



Kevin J. Sherman

The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Personalist Theology of John Zizioulas

Abstract

The present study focuses on the trinitarian theology of John Zizioulas as he articulates the doctrine within the context of a personalist theology. The formative theological influences on his theology are traced in order to understand and appreciate the context of his thought. Two primary criticisms are advanced, that of a latent subordinatist tendency and a certain lack of a biblical conception of redemption in the development of his doctrine of the Trinity.

Keywords

Trinity, Zizioulas, Personalism, Monarchy, Redemption



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1 Introduction

The trinitarian theology of the Orthodox theologian John D. Zizioulas (Metropolitan John of Pergamon, 1931–) has proven both influential and controversial. His approach to the doctrine is a method of theological personalism that understands a person to be ontologically constituted by external relations to the “other.” On the one hand, Zizioulas’ writings have bridged the East-West divide within Christianity by engaging western theology with its heritage in the Greek patristics. In this endeavor, Zizioulas has been influential. On the other hand, his theological conclusions have not all been accepted within his own tradition in the Orthodox Church, particularly among Greek Orthodox thinkers at the University of Athens.

A study of Zizioulas’ trinitarian theology is well warranted, given his influence within current theological discourse. His theology is of particular significance in light of the application of theological personalism with modern questions on the meaning and constituents of the human person.

Several limitations circumscribe the present study. First, this study is limited to the literature written or translated into English. Zizioulas’ large and complex oeuvre includes resources in Greek and French; important secondary literature is also found in these languages, and these resources will not be consulted here. Secondly, Zizioulas’ theology as a whole extends far beyond the doctrine of the Trinity. His theology will be engaged in a limited fashion as it has a bearing on his trinitarianism which is the primary focus of this study.

The structure of this study begins with an overview of the context and influences which bear on Zizioulas’ trinitarianism (Chapter I). The second and third chapters present two primary criticisms of his theology, that of a subordinationist tendency in his doctrine of the Father’s monarchy (Chapter II) and theological distortion in his trinitarianism resulting from the absence of a biblical emphasis on redemption (Chapter III).

I. THE CONTEXT AND FEATURES OF ZIZIOULAS' TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

1 Theological and Philosophical Antecedents to Zizioulas' Personalism

The theological task never occurs in a vacuum, in a way free from the influences of a particular time, culture, and confessional context.¹ To trace these influences is not to discredit a particular theology unless specific influences can be shown, in themselves, to be detrimental. The following section presents a cursory overview of the philosophical and theological antecedents in Zizioulas' personalist trinitarianism.

1.1 The Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Zizioulas draws heavily upon the formative sources of his Orthodox theological heritage in the Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions, particularly the Cappadocian Fathers and Maximus the Confessor. Zizioulas does not limit himself to ancient Christian sources; he astutely criticizes Greek philosophy as a whole for a ubiquitous *ontological monism*, a singular conception of the "one" being, resulting in an utter impotence to affirm the individual (be it God or human) as ontologically absolute in himself, that is, as a *person*.² "Ancient Greek thought in *all* its forms (Parmenidian, Heraclitan, Platonic and Aristotelian), in spite of its variations on other aspects, agreed on one thing: particularity is not ontologically absolute; the many are always ontologically derivative, not causative."³ Themes of freedom from necessity and *persons* as ontologically

¹ Nor would such a "theology" be desirable since it would be ill-suited to fulfill its purpose, which for Christian theology is obedience to Christ rendered in human contexts.

² *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 27–33.

³ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 102.

absolute and unrepeatable entities—all utterly antithetical to Greek philosophy—pervade his exposition of the Greek Christian sources writing from within the Greek philosophical milieu.

In addition to an ancient patristic heritage, Zizioulas, as a contemporary in the Orthodox Church, is also heir to a complex religious and philosophical heritage of modern origin. Over a period roughly spanning the preceding three centuries, the Orthodox Church has experienced a renaissance within Russian religious thought in the writings of such figures as Vladimir Solov'ev (1853–1900), Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) and others. Beginning with the influence of Solov'ev's philosophy of wisdom derived from his mystical encounters with a female apparition, Sophia, Florensky and Bulgakov developed a doctrine of *sophiology*, which represents something of a departure from the patristic conception of God's relationship to the creation through Christ.⁴

One finds in the thought of these Russian thinkers early iterations of personalism as well as certain precursors to modern existential issues, such as a search for authentic personhood made necessary by the arid individualism of the industrial era and the increasingly impersonal and deterministic view of humanity born of Enlightenment rationalism and political tyranny. The Trinity came to be viewed as representing the essence of “the one and the many”, a symbol of *catholicity* captured by Alexei Kharmiakov in the Russian term *sobornost*.⁵ This reaction of Russian sophiology in the eastern Church was parallel to and, to a certain degree, was influenced by similar reactions in the west, such as the religious/philosophical movement of German idealism which also appealed to the

⁴ Alexis Klimoff “Georges Florovsky and the Sophiological Controversy” *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 49:1–2 (2005): pp. 67–100.

⁵ Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: From the Philokalia to the Present* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), pp. 7–8.

doctrine of the Trinity.⁶ These conceptual movements helped to prepare the ground for a trans-confessional resurgence of trinitarian thinking within twentieth-century Christianity.

The influence of Russian religious thought has been mixed as it has been mediated to modern Orthodox thinkers by a generation of early nineteenth-century Russian émigrés (such as Georges Florovsky and Vladimir Lossky) who fled Russia to escape political repression. Bulgakov was a highly controversial figure for his sophiology which inspired a number of theological reactions, notably Florovsky's neo-Patristic synthesis and Lossky's Apophaticism.⁷ John Zizioulas is the intellectual predecessor to Florovsky who was his mentor at Harvard School of Divinity. Lossky's influence is less direct, though he developed his own personalist theology prior to Zizioulas.

Zizioulas' theological personalism emphasizes freedom as well as communality. While original in its own right, his personalism preserves a certain resemblance to his broader intellectual Eastern heritage.⁸ Papanikolaou observes, "The Russian Sophiologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth

⁶ See Christoph Schwöbel "Where Do We Stand in Trinitarian Theology? Resources, Revisions, and Reappraisals" in *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology: An International Symposium*, eds. Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), pp. 11–12; Andrew Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, p. 7.

⁷ Aristotle Papanikolaou writes, "One cannot really understand Lossky's apophaticism and Florovsky's 'neo-patristic' synthesis without understanding that in the background lurks Bulgakov; in other words, their theologies were constructed in part in opposition to Bulgakov's thought." "The Necessity for *Theologia*: Thinking the Immanent Trinity in Orthodox Theology" *Recent Developments in Trinitarian Theology: An International Symposium*, eds. Christophe Chalamet and Marc Vial (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), p. 96.

⁸ E.g., C. Paul Schroeder argues for affinity between the thinking of Zizioulas and the influential Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky most evident in "their common conception of freedom as the highest yearning of man's being." "Suffering Towards Personhood: John Zizioulas and Fyodor Dostoevsky in Conversation on Freedom and the Human Person" *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 45:3 (2001): pp. 243–64, esp. p. 251.

centuries were the first to forge the link between Trinity and personhood.”⁹ He argues that Lossky functions as something of a filter, extracting a theology of personhood but one stripped of Russian Sophiology, and bequeathed to modern Greek theologians such as Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas.¹⁰ Orthodox personalism as it is found in Zizioulas, though influenced somewhat by Lossky’s personalism does not share its characteristic features.

As in Orthodoxy generally, Zizioulas’ theology ultimately has a *liturgical* focus concerned with the unity of the Church in communion with God. That which accomplishes this unity in the experience of the Church through the centuries is the Eucharist as it is presided over by the Bishop.¹¹ Ecclesial unity and worship as the *telos* of theology lie in sharp contrast to scholastic attempts to construct a detached and coherent system of dogma. The broad scope of this unity lies in the biblical theme of creation coming into participation with the divine, the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis*. Communion that is both eschatological and in union with God is prefigured in the present union of humanity in the Church and with God and stands in contrast to individualistic conceptions of salvation stemming from the western Augustinian tradition.

Though coming from the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Zizioulas stands apart from Orthodoxy in a number of important ways. Most notably, whereas Orthodox theology has historically

⁹ Aristotle Papanikolaou “Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology” *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, eds. Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 232.

¹⁰ Papanikolaou “Personhood and Its Exponents” p. 233.

¹¹ This is the thesis of Zizioulas’ doctoral dissertation submitted in 1965 to the University of Athens originally published in Greek: *Ἡ ἐνότης τῆς Ἐκκλησίας ἐν τῇ Θεῷ Ἐυχαριστία καὶ τῷ Ἐπισκόπῳ κατὰ τοὺς τρεῖς πρώτους αἰῶνας*. It has since been translated into English: *Eucharist, Bishop, Church: The Unity of the Church in the Divine Eucharist and the Bishop During the First Three Centuries*, 2nd Edition. trans. Elizabeth Theokritoff (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2001).

employed apophaticism to preserve a mystical quality to the substance and aim of theology, it is largely absent from Zizioulas' theology. Micallef observes that, whereas the personalism of Lossky and others, such as Yannaras and Sophrony (Sakharov), is *apophatic*, Zizioulas' theology is *ontological*.¹² In this respect, Zizioulas stands apart from much of his Orthodox tradition, particularly its apophaticism as informed by the Palamite distinction, arising from the fourteenth-century Hesychast controversy, between the divine essence (which cannot be known) and divine energies (which can be known by direct experience), a distinction revived and popularized by Lossky.¹³ Zizioulas' trinitarianism is not scholastic, for he does not seek to define the essence of God by explaining the divine substance. Nor is Zizioulas' approach apophatic, for he understands God's essence as persons-in-communion.

1.2 A Western Dimension to Zizioulas' Thought

While Zizioulas' theology originates in the Orthodox tradition, his thinking uniquely synthesizes with western thought, both theological and philosophical. In the main, Zizioulas is critical of western theology where he sees problems arising from a *substantialist* view of person, one which grants ontological priority to substance over hypostasis.¹⁴ At the same time, it is important to observe the influence of western thought.¹⁵ While the *antecedents* of his theology lie largely in his Orthodox tradition, it must be recognized that the theological enterprise to

¹² Jesmond Micallef in *Trinitarian Ontology: The Concept of the Person for John D. Zizioulas* (Domuni Press, 2020), p. 20.

¹³ See Aristotle Papanikolaou "The Necessity for *Theologia*", pp. 89–90.

¹⁴ He considers Augustine largely responsible for a line of thinking that associates *person* with individual consciousness and self-consciousness. Additionally, Boethius is to blame for his well-known definition of person in individualistic and substantialist terms (*Con. Eutych. et Nest. 3; PL 64:1343*), John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Morwenna Ludlow emphasizes the importance of recognizing the western context and influences in Zizioulas' theology *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (New York: Oxford, 2007), pp. 52–68.

which Zizioulas devotes himself is not confined to the Eastern church. He places his essays in *Being as Communion* in “the context of Western theological problematic”¹⁶ and orients his theology in the context of “our western culture.”¹⁷ His thinking is that of an Orthodox theologian seeking to apply the insights of Greek patristic theology to modern issues addressed in western theology. This dual perspective testifies uniquely to the expressly ecumenical aim of his theology. This, in part, explains why among Orthodox figures, ancient and modern, Zizioulas devotes significant attention to the early Greek Fathers of “the undivided church” whom he understands as forming part of the common heritage of the Christian faith.¹⁸

Because of the unique relationship Zizioulas has to both eastern and western modes of thought, it is difficult to make extended comparisons between his thinking and other theologies. Karl Barth, in particular, is often considered with Zizioulas in light of Barth’s understanding of God as “the One who loves in freedom.”¹⁹ Though certain affinities can be explored, important differences remain between the two.²⁰

¹⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ He refers to the theology of the Greek Fathers as “a dimension necessary to the *catholicity* of the faith of the Church and to the *existential* implications of Christian doctrine and of the ecclesial institution.” *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), II/2, p. 3.

²⁰ For example, Alan Torrance suggests a lingering individualism in Barth’s conception of person. *Persons in Communion* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), esp. pp. 31–35; for an additional study of Barth and Zizioulas see Paul Collins, *Trinitarian Theology West and East: Karl Barth, the Cappadocian Fathers, and John Zizioulas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

1.3 Neopatristic Synthesis: Ancient East Engaging Modern West

Georges Florovsky's "neopatristic synthesis", while often lacking clear definition, was a vision cast in reaction to the Russian Sophiologists and the infiltration of westernism into their vision for the Orthodox Church, particularly German Idealism.²¹ The neopatristic synthesis attempts to return to Orthodoxy's roots in the Greek patristics, both to recover the original *Hellenistic* form of the Christian faith (which classic liberal theology took as a corruption of Christianity as a fundamentally Hebraic faith) and to allow its insights to speak with fresh perspective on modern issues in theology.²² The neopatristic vision for modern Orthodoxy was expressed but not fully developed by Georges Florovsky; Louth suggests that Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* is "the nearest thing there is to a compendium of the 'neo-patristic synthesis'."²³ Zizioulas has sought to follow Florovsky's lead by aligning his own works with the neopatristic enterprise.²⁴ He maintains the Greek patristic orientation, particularly in the way he advocates the Greek Fathers' *personalist* approach to trinitarian doctrine over against the predominately *substantialist* trinitarianism of Latin Christianity. The *synthesis* in Zizioulas' neopatristicism is conditioned both by his appropriation of certain western modes of thought and by his understanding of the Cappadocian Fathers who, he argues, were seeking to construct a new Christian philosophy to address issues raised within pagan Greek philosophy. He contends that the Christian revolution of philosophy occurred with the Cappadocians whose doctrine of the Trinity afforded them the

²¹ Louth, *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, p. 178.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See Zizioulas' remarks on the neopatristic synthesis in his "Introduction" in *Being as Communion*, p. 26; likewise, in his "Preface" to *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas Knight (T&T Clark, London: 2008), p. x.

opportunity to cast a new philosophy.²⁵ Christian theology today is still in dialogue over issues raised within secular philosophy; when rooted in the philosophy of *being* constructed largely by the Cappadocians, Christian theology can speak to the issues which confront modern man. Zizioulas, more than other modern Orthodox theologians, has pioneered this synthesis.

2 Zizioulas' Eucharistic Ecclesiology and Trinitarian Theology

Zizioulas' theology is difficult to capture in a single descriptor, though it has often been attempted with such terms as *personalist*, *Christological* and *eucharistic*. Each of these descriptors on their own fail to encompass the breadth of his thinking, and thus, it becomes necessary to sketch the broad contours of this theology which I will attempt to do here.

