8 'Decision' *Lucidities*, 13
9 'Of Love' *Relationships* 35
10 *New Collected Poems* 91
11 'Friendship' *New Collected Poems* 89
12 'One Flesh' *New Collected Poems* 81
13 *New Collected Poems* 10
14 Commentary on *The Ethics* 8:2
15 *New Collected Poems* 205
16 *New Collected Poems* 354

Zizioulas: The Trinity and Ecumenism

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'Being as communion' is a phrase that evokes the name of only one person, that of Bishop John D. Zizioulas. It is first and foremost within the context of the Trinity that Zizioulas elaborates his understanding of this concept. Moreover, from his trinitarian understanding of 'being as communion' Zizioulas has also elucidated a distinctive understanding of creation, Christology, Christian anthropology, ecclesiology, the Eucharist and eschatology. In so doing Zizioulas has made significant and insightful contributions to Christian theology. I cannot comment on the whole of Zizioulas' thought in so short an essay, but I would like to examine briefly the topic that interests me the most — the Trinity. I want to highlight the strengths of Zizioulas' conception of the Trinity as well as to note those aspects that I believe demand greater clarity. In attempting to clarify the ambiguities I will also offer a few suggestions as to how Zizioulas' trinitarian thought might be further enriched. In the light of all of the above I will conclude by offering some thoughts on advancing ecumenical relations among Eastern and Western theologians.

The Trinity: Being as Communion

In contrast to Greek philosophy, which gave ontological priority to 'nature' or 'substance', Zizioulas consistently argues that Christian theology, specifically through the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, obtained the insight that 'person' has true ontological priority. The catalyst for such an insight was the working out of a theological understanding of the Trinity, especially, Zizioulas argues, in the light of western Sabellianism, which denied the ontological distinctiveness of the persons.[1] 'The concept of the person with its absolute and ontological content was born historically from the endeavour of the Church to give ontological

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expression to its faith in the Triune God.'[2]

Within classic Greek Philosophy substance (*ousia*) and *hypostasis* were synonymous, both meaning an existing being of a specific nature. However, in the course of attempting to express the unity and distinction within the Christian notion of God, that is, the oneness and threeness, the Cappadocians differentiated the concept of *hypostasis* from that of substance so that it now became associated with the term 'person' and in so doing gave the notion of person ontological priority and depth.[3] Zizioulas justifiably appreciates that this was revolutionary both for the history of philosophy and for Christian doctrine. 'The person is no longer an adjunct to a being, a category which we add to a concrete entity once we have first verified its ontological hypostasis. *It is itself the hypostasis of the being.*'[4] Moreover, 'entities no longer trace their being to being itself— that is, being is not an absolute category in itself— but to the person, to precisely that which constitutes being, that is, enables entities to be entities.'[5] Thus the Cappadocian Fathers perceived that God was one nature (*ousia*), three persons (*hypostases* or *prosopa*).

However, for Zizioulas it would be false to think that the oneness of God was now predicated upon his one nature, while the threeness was predicated of the persons — this was and continues to be the error, he believes, of the West as exemplified in Augustine and Aquinas.[6]

> [R]ather, among the Greek Fathers the unity of God, the one God, and the ontological 'principle' or 'cause' of the being and life of God does not consist in the one substance of God but in the *hypostasis*, that is, *the person of the Father.* The one God is not the one substance but the Father, who is the 'cause' both of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit.[7]

The personal existence of the one God is founded upon the one person of the Father and not upon an impersonal substance. 'What therefore is important in trinitarian theology is that God "exists" on account of a person, the Father, and not on account of a substance.'[8]

For Zizioulas, two inter-related truths flow from this. Firstly, the Father, because he is a person, freely causes the persons of the Son and the Holy Spirit to exist. The Son and Spirit do not arise out of necessity from within the divine nature as seen in the West but come forth from the person of the Father who, because he is a person, freely wills and so causes them to be. For Zizioulas one can even say that the Father freely wills to be the Father and in so freely willing himself to be the Father thereby freely wills the Son and the Holy Spirit. 'God by being uncreated is not faced with given being: *He, as a particular being* (the Father) brings about His own being (the Trinity)'.[9]

