Metaphorically with John's Gospel," *Biblical Interpretation* 24:3 (2016): 396–98. In any case, however, 10:11 presupposes the shepherd's willingness to die for his sheep, if need be, as Jesus being the good shepherd eventually does. Cf. Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 2015), 226.

according to the parable, if the sheep are left alone, their lives and unity are threatened by thieves, robbers, and wolves (10:1, 8, 10, 12). In other words, they face danger both as individuals and as a group. Consequently, when present, the shepherd saves the sheep both individually and collectively.

At the beginning of John's Gospel, John the Baptist calls Jesus the lamb of God, who carries the sin of the world (1:29, 36). Connecting this metaphor with the parable of the good shepherd (regardless of whether the evangelist intended such a connection), it follows that by sacrificing his life for the sheep, Jesus identifies with them by becoming a lamb so that, in dying, he might deliver the sheep from death due to their sin (cf. 8:24). Aside from any implied atoning images,[18] one could also see here an allusion to the incarnation of the Logos (1:14). From this perspective, the good shepherd loves the sheep so much that he becomes one of them in order to save them (cf. 3:16), while at the same time remaining their shepherd.[19] Perhaps in 1:29, the evangelist does not use the word "sheep" (πρόβατον) but instead the hapax legomenon "lamb" (ἀμνός) to demonstrate both the similarity and uniqueness of Jesus compared to his sheep.

From a narrative-critical perspective, the parable of the good shepherd is clearly linked to Simon Peter's reinstatement and Jesus' command for him to shepherd his sheep (21:15–17). In this scene, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Each time, Peter replies, affirming his love for Jesus. Based on these responses, Jesus gives him the threefold command to feed and tend his sheep, a command that implicitly extends to the other disciples as well.[20] Up to this point, the disciples have belonged to Jesus' sheep.[21] Now, Jesus appoints them as shepherds in his place. Therefore, what he expresses about himself in the parable of the good shepherd also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the disciples (cf. 14:12). In a sense, they will also be good shepherds (10:11), maintain the unity of the sheep (10:16), call the sheep by name so that the latter will trust and follow them (10:3), and finally, be prepared to sacrifice their own lives (10:11, 15), something that Jesus predicts about Simon Peter in his final dialogue with him (21:18–19).

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18 See the relevant discussion and main bibliography in Hartwig Thyen, *Das Johannesevangelium* (Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 116–21.

19 Cf. Dorothy Lee, "Paschal Imagery in the Gospel of John: A Narrative and Symbolic Reading," *Pacifica* 24 (2011): 22–23, 28.

20 Christos Karakolis, "Simon Peter in the Gospel according to John: His Historical Significance according to the Johannine Community's Narrative," *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 10 (2020): 35–45. See also the relevant discussion in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (XIII–XXI): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Doubleday, 1970), 1115–1117.

21 Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 388.

On one hand, the good shepherd Jesus is also a lamb. On the other hand, Jesus' disciples, while being sheep, become shepherds of his sheep.[22] However, they still remain Jesus' sheep, as they must continue to follow him and belong to his flock (10:4). As Jesus tells Peter at the end of their final dialogue in 21:22, "you follow me!" (σύ μοι ἀκολούθει).[23]

Conclusion

The above imagery portrays the unity of the sheep while recognizing them as separate and distinct individuals. The narrative highlights the sheep's trust in their shepherd and the shepherd's care for them, ensuring they are properly fed, protected, and united. The parable also reflects the shepherd's readiness to sacrifice his life for their safety and unity. Therefore, this imagery signifies a vital aspect of Johannine theology, namely love. Jesus exhorts his disciples to love one another (13:34; 15:12, 17) and to be united, mirroring the love and unity between him and the Father (17:11, 21, 26). In the Johannine narrative, the disciples maintain their individuality and differ greatly. What should keep them united is not uniformity but their selfless love for one another, extending to the point of offering their lives for each other, just as Jesus offered his life for their sake (15:12–14). This kind of love, originating from God the Father and extending to the believers through the Son, is the primary expression of leadership in John's Gospel, as demonstrated by the parable of the good shepherd, because it unites the believers into a community without undermining their individuality.