Zizioulas holds that, from nonbeing, humankind was brought into being by God's creative act in order that God might have communion with that which he created. Due to creaturely mortality, humankind inevitably inclines away from his created purpose of participation in God and toward individualism, isolation and the nonbeing from which he came. Finitude and death are the ultimate existential threats to humankind since the *hypostasis* is constituted a person by means of *ekstasis*, a free and loving movement externally to affirm the "other." Communion and otherness are fundamental to personal ontology.

It is here that Zizioulas' trinitarianism plays a crucial role. Since *persons* (*vis-à-vis individuals*) are not ontologically constituted by their nature but by their *ekstatic* relations, it follows that, for the hypostases of the Trinity to be *persons*, their being must also not be grounded in nature, that is the divine *ousia*. Although the divine nature has no limitations due to createdness as human nature does, yet, for the trinitarian hypostases to be ontologically grounded therein would still subject them to

²⁵ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 156–65, esp. p. 161.

ontological necessity. Zizioulas espouses the doctrine of the Father's monarchy and affirms that the Father, by an ontologically free and ekstastic act, generated the persons (hypostases) of the Son and the Spirit. Thus, Zizioulas insists that there is no being as *person* if God himself is not personal, and that would be utterly impossible if God were not triune:

Had it not been for the Trinity, God would have been a necessary being, a monad enslaved to its essence, a being incapable of going out of itself. It is the Trinity that makes God free from the necessity of his essence; had it not been for the Trinity God would require an eternal creation in order to be free to reach beyond his essence, and then he would bind himself necessarily and eternally to creation.²⁶

Only God, who is uncreated, possesses absolute ontological freedom, that is, the freedom to *be* in a way that is undetermined by constraints dictated by a nature; rather than a moral freedom, ontological freedom is *ekstastic* in its outward movement to affirm what is "other." It is only by the creature's being united with its Creator—theosis—that creaturely constraints are overcome and the "biological hypostasis"²⁷ can become a person. If personal ontology is at all possible, it can only be so if God himself is personal and humanity transcends their created nature to be united ekstastically to God. Human salvation, the transcending of created nature, must be both *hypostatic* and *ekstastic*.²⁸ Zizioulas considers the Son's Incarnation ontologically as the perfect unity of deity and created humanity in a way which preserves the distinctive qualities of the two.

It is in the context of ecclesial communion, and the Eucharist in particular, that the reality of *being* as constituted by communion enters the realm of human experience. The communion of the Church is ontologically significant, for it is here that those who

²⁶ John Zizioulas, "Trinitarian Freedom: Is God Free in Trinitarian Life?" in *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology*, eds. Robert Wozniak and Giulio Maspero (London: T&T Clark, 2012), p. 197.

²⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 50–53.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53 n. 47.

are baptized are regenerated and begin a new mode of existence as an *ecclesial* being.²⁹ The Eucharist which lies at the core of Zizioulas's ecclesiology most clearly expresses the reality of communion as constituting the very being of person.³⁰ God's being, as constituted by persons in communion, is what lies behind the unique experience of the Eucharist. Miroslav Volf writes, "As soon as one inquires what it is that actually gives his eucharistic thinking its particular character, however, one must go back to his ontology of person as acquired from the perspective of trinitarian reflection."³¹ The communion within God's triune being is the primordial reality which lies behind the event of the Eucharist. Micallef writes "this so-called 'from above' theology of communion (since it comes from the divine and proceeds to the human communion) is the foundation of Zizioulas's understanding of the human personhood"³² Trinitarian theology understood according to personalism is foundational for human personhood, salvation and for the Church. Because they were created in the image of God, human beings have the potential to become persons as well as they participate in God's personhood.³³

3 Contributions to Trinitarian Theology

Though much could be said of the valuable contributions Zizioulas has made to modern trinitarian theology a few summary observations will suffice, beginning with the role it occupies in his thinking. Zizioulas' personalism is a wide-ranging system of thought, akin to *weltanschauung*, presupposing a particular view of *persons* which are relationally constituted

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

³⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 16–17.

³¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 75 n. 15.

³² Micallef, *Trinitarian Ontology*, p. 15.

³³ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 78.

over against the individualism often characterizing western theology. Like any good philosophy, Zizioulas' personalist theology is not restricted to the abstract and the theoretical. The implications for his personalist thesis are pervasive and organically relate to matters which lie beyond the traditional pale of theology, meaningfully impacting such domains as ecology³⁴, culture and the arts.³⁵ Most significantly, the doctrine of the Trinity lies at bottom of it all; the reality of God's tripersonal being is absolutely fundamental to his entire enterprise. That fact alone makes his theology worthy of a careful hearing. The value of a system of thought that is, at its core, *trinitarian*, can hardly be appreciated without recalling the state of neglect which the doctrine has suffered in the modern era. Karl Rahner rightly observed of western trinitarian theology:

Christians are, in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.' We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.³⁶

By contrast, the Trinity could not be removed from Zizioulas' personalist theology without the entire edifice crumbling. Other salutary features of his trinitarian theology deserve to be mentioned. The relative merits of his personalism aside, Zizioulas' critique of scholastic approaches to the doctrine of the Trinity which arise from a latent individualism in the human condition is a needed corrective to modern theological discourse.³⁷ Finally, Zizioulas' personalism contains a framework by which inter-Trinitarian equality and perichoretic

³⁴ John Zizioulas, *The Eucharistic Communion and the World*, ed. Luke Ben Tallon (London: T&T Clark, 2011), especially chapter 8 "Preserving God's Creation" pp. 143–75.

³⁵ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 10.

³⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burnes and Oates, 1970), pp. 10–11.

³⁷ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 1–3.

unity does not eclipse the reality of *taxis* in the immanent Trinity reflected in relations of origin and echoed in the economy of salvation, though whether he holds the two consistently remains to be seen.

II. A CRITIQUE OF THE MONARCHY OF THE FATHER IN ZIZIOULAS' TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

A cluster of difficulties in Zizioulas' trinitarian theology lies with his doctrine of the *monarchia* of the Father. The problems relate both to his portrayal of Cappadocian theology which he claims to follow, as well as the theological formulation itself. In this chapter I argue that Zizioulas teaching on the Father's monarchy has an undesirable subordinationist trajectory.

In its most basic sense, monarchy attributes the ἀρχή (source/cause) of the Godhead, that is to say, the Son and the Spirit, to the one (μόνος) person of the Father. The Son and the Spirit, therefore, have their personal source in the Father. With some variations, the concept can be found in eastern theology since the time of the Cappadocians,³⁸ and is characteristic of apophatic theology with its emphasis on the mystery and incomprehensibility which surround the simple affirmation.³⁹ In this respect, it is entirely in keeping with his theological tradition that Zizioulas subscribes to the notion of the monarchy of the Father. Nevertheless, *monarchia* plays a more specific role in his thinking, one which is crucial to his personalist theology.

³⁸ The theology of Gregory of Nazianzus was seminal; see Christopher Beeley, "Divine Causality and the Monarchy of God the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus" *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol 100 no 2 (April 2007): pp. 199–214; Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), p. 81.

³⁹ The apophatic approach readily points out the ways in which the doctrine does not conform to the norms of human experience, such as a cause having temporal priority over its effect or a cause being inherently greater than its effect.

1 Zizioulas's Doctrine of the Father's Monarchy

Relying on the Greek Fathers, particularly the Cappadocians, Zizioulas understands monarchy not simply as *rule* or *authority* but “in the sense of *personal ontological origination*, in which case it would be referred to the Father: the one ontological *arche* in the Trinity is the Father, who is in this sense the One God.”⁴⁰ *Monarchia* means that the Father is the source of the Godhead, the one from whom the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds. Koutloumousianos summarizes: “the person of the Father in the Triune Deity is the ultimate ontological principle, ground or, more precisely, cause of the divine being itself. The personal existence of the Father not only generates the other divine Persons, but constitutes His very substance, the common divine nature.”⁴¹

Zizioulas adopts the language of *causation* first employed by the Cappadocians, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus. He infers: “Now, if the Father is the one personal *arche* in God, his relation to the other two persons could not but be described in *causative* terms.”⁴² Zizioulas argues that the Cappadocians appropriated the distinctively Greek notion of causation—in part, a demonstration of judicious theological engagement with culture—without importing its nonessential entailments, such as time and substance.⁴³ “The idea of cause was introduced, therefore, in order to indicate that in God there is not only substance, relational and dynamic, but also otherness, which is also dynamic.”⁴⁴ The causal language used by the Cappadocians is not without its problems and has not been universally

⁴⁰ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 119.

⁴¹ Chrysostom Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three: Nature, Person and Triadic Monarchy in the Greek and Irish Patristic Tradition* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2015), pp. 5–6.

⁴² John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 119.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 127–28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

accepted.⁴⁵ Yet, Zizioulas scrupulously avoids applying the terminology to the *ousia* of the Father; rather, he argues that the Father is the cause of *personal* otherness within the Godhead, that is, causation on the *hypostatic* level.

In its broad contours Zizioulas' doctrine of the Father's monarchy lie well within the historical-theological tradition of the eastern church. For example, Basil understands the Father as *cause* and takes the hypostatic designation *Father* as indicating absolute independence from all causality.⁴⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus is perhaps the most forthright of the three Cappadocians on *monarchia*. Beeley observes: "Gregory conspicuously anchors the identity of each figure—and the divine life altogether—in the unique role of God the Father as source (ἀρχή) and cause (αἰτία) of the Trinity."⁴⁷ Gregory states, "We ought to recognize one God, the Father, who is without beginning (ἄναρχον) and unbegotten, and one Son, begotten of the Father, and one Spirit who has his existence from God."⁴⁸ In the eighth century, John of Damascus taught the monarchy of the Father in his work *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, a distillation and synthesis of Greek theology. In it, he confesses, "one God, one cause [ἀρχή]"⁴⁹ and contrasts creation—an act of the will and divine power—from begetting⁵⁰ which he sees as an

⁴⁵ Thomas Torrance is critical of the Cappadocian's doctrine of monarchy for the way in which it makes the being of the Son and the Spirit derived from the Father; *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T. & T. Clark, 1997), pp. 317–19; *The Christian Doctrine of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 176–85. He writes, "Since no distinction between underived Deity and derived Deity is tenable, there can be no thought of one Person being ontologically or divinely prior to another or subsequent to another." *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 180.

⁴⁶ *Ep* 38.4; *PG* 32:329d–332a.

⁴⁷ Christopher Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (New York: Oxford, 2008), p. 204.

⁴⁸ *Or* 32.5; *PG* 36:180b.

⁴⁹ *De Fide Orth.* 1.8; *PG* 94:808b.

⁵⁰ "γέννησις" *De Fide Orth.* 1.8; *PG* 94:812c.

act of the Father's nature (φύσις) and from his substance.⁵¹ Modern Orthodox theologians likewise affirm the Father's monarchy.⁵²

2 Extracting an Ontology of Personhood from Monarchy

Personal ontology and its perceived seminal iterations in the Cappadocians stand in sharp contrast to a historically *monistic* Greek philosophical tradition which viewed the individual as an impermanent actor in a cosmos governed by natural necessity; the hypostasis is not personal but merely a manifestation of its nature (substance).⁵³ The Cappadocians reversed this line of thinking by distinguishing οὐσία from ὑπόστασις,⁵⁴ using the latter term in the context of the Trinity to signify "individualizing marks"⁵⁵ by which the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct from one another. Moreover, the Cappadocians removed οὐσία as the primary ontological reality and in its place affirmed the ὑπόστασις as *being* in its own right. Thus, it is argued, the Cappadocians redirected the course of Greek Christian thought toward a *personal* versus a *substantialist* understanding of the Trinity.

Monarchy in Zizioulas begins to lose its resemblance to that of the Fathers and to take on its own distinctive character as it is used to construct an ontology of persons in which God's being is constituted by an act of communion.⁵⁶ Basil in particular, is used

⁵¹ "ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας αὐτοῦ" *De Fide Orth.* 1.8; *PG* 94:813a; see Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene: Tradition and Originality in Byzantine Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 103–15.

⁵² E.g., Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 58–62.

⁵³ *Being as Communion*, pp. 27–33.

⁵⁴ E.g., Basil, *Ep.* 38.1–2; *PG* 32:325–28; and *Ep.* 236.6; *PG* 32:884c.

⁵⁵ Basil's term: "τῶν ἰδιαζόντων σημείων" *Ep.* 38.3; *PG* 32:329a.

⁵⁶ Vladimir Lossky likewise rooted his personalism, in part, in a doctrine of monarchy; Aristotle Papanikolaou "Personhood and Its Exponents in Twentieth-Century Orthodox Theology" in *The Cambridge Companion*

to argue that the Father as *person* is the basis for personhood as being that of person-in-communion. Using the Cappadocians in service to personalism has created controversy.⁵⁷ A number of arguments are adduced to substantiate a personal ontology derived from the Father's monarchy.

3 East-West Points of Departure on Divine Unity

Both the neopatristic synthesis as well as theological personalism (typically rooted in the Cappadocians) depend in large part upon the thesis of a distinctively *Greek* starting point differing from that of the substantialism⁵⁸ of Latin trinitarianism. It has become commonplace to think that since the Cappadocians, eastern trinitarian theology begins with a recognition of a diversity of persons and then proceeds to establish the basis of divine unity, while the Latin church, largely following Augustine, takes the opposite approach of beginning with the assumption of unity of the divine nature before proceeding to explain the threeness within the Godhead.⁵⁹ From

to Orthodox Christian Theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 233–36.

⁵⁷ Some suggest that while the Cappadocians do not explicitly reach Zizioulas' insights, his relational ontology is an expansion of their theological trajectory. Others have suggested that Zizioulas' ontology of person clearly exceeds his patristic sources and even brings him into conflict with them. For example, Ayres remarks, "We do not find, then, the Cappadocians attempting to construct a Christian ontology based on the primary reality of the person over against non-Christian ontologies" *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford, 2004), p. 313.

⁵⁸ Sometimes called essentialism as in Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, 4; see also 175 n. 6.

⁵⁹ Though the thesis can be found much earlier, its modern articulation comes from the 19th-Century Catholic theologian, Théodore de Régnon. Michel René Barnes observes that it has since been widely repeated, largely without credit to De Régnon and often in ignorance of its source; Barnes, "De Régnon Reconsidered" *Augustinian Studies* Vol 26, Issue 2

this it follows that the Western church's historical struggle has been to explaining *threeness* within the Godhead,⁶⁰ while the Eastern church has been primarily occupied with explaining and defending divine unity.⁶¹ Underlying the historical issue is a theological disagreement on the relationship between person and nature. However, the degree to which the East and West diverge on abstract starting points for Trinitarian theology is a debated point. Notwithstanding the reality of important differences between eastern and western Trinitarianism, the claim's accuracy has been questioned⁶² and the issue can become polemical. Alan Brown rejects critical accounts of personalism which synthesize eastern and western trinitarianism as theologically biased toward postliberal Anglicanism (and its patristic methodology) which he claims is motivated to legitimize its own existence by seeking to demonstrate historical and theological continuity with the

(1995): pp. 51–79. It is taken for granted by a host of modern theologians, including Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, pp. 15–21; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1981), pp. 149–50.