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> The Cappadocian Fathers for the first time in history introduced into the being of God the concept of cause (*aition*), in order to attach it significantly not to the 'one' (God's nature) — but to a person, the Father. By distinguishing, carefully and persistently between the nature of God and God as the Father, they thought that *what causes God to be is the Person of the Father*, not the one divine substance. By so doing they gave to the person ontological priority, and thus freed existence from the logical necessity of substance, of the 'self-existent'.[10]

Or again:

> God's being, the Holy Trinity, is not caused by substance but by *The Father*, i.e. a particular being. The one God is the Father.[11]

Secondly, it is because the Father freely causes, out of love, the Son and the Holy Spirit to exist that there is a communion of persons.

> For this communion is a product of freedom as a result not of the substance of God but of the person, the Father — observe why this doctrinal detail is so important — who is Trinity not because of the divine *nature* is ecstatic but because the Father as a *person* freely wills this communion.[12]

Or again:

> Love alone, free love, unqualified by natural being, as the Cappadocian Fathers saw it, is constituted and 'hypostasized' through a free event of love caused by a free and loving person, the Father, and not by the necessity of divine nature.[13]

Thus the very nature of being is to be personal and so in communion with other persons. 'The Cappadocians called the persons by names indicating *schesis* (relationship): none of the three persons can be conceived without reference to the other two, both logically and ontologically.[14] Because 'being' is now founded upon persons-in-relation and not upon isolated substances, one can speak, according to Zizioulas, of 'an ontology of love.'[15] Thus 'being' is now ultimately defined, for Zizioulas, by the being of the Trinity — a communion of inter-related persons.

Insights and Ambiguities

Zizioulas' conception of the Trinity has rightfully brought to the fore the importance and the significance of a number of inter-related concepts. First, he has grasped and newly articulated the significance that the Christian God is not some impersonal divine substance or even a singular person but a communion of persons. It is not a divine substance or nature that gives rise to the persons of the Trinity, but it is the person of the Father who gives rise to the Son and the Holy Spirit and so ontologically defines the divine

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substance. Secondly, as the above illustrates, a proper understanding of 'person' demands not simply one personal being existing in isolation, but rather necessarily implies relationships with other persons. 'Person' by its very nature is a relational concept. Thirdly, by illuminating the significance of the notion of 'person' within the Trinity Zizioulas has brought to trinitarian theology a renewed and intensified dynamism, that is, the persons of the Trinity are not statically embedded within a singular substance, but actively relate to one another in a communion of love. Fourthly, this dynamism spills over in the Trinity's relationships to creation and with human persons. This eternal communion of love allows the persons of Trinity actively to reach out and embrace other persons, and this is most fully expressed and accomplished within the Eucharist.[16]

While some scholars may quibble with Zizioulas' utterly negative interpretation of Greek philosophy, one must admit, so it seems to me, that he has significantly contributed to the contemporary understanding of the Trinity in a manner that is perceptive and relevant. Nonetheless, I have some quibbles of my own that I wish submit.

As exemplified in the above, Zizioulas consistently states that the Father is the one God or that the one God is the Father. In saying this Zizioulas wants to highlight, and rightly so, the monarchy of the Father, that he is the *arche*, the beginning or the source or the principle of the trinitarian life, and so in being the *arche* the Father is also the principle of unity or oneness as well. However, by stating that the one God is the Father or that the Father is the one God the impression is given that there is first the one God existing as Father and then subsequently, after the Father freely causes the Son and the Spirit to exist, the Trinity. The only manner in which one can rightly say that the one God is the Father is if in saying 'Father' one equally and simultaneously includes within the term 'Father' the Son and the Holy Spirit since the Father would not be Father without the Son and the Holy Spirit. However, Zizioulas is not consistently clear about this. At times the impression is given that the one God does solely exist as Father prior to the existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit since to speak of the Father freely choosing and so causing the Son and Holy Spirit to exist seems to imply a period of 'paternal' deliberation.

