



Article Review

John Zizioulas on Personhood in God and for Humankind

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At last we have from Metropolitan John Zizioulas a major work that is a worthy successor to his deservedly influential *Being as Communion*.¹ It appears under the title *Communion and Otherness*.² In initial summary: '[T]he problem of otherness will be approached from different angles, all of them corresponding to fundamental aspects of the Christian faith. In all these aspects, the "other" will be shown to be ontologically constitutive for the being of God, both in his immanent and in his "economic" existence, including the person and work of Christ, as well as for the being of creation and the human being in their actual condition and their eschatological destiny' (p. 14). Without 'otherness' there can be no 'communion' either in the Church or in society, and so '[t]he task of working out an understanding of communion linked organically with an understanding of otherness appears to be imperative in theology today' (ibid).

It is a brilliant book: intelligent, learned, argumentative, persuasive. The only question, as the author himself frames it with regard to his own main point, is whether the argument presented in this book is – in its precise form – 'theologically legitimate' (p. 134). That main point – recurrent throughout the book – is addressed in detail in one of the three new chapters that figure in the series of eight studies contained in this volume. Chapter 3, in fact, is entitled

¹ J. D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

² J. D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. P. McPartlan (London and New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2006).

‘The Father as Cause: Personhood Generating Otherness’. Without ‘otherness’ there can be no ‘communion’, and ‘otherness’ is ultimately originated – both within the Trinity and among the creatures and, of course, between God and the creation – by the ‘person’ of God the Father.

The polemical thrust of chapter 3 – and indeed of the whole book – is that ontological priority does *not* reside in an allegedly ‘Augustinian’ substratum of undifferentiated essence of deity, the three being ‘one because they are relations within the one divine substance’ (p. 135) or, *à la limite*, the divine persons being ‘accidents’ of God (p. 202, n. 62), or even the perhaps kinder, gentler, more recent ‘trinity’ or ‘co-emergence and co-inherence of the three persons’ with their unity residing in their ‘coinherence’, which properly ‘indicates how the three persons *relate* to each other, not how they came into being’ (p. 136). Positively, it is the Father – as ‘the giver’ who freely originates the Son and Spirit – who is the ontological ‘cause’ of deity and the guarantor of the relations among the trinitarian persons, as well as, in and through the Son and the Spirit, the positer of the being of the creatures.

It is above all the great Cappadocians – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen—who are given credit (see especially pp. 118–145, 155–177, and 180–195, but in fact *passim*). As theologians, they reversed the philosophical Greek priority of substance (*ousia*) over person.³ They did this at the service of soteriology, clarifying what the council of Nicaea had affirmed concerning the Son and applying it also to the Spirit (as the council of Constantinople, under their influence, would do). Only if the Son and the Holy Spirit had their origins on the uncreated side of the absolute dialectic with creation could created human beings be restored to the communion with God which God intended for them – and with them could the world (*ktisis*, not *kosmos*; cf. p. 253) be restored to its purpose. That precisely is the Christian *faith*. The Cappadocians secured it intellectually by virtue of the exposition of personhood: ‘the notion of person, if properly understood’, says Zizioulas, is ‘perhaps the only notion that can be applied to God without the danger of anthropomorphism’ (p. 224). Technically put: personal being implies both ‘reaching out’ in freedom (*ekstasis*) and yet remaining ‘integral and undivided’ in its mode of existence (*hypostasis*), ‘unique and unrepeatable’, ‘the bearer of its nature in its totality’. ‘Without these two conditions, being falls into an a-personal reality, defined and described like a mere “substance”, that is, it becomes an a-personal thing’ (p. 212f.).

³ Zizioulas speaks of the ‘overturning, conversion and baptism of the Greek mind’, the ‘radical Christianization of hellenism’ (p. 254) – precisely the opposite of Harnack’s ‘hellenization of Christianity’!