⁶⁰ In this light, Augustine appears to assign little ontological weight to *person*, using the term merely “to keep at least one word for signifying what we mean by trinity” (*De Trinitate* VII.3.11; *The Works of Sainte Augustine: The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1991], 228) and to avoid being “reduced to silence” *De Trinitate* V.2.10; *The Trinity*, p. 196.

⁶¹ E.g., Gregory of Nyssa's famous treatise, “An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods” (*Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, The Library of Christian Classics [Louisville, KY: The Westminster Press, 1954], pp. 256–67).

⁶² E.g., Lewis Ayres doubts the validity of the distinction, pointing to the inherent problems of isolating a particular abstract starting point in theology, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, pp. 300–301.

Fathers.⁶³ The claim for radically distinct east-west starting points is not accepted by all within Orthodoxy.⁶⁴

Zizioulas squarely bases his personalism on this distinction and, in line with historic eastern thought, a rejection of *Filioque* in favor of monarchy, though he claims to exhibit greater moderation than that of Vladimir Lossky.⁶⁵

The debate about the *Filioque* demonstrated the personalistic approach to monotheism, which characterized the Trinitarian theology of the Greek theologians. Two ‘causes’ would mean two Gods. The one substance would not be sufficient to protect monotheism in Trinitarian theology, since the one God was for the Greek Patristic tradition, as it was for the Bible too, the person of the Father.⁶⁶

The problem of divine unity confronting the eastern church, Zizioulas claims, was resolved by the Cappadocians whose understanding of monarchy located divine unity in the person (not the *ousia*) of the Father. He appeals to the Cappadocians to support the Father’s monarchy as the source of divine unity. For example, Basil claimed “God is one because the Father is one.”⁶⁷ Gregory Nazianzen writes, “and among the three there is one nature (φύσις)—God. Now the unity (ἕνωσις) is with the Father, from whom and to whom the order [of persons] runs its

⁶³ “On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology” in *The Theology of John Zizioulas*, ed. Douglas Knight (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 35–78.

⁶⁴ John Behr appears doubtful, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), p. 414; David Bentley Hart calls the idea “a pernicious falsehood” and suggests that the thesis has been weaponized against western theology. “The Mirror of the Infinite: Gregory of Nyssa on the *Vestigia Trinitatis*” in *Re-thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 111.

⁶⁵ John Zizioulas, *Forgotten Trinity*, p. 114 n. 8., cites Lossky’s *Image and Likeness*, esp. his ch 9 (1974 ed) in which Zizioulas claims that Lossky makes *Filioque* the defining issue between East and West.

⁶⁶ John Zizioulas, “Trinitarian Freedom”, p. 201; see also idem, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 123–24.

⁶⁷ *Contra Sab.*, 3; PG 31:605a.

course.”⁶⁸ Zizioulas treats the question of divine unity as a crossroads, a point at which one must take either a personalist or a substantialist path. “Either God is one because of the *Father* (‘Monarchia’, in an ontological and not simply a functional sense), or he is one because of the one *ousia* which is equally shared by the three persons.”⁶⁹ Monarchy, therefore, accentuates the distinctiveness of eastern theology from its Latin counterpart marked by substantialist thinking largely attributable to Augustine. It is the basis for divine unity which is *personal vis-à-vis* a divine unity which is substantialist. It also effectively answers the charge that tri-personal theism amounts to tritheism.⁷⁰

Zizioulas argues that the Cappadocians intentionally influenced Constantinople away from the substantialist wording of the Nicene Creed. “The creed of Nicaea spoke of the generation of the Son ‘from the substance of the Father’. This was altered by the Council of Constantinople (381 CE) which produced the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed by striking off the word ‘substance’ and making it read that the Son was born simply ‘from the Father’.”⁷¹ He asserts that this alteration “could make sense only in the light of the Cappadocians’ insistence on the emergence of the Trinity from a personal rather than an ousianic source.”⁷²

⁶⁸ *Oration* 42.15; *PG* 36:476b.

⁶⁹ John D. Zizioulas, “The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today”, in Alasdair I. C. Heron ed., *The Forgotten Trinity: A Selection of Papers Presented to the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London: BCC/CCBI, 1991), p. 110.

⁷⁰ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology; Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), p. 183.

⁷¹ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 120. See Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), pp. 12–13.

⁷² John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 120. However, the claim is tenuous; see Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, p. 6; also, Louth’s *Modern Orthodox Thinkers*, p. 220 n. 13; Ralph Del Colle, “Person’ and ‘Being’ in John Zizioulas’ Trinitarian Theology: Conversations with Thomas Torrance and Thomas Aquinas” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 no 1 (2001): pp. 70–86.

A consequence of divine unity centered in the Father is the association of the one God with the person of the Father, an association, we are told, founded in the text of Scripture which the Greek Fathers preferred over the divine *ousia* as both the source of unity as well as the primary referent to “God”. Zizioulas points to a strong eastern tradition which associates deity with the Father.⁷³ The Greek Fathers and the Eastern Church as a whole acknowledge the primacy of the Father within the Trinity. Zizioulas says this primacy is embedded in the Biblical revelation which frequently associates God with the Father rather than with the divine *ousia* as the Western church did. In so doing, the Greek Fathers were better positioned to articulate *taxis* within the Godhead, though that came at the cost of increased liability to subordinationism.⁷⁴

4 A Relational Ontology of Persons

Grounding divine unity in the person of the Father as the ontological cause of the persons of the Son and the Spirit invites the possibility of a *relational ontology* of persons derived from relations in the immanent Trinity. Zizioulas’ theological perspective seeks an ontological basis for *person*, an ontology constituted by freedom in relationship, that is, *being* through communion with that which is “other”.⁷⁵ *Persons*, then, are

⁷³ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ Robert Letham observes the danger of subordinationism in early eastern trinitarian theology by formulations which made the Son and the Spirit derive from the Father, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* Revised and Expanded Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019), xxix. Zizioulas acknowledges the increased exposure to the Arian threat, conceding, “Arianism could therefore not but be an Eastern heresy, something to which devotion to the biblical equation of God with the Father in the East could lead almost naturally.” *Communion and Otherness*, p. 118.

⁷⁵ Zizioulas writes, “we cannot speak of the person as if it were an object — as we do about natures — but can understand it only as *schesis*: as

constituted by *ekstatic* relationship. The Son and the Spirit are constituted as persons by a loving act of relationship, which is to say a *free* act, of the Father.⁷⁶ Moreover, the Father himself is, thereby, constituted as a personal being through his *ekstatic* relationship:

The co-emergence of divine nature with the Trinitarian existence initiated by the Father implies that the Father, too, ‘acquires’, so to speak, deity only ‘as’ the Son and the Spirit are in existence (he is inconceivable as Father without them), that is, only ‘when’ divine nature is ‘possessed’ by all three.⁷⁷

Ontological freedom looms large in Zizioulas’ conception of person, and it is principally based on God’s own freedom of *ekstatic* relations *within himself*.⁷⁸ Creation *ex nihilo*—God’s granting being to that which was not—also demonstrates God’s ontological freedom and distinguishes the Christian God from the god of the Greeks who is inextricably bound up with nature and even derives his being from the cosmos.⁷⁹ Divine freedom, therefore, underlies the ontology of *person*, an indispensable

that *schesis* (relation) which is *constitutive of a particular being* and in which or by virtue of which natures are such a particular being — or beings — and thus are at all.” “Human Capacity and Human Incapacity” cited in *Being as Communion*, p. 239.

⁷⁶ “Love as God’s mode of existence ‘hypostasizes’ God, *constitutes* His being. Therefore, as a result of love, the ontology of God is not subject to the necessity of the substance. Love is identified with ontological freedom.” (*Being as Communion*, p. 46).

⁷⁷ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 140. Zizioulas’ thought echoes that of Lossky: “The Father would not be a true person if He were not this: πρὸς, towards, entirely turned towards other persons, entirely communicated to those whom He makes persons, therefore equals, by the wholeness of His love” (*Lossky Orthodox Theology*, p. 47).

⁷⁸ John Zizioulas, “Trinitarian Freedom”, p. 197.

⁷⁹ John Zizioulas, “Christology and Existence: The Dialectic of Created and Uncreated in the Dogma of Chalcedon” in *Synaxis: Vol 1* (Montréal: Alexander Press, 2006), 24–28. The article first appeared in the Greek periodical *Synaxe* as “Χριστολογία και ύπαρξη. Η διαλεκτική κτιστού-ακτίστου και το δόγμα τη Χαλκηδόνας”, *ΣΥΝΑΞΗ* 2 (Spring 1982): pp. 9–20.

aspect of which is freedom entirely unconstrained by “necessity of nature.” Freedom is both constitutive of *person* as well as a logical consequent of it. Any hint of necessity is associated with a tyranny of nature. Zizioulas qualifies that the trajectory of the ontological freedom he envisions is not toward a self-absorbed individualism. *Being* is as much *ekstatic* as it is hypostatic.

Freedom is not *from* but *for* someone or something other than ourselves. This makes the person *ec-static*, that is, going outside and beyond the boundaries of the ‘self’. But this *ecstasis* is not to be understood as a movement towards the unknown and the infinite; it is a movement of *affirmation of the other*.⁸⁰

Understood in personalist terms, monarchy has a number of consequences for trinitarian doctrine. First, love and ontological freedom are elided. Zizioulas writes,

Love as God’s mode of existence ‘hypostasizes’ God, *constitutes* His being. Therefore, as a result of love, the ontology of God is not subject to the necessity of the substance. Love is identified with ontological freedom.⁸¹

Second, freedom and love become *personal* properties (hypostatic rather than ousianic) residing in the Father.⁸² In this respect, Zizioulas’ theology differs from the tradition in Nicene theology which has located volition within God’s essence rather than in the hypostasis. Ontological freedom in God is the source of freedom in created beings.⁸³ Finally, monarchy, on this

⁸⁰ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 10.

⁸¹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 46; elsewhere he treats freedom and love as distinct but complementary, as “the two components of existence” “Christology and Existence”, p. 34.

⁸² See Koutloumousianos: “love becomes a personal rather than an essential property.” *The One and the Three*, p. 6; Holmes makes the same observation of freedom, *Quest for the Trinity*, p. 13. Thus, Holmes concludes, “it seems clear that Zizioulas locates the capacity of volition with the person, not with the essence” *Quest for the Trinity*, p. 14.

⁸³ Aristotle Papanikolaou “The Necessity for *Theologia*”, p. 93.

understanding, gives rise to an inter-trinitarian *taxis*. Zizioulas observes,

the Father is shown to be ‘greater’ than the Son (and the Spirit) *not in nature*, but in the way (the *how*) the nature exists, that is, in the hypostasization of nature. Trinitarian ordering (τάξις) and causation protect rather than threaten the equality and fulness of each person’s deity.⁸⁴

Zizioulas writes,

In making the Father the ‘ground’ of God’s being—or the ultimate reason for existence—theology accepted a kind of subordination of the Son to the Father without being obliged to downgrade the *Logos* into something created. But this was possible only because the Son’s otherness was founded on the *same substance*.⁸⁵

5 Doctrine of Monarchy and Subordination

Zizioulas’ account of the Father’s monarchy exhibits a subtle but inescapable subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father. This does not imply subordination within Greek theology as a whole, nor of the Cappadocians in particular upon whom Zizioulas’ thinking depends. The degree to which Zizioulas’ theology is consistent with the Cappadocians has been a recurrent criticism of his theology.⁸⁶ I argue here that while Zizioulas’ doctrine of monarchy is largely derived from that of the Cappadocians, his own theology fails to reflect their apophaticism,⁸⁷ their use of antimony and paradox which

⁸⁴ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 140.

⁸⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 89.

⁸⁶ Alexis Torrance, “Personhood and Patristics in Orthodox Theology: Reassessing the Debate” *The Heythrop Journal* 52 no. 4 (July 2011): pp. 700–707.

⁸⁷ This criticism has been raised within Orthodox circles; e.g., Melissaris summarizes Ioannis Panagopoulos objecting to “the alleged downplay of apophaticism by Zizioulas” Athanasios Melissaris, “The Challenge of

enabled them to avoid subordination. Zizioulas' trinitarian theology, on the other hand, exhibits a mild yet undesirable subordinationist bent.

Zizioulas thoroughly subscribes to the Cappadocian settlement which distinguishes person (*hypostasis*) from essence (*ousia*) and grants ontological integrity to the person. Furthermore, he observes in the Cappadocians the insight that essence/substance cannot exist in a naked state but is only to be spoken of as it is hypostatized.⁸⁸ As in the thinking of Maximus the Confessor, *ousia* and *hypostasis* are to be understood together as constitutive of 'being' (ontology).⁸⁹ While the two are inseparable and both equally aspects of personal ontology, yet it is possible to speak of, say, *person* as opposed to *essence* or vice-versa, and even to make distinct predications of the two.⁹⁰ As in

Patristic Ontology in the Theology of Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon" *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* Vol 44 nos. 1-4 (1999): pp. 467-490, p. 485 n. 5; Zizioulas treats apophatic theology primarily *historically* rather than as an ongoing norm for theology, e.g., *Being as Communion*, pp. 89-92.

⁸⁸ He goes so far as to say, "The personal existence of God (the Father) constitutes His substance, makes it hypostases." *Being as Communion*, p. 41; also p. 44 n. 39; *Communion and Otherness*, 25; Lossky concurs: "The nature is inconceivable apart from the persons or as anterior to the three persons, even in the logical order." *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 56-57.

⁸⁹ John Zizioulas, "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor" in *Knowing the Purpose of Creation Through the Resurrection. Proceedings of the Symposium on St Maximus the Confessor Belgrade* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2013), pp. 86-87. Elsewhere Zizioulas labors to dispel the common perception that *being* is limited to or primarily associated with *ousia*, while *person* is somehow less associated with ontology. He writes, "let us make it clear that personhood is as ultimate and primordial ontologically as anything can be." (*Communion and Otherness*, 126; see also pp. 124-126).