Here, I believe, Zizioulas relies too heavily upon the Cappadocians, who did not fully grasp Athanasius' insight into Nicaea's *homoousion,* and so continued to articulate their understanding of the Trinity from within an Origenist perspective. Within such a conception the Father is the one God in that he embodies the whole of the Godhead and the Son and the Holy Spirit come forth out from him in a linear fashion in that they derivatively share in his divine nature. Such a conception, as Arius knew well, undermines both the oneness of God and the equality of the persons. Athanasius, in the light

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of Nicaea, grasped that the *homoousion* demanded that the one God was not the Father, but rather that the one God is the Father begetting the Son and spirating the Spirit. While the Father maintains his monarchy in that he is the principle which gives rise to the Son and the Holy Spirit, yet the begetting and spirating take place within and are formative of the very being and nature of what the one God is. All three persons are the one God for without the three persons — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — there would not be one God.

While I agree with Zizioulas that within the Trinity the notion of person has ontological priority over substance in the sense that there is not one divine substance apart from the three persons, the same ambiguity identified above arises when he consistently states that 'God exists because of the Father', or that 'What causes God to be is the Father', or that 'God's being is caused by the Father'. In such statements Zizioulas is obviously attempting to accentuate that the notion of 'person' (the Father) has ontological priority over that of 'nature' (God). However, to the reader, especially someone not trained in theology, such language gives the impression that the Father exists prior to God and that it is he who brings God into existence. But such would be absurd. What Zizioulas wants to say is not that the Father brings God into existence (the Father as God eternally exists) but that the Father, precisely because he is the Father, is responsible for God being the kind of God 'he' is, that is, a trinity of persons.

What Zizioulas forgets or fails to grasp fully, in his ardent determination to give ontological priority to the notion of 'person' over that of 'nature' or 'substance' is that within the Trinity the three persons *are* the one nature of God. One does not have a 'nature' or 'substance' apart from or even distinct from the three persons, and thus there is neither a priority of persons nor of substance because what the one God is is a trinity of persons. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are what the one God is and there is no substance or nature apart or distinct from them.

This, it seems to me, is what Zizioulas wants to hold but states in a rather ambiguous manner, that is, that the actual substance or nature of God is the inter-relationship of the three persons and it is the communion of the three persons that defines the nature. The one nature of God is the personal communion of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Thus the Greek notion of substance as a static entity has been completely replaced and transformed by the notion of 'person'. This is why Zizioulas holds that the primary definition of 'substance', in conformity with the Trinity which is the source of all that is, is that of 'person'. To truly be an existing substance, that is, to truly be 'something' in the likeness of the Trinity is not to be a 'thing' but to be a person.[17] The reason for the above imprecision ultimately lies in Zizioulas' ambiguous understanding and articulation of the Father

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freely being the cause of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

As we saw Zizioulas speaks both of the Father freely willing himself to be the Father and in so freely willing himself to be the Father he freely wills, by way of causation, to bring the Son and the Holy Spirit into existence. Now to say that the Father freely wills himself to be the Father cannot possibly mean that the Father before he was the Father willed himself to be the Father for if the Father was not always the Father there would be no Father who could will himself to be Father. Nonetheless Zizioulas, in his desire to emphasize that freedom is constitutive of personhood, at times does give the impression that the Father, before he was Father, did will himself to be Father. The problem, for Zizioulas, is that if one says that the Father is the Father by nature then one once more gives ontological priority to nature and thus the concept of the Father being a free person is lost.

Again, this difficulty is resolved when one clearly perceives that within the Trinity the persons and the nature are the same in that what the one nature of God is is the three inter-related persons.[18] Thus, the Father is eternally the Father, in that he did not freely choose to become and so exist as Father. He simply is eternally the Father. Nonetheless, in eternally being the Father he eternally freely affirms his Fatherhood and in so doing simultaneously freely, in accordance with who he is as the Father, begets the Son and spirates the Spirit.[19]

Moreover, Zizioulas also conveys the impression — clearly a false one — that the Father freely caused the Son and the Spirit to exist in the sense that he had before him two options, that is, he freely could or could not have caused them to exist. Again, the Father freely begets the Son and spirates the Spirit not in the sense that he had before him two options and he freely chose one over the other, but rather, being by nature the Father, he freely and eternally performs the actions that define who he is. The reason the Father is by nature the Father is because his nature (who he is) is defined as the free begetter of the Son and the free spirator of the Spirit.[20]