Based on the foregoing analysis, the particular emphasis that modern Orthodox theology has placed on community and the Eucharist as its visible realization is not entirely unproblematic.[24] Indeed, humans are social beings, "persons" in contemporary Orthodox theological terminology, and cannot be

22 It should be noted, however, that the fourth evangelist, to differentiate the disciples from Jesus, never attributes to them explicitly the title "shepherd," which characterizes Jesus exclusively.

23 Cf. D. Francois Tolmie, "The (not so) Good Shepherd: The Use of Shepherd Imagery in the Characterisation of Peter in the Fourth Gospel," in Jörg Frey et al. (eds.), *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 366–67.

24 See, for instance, the studies in the volume by John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

viewed independently of their interpersonal connections to one another.[25] In a sense, without others around them, persons cannot exist as such. However, concepts of personhood tend to reduce the significance of individuality in favor of relationality.[26] While persons cannot exist without being related to other persons, they must also be able to function independently. In other words, temporary isolation, introspection, and self-examination, which belong to the foundations of ascesis, as well as individual decision-making, are important as well. Therefore, there seems to be a delicate balance at this point, to which modern Orthodox theology has not paid sufficient attention. Instead, Orthodox theology has tended to stress collectivity and relationality at the expense of individual consciousness and spiritual self-awareness.[27]

The relationship between individuality and collectivity in contemporary Orthodox theology becomes even more problematic if one assumes that these issues have already been definitively resolved in some golden era of the past, which is generally placed in Byzantium.[28] According to Rhoda E. Howard's study, "Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community," the persistent invocation of an ideal past – one that never actually existed as such – along with the overemphasis on the importance of collectivity and community over the individual and his or her freedoms, points to the rhetoric of absolutist ideologies and regimes.[29] The most prominent example is, of course, Nazism, although it is not the only one. Unfortunately, the ideology of the "Russian world" similarly prioritizes communitarianism and its resulting culture over individuality, as well as the idealized past over the rejected present.[30]

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25 See John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (T&T Clark, 2006), 110–12.

26 For an overview, see Bogdan Lubardić, "Orthodox Theology of Personhood: A Critical Overview (Part 1)," *The Expository Times* 122:11 (2011): 521–30; Bogdan Lubardić, "Orthodox Theology of Personhood: A Critical Overview (Part 2)," *The Expository Times* 122:12 (2011): 573–81.

27 See the relevant discussion and critique in David R. Brockman, *Dialectical Democracy through Christian Thought: Individualism, Relationalism, and American Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 63–73.

28 See for instance, Christos Yannaras, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), 153–62.

29 Rhoda E. Howard, "Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community," *Human Rights Quarterly* 15:2 (1993): 315–38.

30 See the Orthodox-theological criticism of the "Russian world" ideology in Brandon Gallaher and Pantelis Kalaitzidis, "A Declaration on the 'Russian World' (Russkii Mir) Teaching," *Mission Studies* 39:2 (2022): 269–76.

On the other hand, the emphasis on individuality over collectivity in contemporary Western culture also represents an extreme.[31] This emphasis leads societies to imbalance, as both individual rights and opportunities skew in favor of the few socially and financially privileged. In other words, powerful individuals exploit their social and economic power to entrench their position further, while, at the same time, partly due to this, the rights, freedoms, and opportunities of weaker individuals are curtailed.[32] The community can indeed oppress the individual, but the individual can also oppress the community. Unfortunately, such tendencies are also present in the Orthodox ecclesiastical context.

A balance between these two trends must be established. Certainly, John's Gospel does not provide ready-made solutions to this problem. However, through its narrative and symbolism, it conveys the necessity of balancing individuality and community. At the same time, it promotes the possibility of achieving this balance through the communion of individual believers with Christ, as well as with their sisters and brothers, as individual sheep belonging to the same flock and following the same shepherd.

31 Cf. the study of Tim Lomas et al., "Complexifying Individualism Versus Collectivism and West Versus East: Exploring Global Diversity in Perspectives on Self and Other in the Gallup World Poll," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 54:1 (2023): 61–89.

32 Cf. Eva Etzioni-Halevy, "Élites, Inequality and the Quality of Democracy in Ultramodern Society," *International Review of Sociology* 9:2 (1999): 239–50.