⁹⁰ Note Calvin's careful language on this point: "we do not separate the persons from the essence, but we distinguish among them while they remain within it." *Institutes* 1.13.25 cited in *The Library of Christian*

the Cappadocians, Zizioulas himself makes distinct predications by associating the Son's generation not with his nature (οὐσία) but his ὑποστάσις (i.e., a *personal* cause).⁹¹ Zizioulas writes:

it is important to avoid saying that the Father gives his *ousia* to the Son and the Spirit, as if he were by himself its original possessor, or as if the *ousia* existed somehow prior to the persons and was imparted to them by the Father, the original possessor. The *ousia* always denoted something *common* to the three persons and it was never an-hypostatic; its hypostasization was and is simultaneous with the personal differentiation, i.e., the coming forth of the Son and the Spirit from the Father.⁹²

The Cappadocians coupled their view of timeless causation with a rejection of *substantialistic* causation. This is extremely important, and it is overlooked by the critics of Cappadocian theology. Causal language is permissible, according to the Cappadocians, *only at the level of personhood, not of substance*; it refers to the *how*, not to the *what* of God. Causality is used by these fathers as a strictly personalist notion presupposing a clear distinction between person and *ousia*.⁹³

He asserts that the Cappadocians never predicate causation of *ousia* within the Godhead.⁹⁴ By clearly restricting causation from the realm of οὐσία as the Cappadocians did, Zizioulas avoids a more egregious form of subordination which makes the Father

Classics, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁹¹ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 119–20. See Gregory Nazianzen, *Theol. Or.* 3.15–16; *PG* 36:93–96.

⁹² John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 129 n. 52.

⁹³ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 128.

⁹⁴ Zizioulas makes the same claim of John of Damascus, and he disputes Vladimir Lossky's reading of the Damascene, whom Lossky claims to have taught that the Son receives his *ousia* from the Father; *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 129–30, n. 53; Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), pp. 59–60; *De fide Orth.* I, 8; *PG* 94:821c, 824b, 829b.

the causative principle of the divinity of the Son and the Spirit. The inevitable implication would be a secondary and caused οὐσία.

Zizioulas' doctrine of causation, though limited to the hypostatic sphere, requires further nuance given his insistence that *ousia* and *hypostasis* cannot be separated, that *ousia* can only exist as it is hypostatized. Zizioulas appeals to the classic distinction in Cappadocian theology with regard to the being of God, namely, τί ἐστίν (*what God is*) which is God's *ousia*, and ὅπως ἐστίν (*how God is*) which designates the *manner* of his existence (τρόπος ὑπάρξεως) and involves the three persons or *hypostases*.⁹⁵ Because he affirms *ontological* causation, Zizioulas is obliged, in effect, to posit two distinct senses of "ontological," one which is ousianic, a notion he rejects, and another which is hypostatic which he affirms: "This implies that the idea of causation is used in order to describe the *how* of divine being and avoid making the emergence of the Trinity a matter of transmission of *ousia*."⁹⁶ In this way, Zizioulas holds both an ontological causation of the Son and Spirit by the Father, as well as ontological equality among the members of the Godhead.

"The Father as 'cause' is God, or *the* God in an ultimate sense, *not because he holds the divine essence and transmits it* — this would indeed endanger the fulness of the divine being of the other persons and would also turn him into an individual conceivable prior to the other persons — *but because he is the ultimate ontological principle of divine personhood*."⁹⁷

Despite a strictly *hypostatic* causation, the result still appears to be ontological subordination of the Son and Spirit when it is insisted that *ousia* and *hypostasis* are two necessary components of being. We are reminded that the divine substance cannot be treated as an entity in itself: "Divine nature exists only when and

⁹⁵ E.g., Basil, *Contra Eunomius* 1.15; PG 29:545b.

⁹⁶ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 129.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 130.

as the Trinity emerges, and it is for this reason that it is not 'possessed' by any person in advance."⁹⁸

The co-emergence of divine nature with the Trinitarian existence initiated by the Father implies that the Father, too, 'acquires', so to speak, deity only 'as' the Son and the Spirit are in existence (he is inconceivable as Father without them), that is, only 'when' divine nature is 'possessed' by all three.⁹⁹

If it is true that *ousia* cannot exist apart from being hypostatized, the reverse must also hold true: there can be no such thing as hypostatized *non-ousia*.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, if the Son has his *hypostasis* from the Father (i.e., personal cause), it follows from Zizioulas' reckoning that the Son's *ousia* is hypostatized by a generative act of the Father. The result is that the Son's *ontological source* (and that of the Spirit) is the Father. The divine *ousia* itself is understood to be dynamic communion which the Son and the Spirit have from the Father as their ontological *arche*.¹⁰¹ Consequently, there is a "givenness" to the divine *ousia* as possessed by the Son and the Spirit that is different from the manner in which it belongs to the Father. This raises the question whether we can attribute aseity to the Son and the Spirit.¹⁰² Can the aseity of the Son and the Spirit be affirmed when their personal being is ontologically *constituted* by the Father's act of communion?

A similar question arises from the issue of divine freedom residing in the person of the Father. "God, as Father and not as substance, perpetually confirms through 'being' His *free* will to exist."¹⁰³ Within the Godhead, there is ontological freedom "to be

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 140.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ He says as much in his summary of the ontology of the Greek Fathers: "No person exists without substance or nature." *Being as Communion*, p. 42 n. 37.

¹⁰¹ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 126.

¹⁰² As Calvin insisted that the Son "exists in himself" *Institutes* 1.13.25.

¹⁰³ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 41.

one's self, uniquely particular."¹⁰⁴ Its basis is the Father's monarchy:

Freedom in this sense is ontological, not moral, that is, it springs from the very way the hypostases are constituted, with the person of the Father being the initiator at once both of personal being and of freedom, that is, of ontological otherness in the Trinity.¹⁰⁵

Again, one might ask, how can ontological equality of the divine persons be consistently upheld when ontological freedom—a property inherent to being a person—is not possessed by the hypostases separately but is “given” by the Father and is, therefore, ultimately a property of his hypostasis? Despite his own claims to the contrary, ontological causation in Zizioulas' doctrine of the Father's monarchy tends toward an ontological priority of the person of the Father over the Son and the Spirit. Our assessment of Zizioulas' view of the Father's monarchy would be incomplete without briefly referring to its ecclesiological ramifications; the linkage between these two concepts lies in his understanding of the church as the image of the Trinity.¹⁰⁶ The Father's monarchy is echoed in the bishop's relationship to the congregation as the one who constitutes their communion. The ecclesiological outworking of his doctrine is controversial.¹⁰⁷ Koutloumousianos suggests that a subtle

¹⁰⁴ He qualifies “not as a freedom of ‘choice’, which would in any case be inappropriate for the Trinity.” (*Communion and Otherness*), p. 122.

¹⁰⁵ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 121.

¹⁰⁶ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 18–19. He suggests that “the Church as a communion reflects God's being as communion in the way this communion will be revealed fully in the Kingdom.” Keynote Lecture World Council of Churches Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, 1993. “The Church as Communion” in *The One and the Many* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2010), p. 53. First published as “The Church as Communion” *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 38.1 (1994): pp. 3–16.

¹⁰⁷ See Stephen Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, p. 12; Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, pp. 7–8.

subordination of the Son to the Father is echoed in Zizioulas' ecclesiology:

The other, who bestows us otherness, is 'ontologically prior' to us. Thus, we are directed to the field of ecclesiology, where the asymmetrical character of personhood implies hierarchical structures grounded in ontology. Since the person can exist only in communion, and communion can never exist without the one, the concept of hierarchy is inherent in the idea of a personhood.¹⁰⁸

It appears that the subtle subordination within Zizioulas' doctrine of the Trinity is amplified within the praxis of his ecclesiology.¹⁰⁹

The preceding argument has sought to demonstrate a subordinationist strain in Zizioulas' doctrine of the Trinity. In what follows, I offer three examples, demonstrated primarily from Gregory Nazianzus, where Zizioulas diverges from the characteristic apophaticism of the Cappadocians and, in so doing, heightens his liability to subordination.

¹⁰⁸ *The One and the Three*, p. 7. Koutloumousianos elaborates: "Undoubtedly, the conviction about the ontological priority of the person has served as the theoretical basis for an ecclesiological vision that accords a supremacy of power to the person of the bishop in the ecclesial community, notwithstanding the rhetoric of service. For, if a bishop is to be placed *ex officio* on the seat of God the Father, the assumption above, by giving particular emphasis to the role of a hierarchical 'primus', paves the way for excessive exaltation and cloaks him with dominating authority, even if his status is described in relational terms" (Ibid.).

¹⁰⁹ Holmes observes that Zizioulas' ecclesiological implications are controversial even among those who subscribe to his thought: "this ecclesiology (a very hierarchical version of episcopalianism, with an insistence on the maleness of the clergy) has been largely ignored by Zizioulas's followers, and his claim that it flows naturally from his Trinitarian doctrine quietly passed over" (*Quest for the Trinity*, p. 12).

6 Affirming an Unparadoxical Monarchy of the Father

Trinitarian doctrine as a whole is marked by profound sense of paradox in Gregory of Nazianzus. Thomas Noble observes, “What has not perhaps been so clearly understood is that this explicitly paradoxical nature of Gregory’s doctrine of the Trinity extends to his key concept of the Father as the unique ἀρχή, the Origin or Source or Author in the Trinity.”¹¹⁰ Despite the difficulties attending Gregory’s forthright declaration of the Father as ἀρχή and αἰτία, his apophaticism allows him to predicate a sense of monarchy which belongs to the three.¹¹¹ In effect, a trajectory in his thinking that would ultimately lead to subordination (viz. source/cause language) is muted and held in check by his apophaticism, a feature not reflected in Zizioulas’ own account of divine monarchy. Zizioulas’ appears to reflect only one side of Nazianzen’s paradox, that of the Father as source.

Gregory distinguishes predicates or “accompaniments” of the nature (περί τήν φύσιν) from the divine nature itself. These allow us to speak distinctly of the persons: “Now the name of him who is without beginning is Father; he who has a beginning is Son; and he who is with the beginning is Holy Spirit. And the nature of the three is one—God.”¹¹² Monarchy does indeed belong to the Father whom he describes as the one “from whom and to whom the order [of persons] runs its course.”¹¹³ But Gregory insists on absolute (we might say ontological) equality among the three hypostasis, such that he can also attribute *monarchia* to the one God who is three: “the three are one God when considered together, each God because of consubstantiality, one God because of monarchy.”¹¹⁴ Threeness and oneness in God are not ultimately separable realities as

¹¹⁰ Thomas Noble, “Paradox in Gregory Nazianzen’s Doctrine of the Trinity” *Studia Patristica* 27 (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1993), p. 95.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*: Noble suggests, “Gregory’s deliberate embracing of paradox is thus to be seen as an expression of his apophaticism.”

¹¹² *Or.* 42.15; *PG* 36:476b.

¹¹³ *Or.* 42.15; *PG* 36:476b.

¹¹⁴ *Or.* 40.41; *PG* 36:417b.

captured in Gregory's oft-quoted confession which immediately follows: "No sooner do I think of the One than I am illumined by the three; no sooner do I distinguish the three than I am carried back to the one."¹¹⁵ Thus, it appears that the "one God" to whom belongs *monarchia* is the triune God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Even more directly Gregory declares, "It is a monarchy not restricted to one person."¹¹⁶ Gregory Nazianzen's theology paradoxically affirm the Father as source (ἀρχή) while also predicating a specific sense of monarchy to the Trinity.

Restricting the Unity of the Godhead to the Person of the Father Zizioulas unequivocally locates the unity of the Godhead in the person of the Father, and he treats the traditional loci of divine unity, either the one divine *ousia* or Father's *hypostasis*, as mutually exclusive.¹¹⁷ However, this appears to be a false dichotomy, though one which has been reinforced historically by the eastern church's tendency to locate divine unity in the Father's *hypostasis* while the west has preferred the divine *ousia*. Robert Jenson suggests that "the ecumenical tradition has held that both of these propositions must be maintained."¹¹⁸ Jenson cites John of Damascus where he associates unity with *ousia* and with the *hypostasis* of the Father, and Jenson concludes: "The oneness of God is constituted both in the singleness of the divine *ousia* and—using the standard patristic language—in the 'monarchy' of the Father, that is, in his role as sole *arche*, sole originating principle or source."¹¹⁹ In recent years, ecumenical

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ *Theol. Or.* 3.2; PG 36:76b.

¹¹⁷ "The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today", p. 110. See also John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 117–26.

¹¹⁸ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.115; e.g., Thomas Torrance observes in Athanasius a monarchy that includes the three hypostases of the Trinity, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 180–83.

¹¹⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, p. 115.

agreement coalesced around a concept divine unity which located monarchy in God's triune being.¹²⁰

Furthermore, Zizioulas' claim to have the support of Cappadocian theology on his view of divine unity has been called into question. Nigel Rostock presents a sufficient amount of evidence from the Cappadocians to demonstrate that they did *not* ground divine unity *exclusively* in the Father's monarchy.¹²¹ Instead, the evidence shows the Cappadocians, in characteristically apophatic fashion, attributing divine unity to the person of the Father in some contexts, while in others, to the *ousia* common to the three. Rostock demonstrates that, while the Cappadocians indeed taught the Father's monarchy with respect to the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession, they, nonetheless, located the unity of God primarily in the divine *ousia* wholly possessed by each of the Three.¹²² Admittedly, Gregory Nazianzen's doctrine of causality and monarchy is complex and has been the subject of scholarly debate.¹²³ Yet certain aspects of God's being, like divine unity, do not appear

¹²⁰ "...there is only one Trinity in Unity, and one Unity in Trinity..." in "Joint Statement of the Official Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches" issued March 13, 1991, cited in Kevin Gilles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 243.

¹²¹ Nigel Rostock "Two Different Gods or Two Types of Unity? A Critical Response to Zizioulas' Presentation of 'the Father as Cause' with Reference to the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine" *New Blackfriars* 91 no 1033 (May 2010): pp. 321–334.

¹²² Rostock acknowledges Gregory Nazianzen's oft-cited assertion which sees the Father as the source of unity (326): "Now the unity (ἕνωσις) is with the Father, from whom and to whom the order [of persons] runs its course (*Oration* 42.15; *PG* 36:476b). However, Rostock observes that in 42:16 (*PG* 36:477a) Gregory clearly grounds inter-trinitarian unity within the one divine οὐσία of the Three ("Two Different Gods or Two Types of Unity" pp. 326–27).

¹²³ Christopher Beeley "Divine Causality and the Monarchy of God the Father in Gregory of Nazianzus" *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol 100 no 2 (April 2007): pp. 199–214; Thomas Noble Noble, "Paradox".

clearly attributable either to the ousianic or to the hypostatic but occupy a place of mystery where oneness and threeness reside in God. He writes, "When I say 'God' I mean Father, Son and Holy Spirit."¹²⁴ Even his declaration that God is one by virtue of monarchy is preceded and followed by confessions of the mysterious union of threeness and oneness in God.¹²⁵

Rostock's conclusion seems warranted, that the Cappadocians recognized distinct nuances in divine unity, nuances which are collapsed into a single concept in Zizioulas' view of monarchy.