The Trinity and Ecumenism

One of the most appealing aspects of Zizioulas' conception of the Trinity is that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are persons-in-relation, that is, they form an ontological communion of love. What occurs to me, however, is that it is at this very juncture that Zizioulas could have employed and even exploited to his own advantage Augustine's fuller articulation of the Cappadocian insight that the names of the persons denote relations, as well as Aquinas' subsequent development that the persons of the Trinity are subsistent relations.[21] By making the most of these common trinitarian developments Zizioulas could have also then contributed to an ecumenical understanding of the Trinity.

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Similar to Zizioulas' own understanding that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are persons-in-relation, Aquinas defined the divine persons as subsistent relations, that is, that they subsist or exist as who they are only in relation to one another. The Father subsists as Father only in relation to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son subsists as Son only in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit subsists as Holy Spirit only in relation to the Father and the Son. And thus, in accordance with Zizioulas' trinitarian insight that 'being is communion', they form a dynamic ontological communion of love. They are 'being as communion' because they only *are* in that they *are only in communion* with one another.[22]

Moreover, defining the persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations allows one to ground their unity and diversity in the same principle, that of personal relations. Their relationships both define their distinct identities as ontological subjects or persons and their ontological unity as the one God. Such an understanding would, it seems to me, be fully in accord with Zizioulas' own concerns — that the one God is not a substance apart from the persons, but rather the inter-relationship of divine persons defines the nature or substance of the one God.

But why did Zizioulas not employ or even make reference to Augustine and Aquinas? More than likely it just never occurred to him. Nonetheless, I think such an oversight is significant. It is only because I know that Zizioulas, as a theologian and as a bishop, has worked zealously to foster fraternal relations between the East and the West that I feel permitted to make the following fraternal comments.

Zizioulas and other Orthodox theologians almost always refer to Augustine and Aquinas when they wish to illustrate the differences between the East and the West and as to why the West is in error.[23] Now Augustine and Aquinas can obviously be wrong (I myself have criticized them), but what is disheartening is that they are often misrepresented. For example, as we saw above, the commonplace that, with regard to the Trinity, the East emphasises the threeness and the West the oneness, expresses a judgement that bears no relation to Augustine's or Aquinas' writings.[24] It merely raises the question of whether those who make such judgements have actually read and studied the texts.

This brings me to my other ecumenical concern. While Western theologians, especially within the Roman communion, have often in the past overlooked and neglected the Eastern Fathers (and often the Western Fathers as well) in their enthusiasm for Aquinas, yet some of the most prominent and influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century have been pre-eminent scholars of the Eastern Fathers.[25] Because of this Western theology has not only benefited enormously, but it has also broadened its whole theological viewpoint in that it now employs both

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Western Fathers and theologians and Eastern Fathers and theologians — ancient and modern. Western theology has come to claim as its own the whole Christian theological tradition and does so, presently, almost automatically. The same cannot be said of contemporary Eastern theologians. I know of no major study of a Western Father or theologian authored by a recent or contemporary Eastern theologian. Whatever the reason for this, I am sure that it is not because contemporary Eastern theologians judge that the Western Fathers never taught anything of any significance which may be of interest or benefit to them. More likely they believe that they must, in the face of the dominant West, protect and develop their own heritage, as surely they must. Nonetheless, the Fathers themselves, while they obviously realized that some of them were from the East and spoke Greek and some of them were from the West and spoke Latin, never thought of themselves as engaging in different theological enterprises or fostering distinct and totally separate theologies. They were very conscious that they together possessed the same Gospel, and the reason they collaborated so closely within Councils and Synods, sometimes in the midst of tension and even acrimony, but most often, it must be remembered, with absolute unanimity, was precisely because they did realize that it was the one Gospel that they together must defend and proclaim.[26]

Too often today, I believe, Western and Eastern theologians read and study the Fathers as if the Fathers had the same theological hang-ups among themselves as we do today. In so doing the Fathers are never read as they are, but merely as weapons to be used against either the East or the West, and so Christian theology never entirely reaps the abundant harvest of what they taught. By reading the Fathers in such a manner, Western theologians are disloyal to their heritage and Eastern theologians are false to theirs, and together they are unfaithful to the one Gospel. Only when the West and the East truly strive to live together, as Zizioulas has laboured so long to teach us, in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit will the Church once more breathe with both lungs.