Thus, for the Cappadocians, while divine unity is located to a degree in the Father, this unity does not ensure the ontological oneness of God as Zizioulas has asserted. On the contrary for the Cappadocians it was only through the shared *ousia* that God's oneness could be safeguarded. Consequently, it may be that the Cappadocians are also far closer to Augustine than Zizioulas would like to admit.¹²⁶

Zizioulas equates the divine *ousia* to the Father's generative act of communion by which the Son and the Spirit have their being. Rostock argues that Zizioulas has not fully answered the accusation that his conception of monarchy can allow for two deities, that of the Father and that which emerges by his generative act of inter-Trinitarian communion.¹²⁷

7 Generation and Procession by the Father's Ontological Freedom

Zizioulas accepts no inevitability or compulsion in the Father's act of communion by which the Son and the Spirit are constituted.

The fact that God owes His existence to the Father, that is to a person, means (a) that His 'substance,' His being, does not

¹²⁴ *Oration* 45.4; *PG* 36:628c.

¹²⁵ *Oration* 40.41; *PG* 36:417b.

¹²⁶ Nigel Rostock "Two Different Gods or Two Types of Unity?" pp. 329–30.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 321–22.

constrain Him (God does not exist because He cannot but exist) , and (b) that communion is not a constraining structure for His existence (God is not in communion, does not love, because He cannot but be in communion and love).¹²⁸

Zizioulas asserts: “the Father out of love—that is, freely—begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit. If God exists, He exists because the Father exists, that is, He who out of love freely begets the Son and brings forth the Spirit.”¹²⁹ His emphasis on freedom is founded on his assumption that “the ultimate challenge to the freedom of the person is the ‘necessity’ of existence.”¹³⁰ Consequently, his theology repels any hint of necessity or determination.

The relationship between divine freedom and God’s being is a perennial issue in theology.¹³¹ Divine freedom was an important issue for the Cappadocians in their refutation of the theology of Eunomius, Bishop of Cyzicus.¹³² Eunomius taught that the Son’s οὐσία was generated *freely*, by an act of the Father’s will (γνώμη τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατρός).¹³³ Two issues were at stake, the first of which was a subordinationist claim implied by making the Son’s οὐσία the object of generation. The second was, as Augustine observed, that by attributing the Son’s generation to the Father’s will, Eunomius “wished of course to assert that the will by which God begot the Son is something accidental to him.”¹³⁴ Underlying

¹²⁸ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 18.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹³¹ On the recent debate concerning the relationship between God’s being and election see Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), p. 7, esp. n 20; *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011).

¹³² Basil, *Contra Eunomius*; Gregory of Nyssa *Contra Eunomius*; Answer to Eunomius’ Second Book

¹³³ Eunomius, *Apol.* 12:11–12; *PG* 30:848b.

¹³⁴ Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV.5.38; *The Trinity*, p. 425.

both of these issues was Eunomius premise that, prior to the Son's generation before time, there was a "when" at which point the Son did not exist, a premise to which the Cappadocians replied at length. The Cappadocians' critique of Eunomian thought (both directly and indirectly) was to affirm both the *hypostatic* (vis-à-vis *ousianic*) generation of the Son as well as his eternity.¹³⁵ They succeeded in answering both the question of time and of will in their explanation of the relations among the Father, Son and Spirit.

Gregory Nazianzen addresses both issues by appealing to the relations as revealed in the names of the *hypostases*. He rejected the false dichotomy that *Father* refers either to an essence or an action, but "instead is a relation [σχέσεως] which the Father has to the Son and the Son has to the Father."¹³⁶ This relation establishes both an identity of nature (ὁμοφυΐαν) as well as a natural necessity among the hypostases that effectively moves the issue of causation entirely beyond the realm of generation in time or by the Father's free decision. Nazianzen writes "If ever the Father was not, then the Son was not. If ever the Son was not, then the Holy Spirit was not. If the One was from the beginning, then the three were as well."¹³⁷ More than simply arguing for the *timelessness* of inter-trinitarian relations, Gregory is asserting the categorical impossibility of God's being anything other than triune. Gregory's proposition appears to be logically convertible. That is, despite his contention that the Father is ἀρχή and αἰτία of the hypostases of the Son and the Spirit, nevertheless, their hypostases are entailed in the *hypostasis* of the Father as *Father*. Frederick Norris disputes this reading of Gregory. He notes the absence of temporal language in Gregory's first two lines and concludes that "his point could be that if ever the Father was not, then it is proper to say that the Son was not. And if ever the Son was not, then it is appropriate to say that the Spirit was not."¹³⁸ The Eunomian position was that the Son and the Spirit had their

¹³⁵ Not simply the Son's preexistence as Eunomius affirmed.

¹³⁶ *Theol. Or* 3.16; *PG* 36:96a.

¹³⁷ *Theol. Or* 5.4; *PG* 36:137a.

¹³⁸ Norris, *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), p. 187.

beginning not in time but in eternity. But Norris faults Gregory for “a major category mistake” in his third line for what Norris takes to be a temporal marker in the phrase “from the beginning,” an apparent reference to John 1:1.¹³⁹ However, Norris’s conclusion that Gregory’s anti-Eunomian argument is blunted by a reference to time is overstated because elsewhere Gregory has insisted without temporal terms on the incongruity of God being without the Word or not being Father.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, the assumption that “from the beginning” is, in fact, a temporal marker is questionable given the fact that Gregory clearly intends the phrase in an eternal sense when he says “for this reason, the one moved from the beginning (ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς) to a dyad, unto a triad. And this is for us the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴¹ Though Gregory repudiates any notion of the Son’s generation as an involuntary (ἀκούσιον), a spontaneous replication of the Father’s οὐσία, nevertheless, he appears to see eternal generation and procession of the Son and Spirit respectively as inherent to God’s being, and thus, not purely the object of the Father’s freedom.

Similarly, Basil of Caesarea argued that the analogy of light used in Heb 1:3 of the Son being the radiance of the Father’s glory requires us to include the Son in our conception of the Father.¹⁴² Accordingly, we must join together in our minds both the cause and that which comes from it.¹⁴³ Rather than making generation and procession a function of the Father’s will, Basil’s argument upholds the necessary existence of the trinitarian persons established in relation with the others: “For it is impossible when naming the Son to not think of the Father also...”¹⁴⁴

Thus, for the Cappadocians, a certain necessity can be located in God which makes the generation of the Son and the spiration of

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁴⁰ *Theol. Or.* 3.17; *PG* 36:97a. Nazianzen is even willing to call the Son and the Spirit “unoriginated with regard to time” (*Theol. Or.* 3.3; *PG* 36:77a).

¹⁴¹ *Theol. Or.* 3.2; *PG* 36:76b.

¹⁴² Basil, *Ep.* 38.7; *PG* 32:337b.

¹⁴³ Basil, *Ep.* 38.7; *PG* 32:337c.

¹⁴⁴ Basil, *Ep.* 38.7; *PG* 32:340a.

the Spirit not an utterly free act of the Father but rather an act that is both willing and inherent to who God is. The very being of the Father inescapably implies the Son's being. Gregory Nazianzen emphasized this reality: "there has never been a time when he [God] was without the Word [the Son] or when he was not Father."¹⁴⁵

John of Damascus contrasted creation and generation, the former he viewed as a function of divine will and power. The latter he attributed to the Father's nature (φύσις). He also uses the illustration of light begotten of a fire to demonstrate both the light's "fromness" and simultaneity with the fire. But he also saw the Son's generation as inherent to the Father's φύσις just like the radiation of light is of the very nature of fire. Furthermore, the Damascene affirms that "Only the Son is begotten; for he was begotten without beginning and without time by the substance (οὐσία) of the Father."¹⁴⁶ He calls the Father "the natural cause of the Son" with the result that they are of one and the same substance.¹⁴⁷

Rostock observes in Orthodox Trinitarian theology, the inference that while the Son and the Spirit would not exist without the Father, the Father would still theoretically exist without the Son and the Spirit. Therefore, Zizioulas understands the existence of the Trinity as the free decision

¹⁴⁵ *Theol. Or.* 3.17; *PG* 36:97a.

How then are They not alike unoriginate, if They are coeternal? Because They are from Him, though not after Him. For that which is unoriginate is eternal, but that which is eternal is not necessarily unoriginate, so long as it may be referred to the Father as its origin. Therefore in respect of Cause They are not unoriginate; but it is evident that the Cause is not necessarily prior to its effects, for the sun is not prior to its light. And yet They are in some sense unoriginate, in respect of time, even though you would scare simple minds with your quibbles, for the Sources of Time are not subject to time (29.3).

¹⁴⁶ *De Orth. Fide.* 1.8; *PG* 94:817c.

¹⁴⁷ *De Orth. Fide.* 1.8; *PG* 94:820b.

of the person of the Father rather than an unavoidable necessity.¹⁴⁸

Thus, while Zizioulas seeks utter freedom from “necessity of nature” the Cappadocians appear to make the Son’s generation and the Spirit’s procession to be inherent to the hypostasis of the Father. That is, God could not be other than as he is, Father, Son and Spirit; the three hypostases are mutually correlative. Zizioulas attempts to maintain a distinction between the Son and the Spirit being *constituted* by the Father, while the Father himself being *conditioned* by his relations to the Son and the Spirit, but Volf demonstrates the inadequacy of this distinction: “If one presumes that the Father alone is the constitutive entity within God, then, as we have already seen, it is difficult to not ascribe priority to the person before the communion.”¹⁴⁹ Zizioulas actually appears to have committed the very mistake in regards to the Father which he warns we must avoid when conceiving of the Son and the Spirit, that of presupposing individual existence of an entity prior to its relationships whereby it is constituted as a person.¹⁵⁰ Ontological freedom, as Koutloumousianos observes, requires Zizioulas to “introduce concepts implying temporal priority within the Trinity.”¹⁵¹ One must ask Zizioulas, if the Son and the Spirit are constituted by the Father’s free act of communion, does the Father not exist as an

¹⁴⁸ “Two Different Gods or Two Types of Unity?” pp. 324–25.

¹⁴⁹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 80.

¹⁵⁰ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 122: “In a sense, all this remains a puzzle to our common logic, because we tend to associate freedom with individuality: how can one be constituted freely if someone else with *his* freedom constitutes him? Has the Father ‘asked’ the Son and the Spirit for their free consent before he brought them into being? Such a question presupposes individualism, for how can you ‘ask’ someone’s consent for his being if he does not already exist? Ontological individualism is precisely the establishment of an entity prior to its relationships. Its opposite is the establishment of the entity through the very relations that constitute its existence.”

¹⁵¹ Koutloumousianos, *The One and the Three*, p. 16.

individual in the free exercise of his will to generate the Son and the Spirit? How can we posit a free act to generate if the very being of the willing one is, itself, constituted/conditioned by that act?

In seeking to escape any notion of necessity in God due to his nature, Zizioulas disproportionately emphasizes divine freedom. Unlike the Fathers, particularly those responding to the Arian teaching that the Son was generated *freely* and out of nothing, which is to say, *created*, Zizioulas makes divine freedom entirely and perpetually the pillar upon which the being of God and the Father's "generation" of the Son and the Spirit stand:

when we say that God "is," we do not bind the personal freedom of God—the being of God is not an ontological "necessity" or a simple "reality" for God—but we ascribe the being of God to His personal freedom. In a more analytical way this means that God, as Father and not as substance, perpetually confirms through "being" His free will to exist.¹⁵²

Such emphasis on freedom departs not only with the theology of the Cappadocians but appears to break with a theological theme throughout trinitarian theology which points to some inherent principle in God as the basis for the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession.¹⁵³ In the absence of this, his treatment of the emergence of the Trinity as a whole and the persons in particular gives the impression that the Godhead—the immanent Trinity—might have been otherwise or could cease to be as it is.¹⁵⁴ Of course, Zizioulas affirms just the opposite:

¹⁵² John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 41.

¹⁵³ As, for example, Origen did by tethering the generative act of the Father's will (1.2.6) to his eternal and essential goodness (*vis-à-vis* a sort of accidental goodness) 1.2.13; or as, in more recent times, Herman Bavinck affirms that the Son's generation was "willed" (not decreed) insofar as it occurs by the fecundity of God's nature (*Reformed Dogmatics* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 2:308–10). He qualifies this further as a "generative nature (φύσις γεννητική)" (p. 309).

¹⁵⁴ A criticism raised by Richard Swinburne "The Social Theory of the Trinity" *Religious Studies*, 54 no 3 (Sep 2018): 431. While Zizioulas' understanding of divine freedom bears considerable resemblance to

It would be unthinkable to speak of the 'one God' before speaking of the God who is 'communion,' that is to say, of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Trinity is a *primordial* ontological concept and not a notion which is added to the divine substance or rather which follows it.¹⁵⁵

However, his emphasis on the absolute personal freedom of the Father *for the other* and the primordial nature of the Trinity emerging from the Father's freedom appear inconsistent; if God could not be conceived apart from trinitarian communion, then some kind of compulsion or necessity is implied since, as Zizioulas argues, the Father's person is established by that act of communion.

The quandary of determining whether the Son's generation was either necessary or free lies in formulating a nuanced answer which avoids the false dilemma. On the one hand, generation and procession in God cannot be the product of sheer necessity, for that would subject God to an authority or principle outside of himself and would bear uncomfortable resemblance to Gnostic portrayals of God's nature as being manifest in successive

that of Karl Barth, yet Barth does not treat divine freedom as a decision to be. "When we say that God is free to exist, we do not say that God lifts Himself, as it were, out of non-existence into existence, that He makes Himself free to exist. What we say is that the mode of existence is proper to Him which is exempt from any limitation by the possibility of its non-existence." *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 306. Barth concludes that God's freedom to be precludes any possibility of his being non-existent or being other than he is (307). Bruce McCormack observes, "Had he not surrounded these claims with a rejection of the idea that 'God takes His origin from Himself' (*CD* II/1, p. 306), had he allowed that this actuality of being expresses a freedom-in-decision, he would have arrived at the same concept of divine freedom as Zizioulas did." "Theses in Response to George Hunsinger" in *Election and the Trinity in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Michael Dempsey (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 133-34.

¹⁵⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 17-18: "communion is not a constraining structure for His existence (God is not in communion, does not love, because He cannot but be in communion and love.)"

emanations.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, generation and procession, though “not unwilling” as Athanasius said,¹⁵⁷ cannot be attributed to a free act of the Father’s will, for this would imply that God’s existence as Trinity could be otherwise, and it would erode the distinctiveness of generation and procession from God’s free act of creation.

8 A Cappadocian Theology Without Apophaticism

As noted in the previous chapter, Zizioulas’ thinking diverges from his Orthodox theological tradition in his greatly restricted use of apophaticism, historically a hallmark of theology in the eastern church which embraces antimony and paradox so as to acknowledge a sense of unrevealed and ineffable mystery to certain aspects of theology. While opposing the excessive rationalization present in western forms of theology, Zizioulas’ neopatristic method and his quest for an ontology of person leads him into speculation where eastern theologians unanimously acknowledge impenetrable mystery.¹⁵⁸ This is particularly evident in the way that Zizioulas’ account of οὐσία removes the divine mystery of what God is in himself; οὐσία is communion, a dynamic “relational substance.”¹⁵⁹ By contrast, beyond the simple descriptors of *unoriginate*, *begotten*, and *proceeding*, Gregory Nazianzen repeatedly emphasizes the utter

¹⁵⁶ This concern prompts Gregory of Nazianzus to reject any idea of an “involuntary” generation, *Theol. Or.* 3.2; PG 36:76b.

¹⁵⁷ Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, 3.66; PG 26:464a.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. John of Damascus on the utter mystery of the Godhead apart from divine self-disclosure to creatures, whether men or angels. *The Orthodox Faith* 1.1. Lossky describes apophaticism as “an attitude of the mind which refuses to form concepts about God” in a way that would “adapt the mysteries of the wisdom of God to human ways of thought.” *Mystical Theology*, pp. 38–39. Lossky’s understanding of apophaticism is that it is a non-negotiable for theology: “all true theology is fundamentally apophatic” (p. 39).

¹⁵⁹ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 125–26.

mystery which shrouds the mode of being¹⁶⁰ and relations¹⁶¹ among the divine hypostases. Indeed, Gregory sees the divine nature (θεϊός) as lying utterly beyond the scope of human reason.¹⁶² Meyendorff observes,

Greek patristic thought, and particularly that of the Cappadocians, always presupposed the starting point of apophatic theology: that God's being and, consequently, the ultimate meaning of hypostatic relations were understood to be totally above comprehension, definition, or argument.¹⁶³

That is to say, apophaticism is not a property accidental to Cappadocian theology, which can be discarded when building upon their theology to construct a doctrine of the Trinity.

III. A CRITIQUE OF THE THEOLOGICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF ZIZIOULAS' TRINITARIANISM

A significant problem in Zizioulas' doctrine of the Trinity is the theological-philosophical context in which he constructs his trinitarian theology. By synthesizing patristic and later Greek theology with modern existential thought, a theological-philosophical context for trinitarianism is formed in which the biblical concept of redemption is greatly underrepresented. Redemption is the salvation-historical context in which trinitarian revelation was first given, and is, therefore, the conceptual framework by which we understand God in his triune being and his saving acts to remedy human need. In this chapter I argue that Zizioulas' trinitarianism suffers distortion for its failure to integrate the Bible's concept of redemption. Consequently, his doctrine of the Trinity is bent toward the establishing of an ontological basis of *person* which meets the

¹⁶⁰ The τρόπος (*Ep.* 25.16; *PG* 35:1221c).

¹⁶¹ The τάξις (*Ep.* 6.22; *PG* 35:749c); σχέσις (*Ep.* 23.11; *PG* 35:1161c).

¹⁶² *Theol. Or.* 2.11; *PG* 36:40b.

¹⁶³ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, pp. 184–85.

existential needs of the creature through divine-human participation (*theosis* in the Greek tradition) and which dispenses with juridical themes (e.g., sin, guilt, atonement) in favor of trinitarianism, ecclesiology, human sin and salvation all understood in *ontological* terms.

1 Trinitarian Doctrine in the Context of Redemption

Sin and redemption have been foundational concepts in the historical development of western theology. In the Eastern tradition, theology has revolved around the broad theme of creation and the culmination of its union with the Creator. Orthodoxy has criticized western theology, and not without some warrant, for its narrow focus on sin and redemption as just one segment of the broader theological vision of the Scriptures. Creation's transformation into divine likeness is a theme that is often lacking in the Latin theological tradition. However, this criticism may reveal an error in Orthodox thinking when it is taken for granted that redemption *is*, in some sense, a secondary biblical theme, one which is exclusively occupied with the problem of sin and which is, therefore, not integrally related to creation and its culmination in union with the Creator. For example, Andrew Louth flirts with this error when he writes:

There is, as it were, an arc that passes from creation to deification, union with God. But humans did not pass along that arc, as intended; they departed from it. They introduced sin, death, destruction: a problem brought about by human misuse of free will, a problem that needs to be dealt with and leads to what one might think of as the lesser arc leading from fall to redemption. It is possible to become concerned with the lesser arc from fall to redemption to such an extent that one loses sight of the greater arc passing from creation to deification, but the theology of the Fathers – and Orthodox theology, when it is true to itself – avoids this danger, and

never forgets that we are dealing with God's creation, created for union with him.¹⁶⁴

Similarly, Panagiotis Nellas calls Creation-Deification "the true axis" in Orthodox theology and claims that "restriction of this axis to just the segment Fall-Redemption leads to a mutilation and distortion of the truths of faith, the content of spiritual life and the various dimensions of the Church."¹⁶⁵ Vladimir Lossky better integrates redemption and Orthodoxy's doctrine of deification by noting that in addition to accomplishing human union with God, the Incarnation also has a redemptive purpose made necessary by original sin.¹⁶⁶

It appears, then, that a truncated doctrine of redemption is a problem to be found within both branches of the church. This is the result of treating the Bible's concept of redemption in isolation from the divine intention for Creator-creation communion and, instead, considering it in negative terms as but a temporal remedy for sin, summarily resolved by means of the Incarnation and Atonement.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), pp. 69–70.

¹⁶⁵ "Redemption or Deification: Nicholas Kavasilas and Anselm's Question 'Why Did God Become Man?'" in *Synaxis: Vol 1* (Montréal: Alexander Press, 2006), p. 25.

¹⁶⁶ *In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 98.

¹⁶⁷ Anselm's theology is often cited to illustrate redemption narrowly construed as evident by the singular reason he attaches to the Incarnation, namely, that without it redemption from sin would be impossible (Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* especially 1.5 in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans [New York: Oxford 1998], p. 270). While his assertion is correct and can even find agreement with Orthodox theology, his answer appears to make no allowance for the Incarnation having a *relational* function to effect Divine-human communion.

2 Redemption and *Theosis*

Eastern theology prefers *θέωσις* over redemption as being more central to the Christian faith and experience.¹⁶⁸ The concept itself has a complex historical development within the Eastern Church such that it repels a singular definition and is better understood as a spectrum of ideas.¹⁶⁹ Though *theosis* is not precisely equivalent to saving grace, yet, insofar as it is it involves human communion with the Divine in which the distinctiveness of the Creator from the creature is maintained, it ought to be understood in organic relation to redemption in the broad sense. That is, redemption is not a secondary movement, one divorced from or incidental to creation's ultimate and eschatological union with God. Even in its unfallen state, creation is not to be seen as an end in itself. Lossky rightly observes: "Man was created perfect. That, however, does not mean that his first state is identical with his last, or that he was united with God from the moment of his creation."¹⁷⁰ Eschatological union with the Creator is creation's *telos*, and redemption is the *means* to that end. Rightly understood, eschatological union considers all that lies within the scope of God's redemptive decree (e.g.,

¹⁶⁸ Creation's journey toward participation in God—*theosis*—is a primary consideration in Greek patristic theology, one which is conditioned but is not occasioned by the advent of sin into the created order; see Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, p. 69; Aristotle Papanikolaou, writes that Zizioulas and Lossky "identify as the heart and center of all theological discourse the realism of divine-human communion, which is often understood in terms of the familiar Orthodox concept of *theosis*, or divinization." *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁶⁹ Normal Russell isolates four distinct approaches within Greek patristic theology, ranging from the nominal and analogical to the ethical and realistic approaches (*Deification*, 1–3). The latter two are especially significant; the ethical approach understands deification as a moral transformation into a divine likeness (*homoiosis*) while the realistic approach sees deification as *transformative* as the individual reaches a participation (*methexis*) in the Divine (*Deification*, pp. 1–2).

¹⁷⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, p. 126.

creation, Fall, sin, death, atonement, resurrection, etc.) as waypoints along the path toward reconciliation—personal and cosmic—to the Creator.

Redemption as the *means* of eschatological union with the Creator implies a paradoxical function of sin and fallenness in the created order. However, the motif of transgression/fall becoming the occasion for abundant grace and reconciliation runs like a thread through the whole of Scripture (e.g., Luke 15:24; Rom 5:15; 11:12, 15; Heb 12:22–24; Rev 21:3–4). The infiltration of fallenness into the created order through human rebellion brought about death and decay and gives rise to the existential problems of impermanence and the isolation of the individual. Redemption addresses the existential consequences of sin, that of temporal and eternal alienation to the Creator, but does so by addressing juridical problems of human sin and guilt from which humanity's existential needs arise. In this light, the emergence of human need—juridical and existential—met by God's redeeming acts are understood to be the means by which the creation is brought into eschatological participation and communion with the Creator.

In addition to being the *means* of accomplishing creation's eschatological communion with the Creator, redemption also textures the quality of that union which, in the language of Scripture, is that of reconciliation, renewal, re-creation. The Apostle Paul envisions a cosmic reconciliation in which all things, both on earth and in heaven are reconciled to God through Christ by his Atonement (Col 1:19–20), a reconciliation which is experienced in the near term among those who have been redeemed (1:21–22). Those who are united with the Creator in the new creation are the *redeemed* who have become one with Christ (John 17:23) and have received his fulness (Col 2:9–10). The last state of creation, therefore, far excels that of its first state in an unfallen paradise. Creation begins with divine communion in state of simple innocence with an, as yet, unrevealed Trinity; it culminates in the praises of the redeemed in fellowship with God and the Lamb in the fellowship of the Spirit.

3 Trinitarian Revelation in the Context Redemption

Biblical revelation from which the doctrine of the Trinity is deduced occurs in the contexts of redemption, that is, through God's saving acts by which he remedies the problem of sin and death by bringing the redeemed into eternal life and communion with himself.

An important exegetical issue attends the relationship between sin and death as expressed in Paul's declaration that death came to all men ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον (Rom 5:12). In the Augustinian tradition, the phrase encapsulates humanity's *peccatum originale* (original sin), namely, universally guilt with Adam and condemnation for his first sin, whether by humanity's *real participation* with Adam as Augustine taught (mistakenly taking the phrase ἐπὶ ᾧ as "in whom"), or by Adam's *representative headship* over the human race as in Reformed covenant thinking. Meyendorff points to an entirely different interpretive tradition in the Eastern Fathers which takes the relative pronoun ᾧ as masculine and identifies its antecedent as the masculine noun *death* (ὁ θάνατος) in the preceding clause.¹⁷¹ On this reading, Paul asserts "death spread to all men; and *because of death* all sinned..."¹⁷² This interpretation is commonly held in present-day Orthodoxy, and, quite opposite the Augustinian tradition, it views death more in terms of *cause* and sin as the effect. While certainly possible *grammatically*, this interpretation resists the biblical flow of ideas which views death as a divine judgment occurring *consequent to* sin (e.g., the sequence of fall, death, sin in Gen 3–4; Rom 5:15, 16, 17). Leaving aside the question of *peccatum originale*, one can find the Fathers even within the Greek patristic tradition affirming death as a consequence

¹⁷¹ Grammatically, the pronoun could be either masculine or neuter; it takes the gender of its antecedent in the context. For a discussion of the grammar and interpretive possibilities for the phrase ἐφ' ᾧ here and elsewhere in Paul, see Murray Harris, *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), pp. 139–41.

¹⁷² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 144.

arising from disobedience.¹⁷³ We must conclude that redemption—effected by and revealing the Triune God—addresses human need arising from the infiltration of sin into the created order and is the vehicle by which eschatological union and participation in the life of God is realized by the redeemed. Trinitarian doctrine does not come to us fully formed in the Bible, but is, instead the product of theological reflection and synthesis of revelation, both historical and verbal, in the light of the church and its historical teaching. Knowledge of God as Trinity belongs to the creature only as God freely shares himself with his creation. Furthermore, God’s being is entirely undetermined by creaturely needs, whether redemptive or existential. Self-revelation is self-sharing to graciously meet human need. Thus, while redemption is the human context in which revelation is received, it does not make the doctrine of the Trinity arise from human experience.

The biblical data from which trinitarian doctrine is deduced is not that of direct verbal propositions on God’s threeness.¹⁷⁴ Rather, God’s revelation of himself as triune occurred through his salvation-historical acts. Warfield observed that it was the redemptive missions of the Son and the Spirit by which God revealed himself as Triune: “The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁵ Fred Sanders writes, “The Trinity was revealed in person when the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit. They came among us speaking to and

¹⁷³ E.g., Theophilus of Antioch: “through the man’s disobedience sprang toil, misery, grief, and he finally fell into death” (*Theophilus to Autolytus* 2.XXIV; *PG* 6:1092c).

¹⁷⁴ This is not to minimize the importance of biblical statements, such as the terse utterances on inter-trinitarian relations (e.g., John 17:5).

¹⁷⁵ Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity”, p. 33. Warfield argued cogently that the doctrine of the Trinity is “undiscoverable by reason” and therefore, “incapable of proof from reason.” Warfield, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: 1968), p. 23.

about each other as they carried out the work of salvation.”¹⁷⁶ That is to say, the outworking of God’s redemptive decree for humanity is the economy in which the triune God revealed himself to humankind. Redemption from sin is the human context in which divine self-disclosure is received.

More than simply the salvation-historical context (which is to say the theological context) of trinitarian revelation, redemption ought also to serve as the *hermeneutical context*. Trinitarianism understood in light of the whole of Scripture begins by recognizing an organic link between Creation and redemption, both free acts of the triune God toward that which is external to him.¹⁷⁷ In both, the triune God freely reveals something of himself to his creation, and both are prerequisite to the *telos* which is new creation. The Father sent the Son to be the incarnate savior of the world (1 John 4:14). The Son requests and the Father sends the Holy Spirit (John 14:16). Trinitarian revelation occurred in the context of human redemption from sin. In light of God’s triune saving acts, individual salvation occurs by the Father’s elective decree, through the Son’s redemptive activity, and unto the sanctifying work of the Spirit (1 Pet 1:2). The saving acts of God to accomplish redemption for sinful humanity function as a sort of prism revealing the Triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity must be understood within this economy. Human redemption from sin is not simply coincidental with biblical revelation on God’s triunity; rather, I argue that redemption is the theological context by which trinitarian doctrine must be formulated. Trinitarian reflection attempted apart from a redemptive theological context or from within a different context, such as Zizioulas’ context of personal ontology, is liable to introduce distortion to one’s trinitarianism.

¹⁷⁶ Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), p. 72.