1 See J.D. Zizioulas, 'The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity: The Significance for the Cappadocian Contribution', *Trinitarian Theology Today*, ed. C. Schwöbel (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 45-49. Even though Tertullian in the West argued against Sabellianism and spoke of *tres personae*. Zizioulas holds that he and the subsequent Western tradition never fully extricated themselves from Sabellianism. See *Being as Communion* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), pp. 36-37.
2 *Being as Communion*, p. 36.
3 See *Trinitarian Theology Today*, p. 47.
4 *Being as Communion*, p. 39.
5 *Being as Communion*, p. 39.
6 See *Being as Communion*, p. 88; *Trinitarian Theology Today*, pp. 46 and 52;

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and 'On Being a Person. Towards on Ontology of Personhood', *Persons, Divine and Human*, eds. C. Schwöbel and C. E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&.T Clark, 1991), p. 40.

7 *Being as Communion*, pp. 40-41.

8 *Being as Communion*, p. 42.

9 *Persons, Divine and Human*, p. 42. See also *Being as Communion*, p. 41 and *Trinitarian Theology Today*, p. 51.

10 *Trinitarian Theology Today*, pp. 54-55.

11 *Persons, Divine and Human*, p. 40. See also p. 40, fn 13.

12 *Being as Communion*, p. 44.

13 *Trinitarian Theology Today*, p. 59. See also *Persons, Divine and Human*, p. 39.

14 *Trinitarian Theology Today*, p. 50.

15 *Persons, Divine and Human*, p. 42.

16 On Zizioulas' theology of the Eucharist see *Being as Communion*, pp 143 -69.

17 On the irreducible uniqueness of the person, see *Persons, Divine and Human*, pp. 33-46.

18 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 28, 2.

19 In an analogous manner, I did not freely choose to be Tom Weinandy. However, because I am Tom Weinandy, and thus a human person, I can freely choose to affirm who I am and so freely live out who I am.

20 While Zizioulas holds that the concept of 'cause' is one of the great insights of Cappadocian trinitarian thought, I am not entirely pleased with it. 'Cause' seems to imply that the one who causes exists prior to that which is caused and equally that the one who causes is of a different nature from what is caused. Now one could say that within God such implications do not apply. Nonetheless, I would prefer the term 'principle'. While the Father is the principle from which the Son and Spirit proceed, yet his being the principle does not carry with it the notions of prior existence or difference of nature.

21 Gregory of Nazianzus wrote that 'the difference of manifestation, if I may so express myself, or rather of their mutual relations one to another, has caused the difference of their names' (*Oratio*, 31, 9). See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 6:6, 9, 11, 14 and 7, 7-9, and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 29, 4 and I, 40, 1-2.

22 The fact that Augustine and Aquinas define the persons of the Trinity by their relations to one another nullifies Zizioulas criticism that they are focused primarily on God's substantial impersonal oneness and not upon the relationships among the three persons.

23 However, I was recently reading B. Bobrinskoy's *The Mystery of the Trinity* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999) where he mentions Augustine eighteen times and almost always within a positive and favourable context.

24 See M.R. Barnes, 'Rereading Augustine's Theology of the Trinity', *The Trinity*, eds. S. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O'Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 145-76; E. Hill, *The Mystery of the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), p. 115; B. de Margerie, *The Christian Trinity in History* (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1982), pp. 162-3; and T. Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 56.

25 Here I am especially thinking of H. Crouzel, J. Daniélou, H. de Lubac, and H.U. von Balthasar.

26 This exemplified very well in Athanasius' and Hilary's friendship and in their mutual defence of Nicaea and the full divinity of the Son.

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