¹⁷⁷ The linkage between Trinity, creation and redemption is particularly evident in patristic rehearsals of the “rule of faith”; e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.X.1; PG 7:549a.

4 A Critique of Trinitarianism According to Personalist Ontology

The argument presented here is *not* that Zizioulas is an existentialist seeking support from the Greek Fathers, though his affinity to modern philosophical modes of thinking has precipitated this criticism. Alan Brown summarizes:

the thought of the Metropolitan of Pergamon is located within particular traditions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century 'personalist' and/or 'existentialist' philosophical thought, and his entire theological project is then rejected as being 'philosophical'— and therefore not Christian theology at all.¹⁷⁸

The existential concerns which underly his doctrine have raised questions about the degree to which his theology organically relates to the philosophy of existentialism. However, Zizioulas himself is critical of existentialism on a number of points, and many have rightly observed that his existential interests do not make him an existentialist, *per se*.¹⁷⁹ Given his criticism, it is

¹⁷⁸ Alan Brown "On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology" in Douglas Knight *The Theology of John Zizioulas* (2007), p. 35. In a strange irony, Brown argues that Zizioulas' theology should not be judged on the basis of its intellectual genealogy, and he then proceeds to accuse Orthodox detractors of Zizioulas' neopatristic synthesis, such as Lucian Turcescu, Andrew Louth and John Behr, as being thoroughly given over to the influence of postliberal Anglicanism (pp. 37–41).

¹⁷⁹ For instance, Zizioulas faults modern existentialism for its disjunction between nature and person, "a disjunction which is totally absent in the Greek Fathers." "'Person' and 'Nature' in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor", p. 87; at the same time, Zizioulas is transparent about assumptions he shares with existentialism such as "freedom from the given (and nature)" "'Person' and 'Nature'" p. 104. For critical evaluations which argue *against* his being an Existentialist, see Douglas Farrow, "Person and Nature: The Necessity-Freedom Dialectic in John Zizioulas" in *The Theology of John Zizioulas*, ed. Douglas Knight (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 109–23; Aristotle Papanikolaou "Is

unlikely that modern existentialism would include Zizioulas among its ranks. Nevertheless, it can be argued that its influence on his thinking is evident, both in its foundational assumptions and the questions it prioritizes.¹⁸⁰ These relate particularly to Zizioulas' conception of freedom and of person as constituted by their relations. Because Zizioulas attempts to address modern questions on the constituents of the human person by appeal to divine hypostases as person constituted by relation to the other, some have rejected Zizioulas' theology as a form of social trinitarianism.

In contrast to the above criticism, the argument here concerns the *results* of trinitarian doctrine considered in light of the theological-philosophical context in which it is formed. It can hardly be debated that Zizioulas' trinitarian doctrine emerges from a synthesis of Eastern patristic theology applied to issues raised by modern existentialism and personalist philosophy. The influence of the Eastern Fathers is transparent and pervades his theology, though the concurrence of his conclusions with their theological trajectory is in doubt, along with some aspects of his patristic interpretation. His theological method prioritizes the assessment of human need prior to the application of dogma.¹⁸¹

John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise?" *Modern Theology* 20:4 (October 2004): pp. 601–607.

¹⁸⁰ In his own comments, Zizioulas downplays the influence of existentialism on his thinking, deferring, instead to the theology of the Greek Fathers; and yet he acknowledges that his function as a systematic theologian entails the consideration of questions which the Fathers did not ask ("Person' and 'Nature'" pp. 107–08, esp. n. 60). Thus, it appears that his trinitarian doctrine is fundamentally shaped by the Greek Fathers and is further qualified by his engagement with modern existential philosophy which gives rise to his neopatristic synthesis, particularly, that of historic Greek theology and modern existential thought.

¹⁸¹ Zizioulas suggests that theology must "seek ways of *relating* the Gospel to the existential needs of the world and to whatever is human. Instead of throwing the Bible or the dogmas of the Church into the fact of the world, it would be best to seek first to feel and understand what every human being longs for deep in their being, and then see how the Gospel

Thus, his neopatristic synthesis leads his Greek patristic theology into dialogue with modern existential questions on what constitutes *person* ontologically. However, redemption in its broad sense, inclusive of juridical themes (e.g., transgression, guilt, forgiveness, etc.) as well as a teleological orientation toward creaturely transformation into the divine likeness is not represented. Rather, the juridical aspects of redemption are eclipsed by a consuming focus on creaturely transformation narrowly conceived in ontological terms where the assumptions of existentialism and personalism appear to set the terms of the discussion. The results, I argue, are deleterious effects on various aspects of his theology culminating in a distorted doctrine of God, whereby trinitarian doctrine serves as an existential template for humanity's attainment of personhood. The focus on human existential needs is evident in his trinitarian theology:

There is a growing need for relating the Trinitarian model of existence to the human person. On this matter very little, if anything at all, has been done so far. And yet the notion of *Person* is a current notion in sociology and a favourable ideal in humanism – religious and atheistic alike. Without a study of the doctrine of the Trinity we cannot relate theology to the deeper existential needs of Man. Christian faith, it would seem to me at least, is empty of all existential significance for Man without the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁸²

In the following sections, I will seek to substantiate the claim of distortion in Zizioulas' doctrine of the Trinity. However, personalism in Zizioulas' thought is integral to his entire theological vision. Consequently, critically interacting with his trinitarianism requires at least a cursory engagement with his theology as a whole.

and doctrine can make sense to that longing." "Church as Communion" in *The One and the Many*, p. 57.

¹⁸² "The Doctrine of God the Trinity Today" *The Forgotten Trinity*, p. 107.

5 Creation, Humanity and Freedom

Zizioulas lucidly demonstrates *antithesis* between patristic thought on the Judeo-Christian view of creation in contrast to Greek philosophy. "Creation by the Christian God is in its essence an *ontological* act, an act that constitutes another being; while for the god of Plato it is in essence an *aesthetic* act, giving form to matter which pre-existed."¹⁸³ Creation *ex nihilo* is paramount, and in many ways is the bedrock of his entire theology. It testifies to the unilateral freedom of God and his desire for communion with an "other" outside of himself. It equally demonstrates that creation's existence is not *necessary* (that is, eternal, as in the Greek view of matter), but was freely brought into being by God. However, the absolute *nonbeing* which preceded the God's creative act is, for Zizioulas, indicative of an inescapable mortality that inheres *createdness*. Just as creation was brought into being out of nothing, it is under constant threat of returning to nonbeing: "Absolute nothingness, the non-being which is a precondition of the created, is not automatically removed by existence, but constantly pervades and suffuses it."¹⁸⁴ Such is the state of *nature*, a term which the Greek Fathers use to refer to that which is created and is, therefore, distinct from God. Though not evil in itself, "nature can and must be transcended; this is the privilege and the function of the *free mind*, made 'according to God's image.'"¹⁸⁵ The necessity of nature ultimately terminates in death. Zizioulas writes,

I have insisted ... on the fact that in human existence the conflict between otherness and communion, that is, the particular (the *hypostasis/person*) and the general (*ousia/substance* or nature), is not only ontological but also in *itself unredeemable*: nature not only precedes particular

¹⁸³ "Christology and Existence" p. 25.

¹⁸⁴ "Christology and Existence" p. 29.

¹⁸⁵ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 143.

beings and dictates its laws to them, but also finally swallows them up through death.¹⁸⁶

Nature's constraints are not moral; they do not derive from the Fall. Rather, they are inherent to creaturehood. The created condition is understood to be inherently constrained by death quite apart from the Fall.

The nature of the created does not have within it any possibility of survival: Heidegger was right to call it 'being-unto-death.' To be created automatically means that you are mortal, that you are subject to the threat of *total and absolute annihilation*.¹⁸⁷

Consequently, the product of God's creative activity appears to be an ontologically unstable *being* that inevitably regresses toward nonbeing.

Humankind was created with a free will, and it is only in the exercise of it to relate to that which is "other" does one move toward being a *personal* and thereby transcend the constraints of nature.¹⁸⁸ Though only God is free in the absolute sense, there is some correspondence in Zizioulas' thinking between divine

¹⁸⁶ John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, p. 63

¹⁸⁷ John Zizioulas, "Christology and Existence" p. 29.

¹⁸⁸ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 2–3. The conceptual antecedents to Zizioulas' understanding of *person* as constituted by communion are debated. Lucian Turcescu suggests the existentialist thought of Martin Buber and the personalist philosophy of John Macmurray as the most likely influences, both of whom Zizioulas has cited approvingly, "'Person' Versus 'Individual', and Other Modern Misreadings of Gregory of Nyssa" in *Rethinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford, Blackwell, 2003), p. 105. Catherine Mowry LaCugna does not speculate on influences but treats the works of Macmurray and Zizioulas together as addressing distinct but complementary aspects of a philosophy of person as constituted by relations, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperCollins: 1991), pp. 255–66, esp. 265–66. See pp. 266, 310 n. 77 for LaCugna's insightful and critical comments on the heteronomy which can result from Zizioulas' view of persons as constituted by external relations.

ontological freedom and creaturely freedom. Volf captures this relationship by observing that creation is the free act of God and renders that which is created open to the possibility of also being free.¹⁸⁹ Human freedom is pivotal, for by it, one chooses either to affirm his or her created nature and thus remain individual and isolated which is to choose nonbeing, or one may reach outside of one's self, to choose *ekstatic* relationship with that which is "other," as the Father did in freely generating the Son and the Spirit (Zizioulas conception of monarchy) and as the Trinity did in freely creating the world.

Zizioulas' theology has been criticized for the way in which the necessity of nature appears to make consequences of the Fall latent to the very *createdness* of the natural order. Miroslav Volf writes, "Creation and Fall coalesce into a single entity in Zizioulas's thinking. The Fall consists merely in the revelation and actualization of the limitations and potential dangers inherent in creaturely existence."¹⁹⁰ Similarly, Douglas Farrow observes that by predicating an existential freedom-necessity dialectic of creation, Zizioulas appears to conflate creation and fall or at least suggests that "the fall is somehow implicit in creation."¹⁹¹ Replying to Farrow, Zizioulas clarifies that he believes "the fall has prevented creation from overcoming the limitations inherent in creaturehood (corruptibility, mortality, etc.)."¹⁹² At the same time, he acknowledges the relative emphasis on sin as a point of difference:

As to Farrow's suggestion that it is *sin* that is the ultimate threat (p. 123), this is probably the real issue behind our

¹⁸⁹ *After Our Likeness*, pp. 80–81.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 81–82.

¹⁹¹ "Person and Nature: The Necessity-Freedom Dialectic in John Zizioulas" in *The Theology of John Zizioulas*, edited by Douglas Knight (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), p. 122.

¹⁹² "Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor", p. 107 n. 56.

disagreement. For the Greek patristic tradition, the real threat was not sin but mortality due to createdness.¹⁹³

In one sense, Zizioulas can reasonably appeal to Eastern patristic theology which sees creation's purpose realized in dynamic relationship and communion with its Creator. The created order is not to be viewed as complete in itself from the beginning; rather, the moment of creation initiates creation's journey toward unity and oneness with the Creator. While Adam's fall and the introduction of sin into the created realm certainly affect the realization of that union, the Fall and redemption find their place within the broader movement of the cosmos toward its proper relation to the Creator. The *telos* of Zizioulas' theology is that of divine-human communion in which created humanity comes to participate in God through a relationship of communion and fellowship, an idea which fits within the broad tradition of *theosis* in the teaching of the Orthodox Church.

The impress of historic Greek theology is also evident in Zizioulas' view of sin and death which differs significantly from Augustinian hamartiology which has profoundly shaped western theology. Meyendorff observes, "In the Byzantine world, where Augustinian thought exercised practically no influence, the significance of the sin of Adam and of its consequences for mankind was understood along quite different lines."¹⁹⁴ In historic eastern thought, sin is a movement away from the Creator and, by consequence toward the natural state. Ultimately, sin is associated with nonbeing and death.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 143.

¹⁹⁵ E.g., Athanasius sees human transgression is a rejection of humanity's divinely intended incorruptibility which triggers the rule of death which is a regression toward the natural state which terminates finally in nonbeing, εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι (*On the Incarnation* 4; Greek text cited in: *On the Incarnation: Greek Original and English Translation*, Popular Patristics Series, trans. John Behr [Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011], p. 59; cf. *PG* 25:104b). Russell summarizes Athanasius: "As a result of the Fall humanity is drawn towards the pole of createdness

Zizioulas writes, “Death is the opposite and the negation of life. It is a step towards pre-creative ‘non-existence’.”¹⁹⁶ He appears to share the Greek patristic perspective on death which sees it in relation to sin more as cause than effect, the condition of mortality resulting in a greater propensity to sin.¹⁹⁷

All this means that man as a biological hypostasis is intrinsically a tragic figure. He is born as a result of an *ecstatic* fact—erotic love—but this fact is interwoven with a natural necessity and therefore lacks ontological freedom. He is born as a *hypostatic* fact, as a body, but this fact is interwoven with individuality and with death...His body is the tragic instrument which leads to communion with others, stretching out a hand, creating language, speech, conversation, art, kissing. But at the same time it is the “mask” of hypocrisy, the fortress of individualism, the vehicle of the final separation, death...The tragedy of the biological constitution of man’s hypostasis does not lie in his not being a person because of it; it lies in his tending towards becoming a person through it and failing. Sin is precisely this failure. And sin is the tragic prerogative of the person alone.¹⁹⁸

However, Zizioulas doctrine of the Trinity understood in light of creation and human need cannot be explained solely in terms of its origins in Greek patristic theology. Here, at least, Zizioulas’ theology bears certain affinities to modern western philosophical thought, both in his view of the created condition as well as in the ontological significance he accords to Divine-human communion.

with a tendency to return to nothingness.” *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, p. 169.

¹⁹⁶ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 267.

¹⁹⁷ As in the previously cited Eastern interpretation of Rom 5:12 in John Meyendorff (*Byzantine Theology*, p. 144). He writes, “There is indeed a consensus in Greek patristic and Byzantine traditions in identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance essentially of morality rather than of sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality” (p. 145).

¹⁹⁸ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 52.

With regard to the created condition, Zizioulas goes beyond simply affirming creation's need even before the Fall to become united in communion with its Creator. Instead, his created-uncreated dialectic leads to an overtly *negative* assessment of createdness as inherently mortal, fraught with death and decay. While he acknowledges that existence is a gift granted to human beings by the free act of God, nevertheless, he writes: "The created is tragic by its nature; its existence is defined by the paradox that brings together two absolutely mutually exclusive elements, life and death, being and nothingness. And this is because its being has a starting point, a beginning."¹⁹⁹ Papanikolaou puts the matter clearly:

for Zizioulas the aspect of human experience by which he clarifies his trinitarian theology is the human experience of longing for irreducible uniqueness and freedom from necessity colliding tragically with death and finitude.²⁰⁰

What is the basis for attributing tragic finitude and death to createdness, irrespective of the effects of sin?

The extent to which Zizioulas' thinking bears the direct influence of modern philosophy remains an open question. However, we may safely observe that Zizioulas' understanding of *being* as he applies it to creation coincides with existentialist thought and places him at odds with some within his own tradition. Though Zizioulas credits Martin Heidegger's ontology of being as a movement away from the pitfalls of western philosophy, nonetheless, he expresses skepticism over the possibility of applying Heidegger's insights to the interpretation of Greek patristic theology.²⁰¹ Ironically, however, in disputing Heidegger, Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos finds himself contradicting Zizioulas on the fundamental point of whether or not death is an ontological concept implicit within the very notion of existence. Vlachos writes, "God did not create the world

¹⁹⁹ John Zizioulas, "Christology and Existence", p. 29.

²⁰⁰ Aristotle Papanikolaou, "The Necessity for Theologia", p. 95.

²⁰¹ See his own comments in *Being as Communion*, pp. 44–45, n. 40.

negatively, but positively, that is, without death. Death is an intervention. This is why it is not an ontological phenomenon: that is to say it is not characteristic of the hypostasis.”²⁰² Zizioulas’ view of creation, therefore, appears to reflect a degree of influence from modern philosophy.

Viewing creation as inherently subject to death also places Zizioulas thinking in conflict with the emphatic declaration of Scripture on the goodness of the created order in its completed state (Gen 1:31; cf. 2:18). The crucial assumption is that mortality is an inescapable property of that which is created and can only be overcome by union with the Divine.²⁰³ This is the failure to distinguish eternity as it is in God, having neither beginning nor end, from the concept of finite *created immortality*. Zizioulas relies on Athanasius to argue that, had humanity been endowed with eternity, the advent of sin would quite obviously be incapable of wielding the power of death (a return to non-being).²⁰⁴ Whereas the Scriptures place death as consequent to sin, Zizioulas sees createdness as the cause of death. Therefore, as Zizioulas sees it, human ontology is threatened by death which is inherent to createdness. Consequently, trinitarianism is conceived in a way which resolves created mortality and grants ontological personhood to those who have become united with their Creator.

Finally, whether death is understood as cause or effect, the Greek Fathers affirm juridical as well as existential aspects of sin. Zizioulas is at odds with his heritage in the Greek patristics where redemption is conceived in a way that addresses both of

²⁰² *The Person in the Orthodox Tradition*, 2nd ed (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 2021), p. 117. Likewise, Farrow detects an existentialist affinity in Zizioulas’ personalism, particularly in the assumption that necessity of nature is antithetical to personhood “Necessity-Freedom Dialectic” esp. p. 111.

²⁰³ Any notion of the immortality of the soul is dismissed on these grounds, that what is created cannot be eternal (e.g., *Being as Communion*, p. 265).

²⁰⁴ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 266.

these aspects.²⁰⁵ Zizioulas appears to dispense with the juridical in favor of the ontological. Or when present, he makes juridical themes subservient to the ontological. A striking example is how the eminently *juridical* concept of retributive judgment on the impenitent in Hell is overtaken by an ontological interpretation of Hell:

the words of the Gospel take on an existential (and not simply a juridical) meaning: ‘and they will go away into eternal punishment, but the just into eternal life’ (cf. Mt. 25.46). Hell is the existential space where all those who desire the loss of others — and cannot obtain it, because of the Resurrection — are held. Hatred is, *par excellence*, the foretaste of hell.²⁰⁶

6 Salvation in Divine-Human Communion

The principle of created mortality which would ultimately preclude the realization of personhood shapes Zizioulas’ understanding of God and his vision for Divine-human communion. The Resurrection is invoked to resolve creation’s impermanence, which is the problem of death. Louth observes, “the resurrection is seen as the conquest of Christ over death, and so it is death, rather than sin, that is central to the Orthodox understanding of the consequences of Adam’s disobedience.”²⁰⁷ Papanikolaou attempts to clarify the salvation concept in Zizioulas, arguing that

freedom from the necessity of nature cannot be understood as a transcending or abolishing of created nature, but as a freedom from the necessity created by the effects of sin on created nature. Human personhood, then, is not a

²⁰⁵ Lossky draws attention to “the wider and richer idea of redemption found in the Fathers” in which juridical themes are present alongside the theme of the creature’s union with God (*In the Image and Likeness of God*, p. 103; see pp. 97–110).

²⁰⁶ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 268.

²⁰⁷ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, p. 70.

transcendence of created nature per se, but a personal realization of all that created nature was created to be.²⁰⁸

However, this is too generous a reading of Zizioulas. Salvation in his thinking becomes redemption from *createdness* itself, that is, from certain constraints inherent to creaturehood (e.g., individuality, mortality), when that which is created becomes indissolubly united with the Creator. As sin and death are understood in existential terms, likewise, Zizioulas considers salvation ontologically:

The eternal survival of the person as a unique, unrepeatable and free “hypostasis,” as loving and being loved, constitutes the quintessence of salvation, the bringing of the Gospel to man. In the language of the Fathers this is called “divinization” (*theosis*), which means participation not in the nature or substance of God, but in His personal existence. The goal of salvation is that the personal life which is realised in God should also be realized on the level of human existence. Consequently salvation is identified with the realization of personhood in man.²⁰⁹

Norman Russell observes that this attainment of personhood in Zizioulas is actually a recasting of the concept of deification in the Fathers.²¹⁰ This is ultimately an eschatological reality since humankind still lives within the sphere where nature imposes its necessity.²¹¹

7 Trinitarianism in a Eucharistic Theology

While personalism exerts broad influence in Zizioulas’ theology, it is particularly bound up with his doctrine of the Trinity. The

²⁰⁸ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Necessity of *Theologia*”, p. 92.

²⁰⁹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 49–50.

²¹⁰ *The Doctrine of Deification*, p. 318.

²¹¹ “Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus”, p. 108; *Being as Communion*, p. 62.

existential needs of mankind which guide his personalism shape his approach to the Incarnation, which he understands as the supreme example of the realization of personhood in communion:

Personhood, as I have argued, is the mode in which nature exists in its ekstatic movement of communion in which it is hypostasized in its catholicity. This, I have also said, is what has been realized in Christ as the man *par excellence* through the hypostatic union. This, I must now add, is what should happen to every man in order that he himself may *become Christ* (according to the Fathers) or 'put on Christ' (according to Paul). And this is what makes Christ the head of a new humanity (or creation) in that he is the first one both chronologically and ontologically to open up this possibility of personhood in which the distance of individuals is turned into the communion of persons.²¹²

In some sense, his thinking bears affinity to that of Athanasius which Russel summarizes: "Through the convergence of the uncreated and the created in Christ, through his simultaneous 'otherness' and 'nearness' in relation to us, humanity is now drawn towards the opposite pole of the uncreated."²¹³ Taking the Incarnation as a paradigm for *theosis* rather than as a unique and unrepeatable salvation-historical event is not inconsistent with Greek patristic thought.²¹⁴

However, Zizioulas' view on the Incarnation represents an important departure from traditional Orthodox thought, as evidenced by the controversy ignited in Greek Orthodox circles by his article "Christology and Existence" which first appeared in the Greek journal *ΣΥΝΑΞΗ* in 1982. In it, Zizioulas controversially omits juridical import and, instead, treats the Incarnation solely

²¹² John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 245.

²¹³ *The Doctrine of Deification*, p. 169.

²¹⁴ E.g., Maximus the Confessor: "God the divine Logos wills the mystery of his Incarnation to be effected always and in all things" (*Ambigua to John* 7; PG 91:1084d).

according to its existential significance.²¹⁵ In essence, he commits the same error as Anselm did by making one aspect of its significance primary—divine-human communion in this case—to the exclusion of others. Because, Zizioulas finds in the Incarnation the solution to the problem of death endemic to the created order, it becomes an ontological ideal for humanity seeking to escape the inevitability of death by union with the Divine. In Christ the divine and the human were united “without division” and “without confusion” in the wording of Chalcedon. The Incarnation, then, is accorded *ontological* value and becomes something of a model or pattern for human ontology. He writes that,

In order for the created to live it must be in constant and uninterrupted relationship (“without division”) with something uncreated, and in this way bridge the gulf that inevitably results from createdness and commune constantly with something outside itself. Any created thing that does not go outside itself and is not united without division with something else, is annihilated; it dies.²¹⁶

Christology, therefore, is *existentially* significant, and it is precisely that which Nestorianism endangered.²¹⁷

Christology consequently is the proclamation to man that his nature can be ‘assumed’ and hypostasized in a manner free from the ontological necessity of his biological hypostasis, which, as we have seen, leads to the tragedy of individualism and death.²¹⁸

The existential view of the Incarnation conceptually leads to the Church, which is the arena in which human experience of Christ occurs. “We cannot be the ‘image of God’, either at the ecclesiological or the anthropological level, unless we are

²¹⁵ Melissaris “The Challenge of Patristic Ontology”, p. 468; Micallef, *Trinitarian Ontology*, p. 13.

²¹⁶ “Christology and Existence”, p. 31.

²¹⁷ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 54.

²¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

incorporated in the original and only authentic image of the Father, which is the Son of God incarnate.”²¹⁹ Zizioulas writes, “This experience of the Church is the only way that the existential meaning of Christology can become a reality.”²²⁰ The individual passes from existing as a biological hypostasis to an ecclesial hypostasis through Baptism.²²¹ “In its ecclesiological sense, this dogma [“without division” “without confusion”] has become a mode of existence. The Church, when she is constituted through the Eucharist, reveals the great christological paradox: created and uncreated are united perfectly, without doing away with otherness.”²²² Douglas Farrow observes in this ecclesiology a synthesis of patristics with “modern questions and difficulties.”²²³ Consequently, ecclesiology is understood in experiential terms, as a foretaste of an eschatological reality.

Nowhere is the reality of eschatological communion more clearly manifest than its foretaste in the event of the Eucharist in which “the Church realizes her true being, manifesting already, here and now, the Kingdom which is yet to come.”²²⁴ Zizioulas’ ecclesiology has both a trinitarian as well as an eschatological focus; “ecclesial being” in the Church anticipates the full realization of *person* in the context of Divine-human communion. Papanikolaou admirably draws the various strands together:

The monarchy of the Father, and, hence, a relational ontology of trinitarian personhood, is rooted in the experience of God

²¹⁹ John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p. 5.

²²⁰ John Zizioulas, “Christology and Existence”, p. 33.

²²¹ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 53.

²²² John Zizioulas, “Christology and Existence”, p. 33.

²²³ Farrow, “Necessity-Freedom Dialectic”, p. 109

²²⁴ John Behr, “The Trinitarian Being of the Church”, p. 68. Twentieth-century eucharistic theology reflects its heritage in the Byzantine tradition: “This reunion of heaven and earth, anticipated in the Eucharist, is the eschatological goal of the whole of creation” (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, p. 136).

in the eucharist understood as the event of the Body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.²²⁵

8 Personalism and Trinitarian Theology

Zizioulas' ecclesiology has been faulted for the way in which it presupposes a communion of persons in the Trinity rather than reflecting a more specific pattern of inter-Trinitarian communion as centered in the Son directed to the Father through the Spirit.²²⁶ The "communality" of persons relating perichoretically has been associated with recent forms of social trinitarianism, though his hierarchical doctrine of monarchy ought to suggest otherwise.²²⁷ Apart from ecclesiological and liturgical considerations, conceiving the divine life as a communion of persons does not, in itself, appear to make one guilty of projecting human experience upon God. The criticism appears ill-founded.

There are, however, problems in Zizioulas' trinitarian theology which I argue arise specifically from its development apart from the biblical context of redemption in its broad sense. First, because the full redemptive purpose of the Incarnation is narrowly confined to the realm of human personal ontology, the purpose of the temporal mission of the Son is clouded. It would appear that the *fact* of the hypostatic union is enough on its own to secure existential union of the created and the uncreated while maintaining the distinction of the two (as Chalcedon affirmed). What becomes of other aspects of the Son's earthly mission, such as his death and resurrection? Of course, Zizioulas,

²²⁵ Aristotle Papanikolaou "Is John Zizioulas an Existentialist in Disguise?" p. 603.

²²⁶ John Behr, "The Trinitarian Being of the Church" esp. pp. 68–77, pp. 77–78.

²²⁷ E.g., John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, p. 310 n. 110; p. 425 n. 39; cf. Karen Kilby "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity" *New Blackfriars* Vol 81 no 956 (Oct 2000): pp. 432–45, esp. p. 444 n. 3.

sees resurrection as victory over death, but does it possess more than merely symbolic value, since, as he argues, death—lapse toward nonbeing—is effectively nullified by union with the divine?²²⁸ Furthermore, the death of the incarnate Son seems to have no significance in itself other than as a means to accomplish resurrection.

Second, Zizioulas' pneumatology is undeveloped. *Persons as being in communion* would seem to be established among the divine hypostases simply on the basis of the Son's generation. His attention to pneumatology is primarily occupied with issues in the context of the immanent Trinity such as consubstantiality and the *Filioque*.²²⁹ The Spirit's redemptive work (juridical or existential) in the economy receives significantly less attention. What was accomplished by the Spirit's outpouring in history? Zizioulas suggests that the Spirit's role in the economy that of *constituting* the Body of Christ.²³⁰ However, the Spirit's economic operations as he describes them advance little beyond the describing the work of Christ *pneumatologically*. Apart from this and scattered vague descriptions of the Spirit as associated with *koinonia*, freedom and relationality,²³¹ Zizioulas' personalist ontology struggles to articulate a meaningful pneumatology.

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to engage the trinitarian theology of John Zizioulas according to its articulation in a personalist theology.

²²⁸ Zizioulas' argument would be well-served by more careful delineation of the concept of death as nonbeing. Of course, resurrection is victory over *physical* death, but there also appears to be an *existential* death (nonbeing) which is the destiny of the *non-ekstatic* individual who chooses isolation. What is the relationship between these two?

²²⁹ "Pneumatology and the Importance of the Spirit" reprinted in John Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, pp. 178–205.

²³⁰ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, pp. 110–14.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 12.

Zizioulas' doctrine of the Trinity has much to commend it, particularly as a critique of the problems and limitations that have characterized western conceptions of the Trinity.

However, it has been argued here that Zizioulas' doctrine also has significant problems, relating both to his conception of the Father's monarchy as well as the absence of the biblical concept of redemption understood according to its broad sense.

Despite these criticisms, Zizioulas' theology of the Trinity pioneers an important field of inquiry and ought to be engaged in further study in Trinitarian thought regardless of one's particular theological tradition.

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