

## Foreword

John Zizioulas, metropolitan of Pergamon, is one of the most significant theologians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He is well known not only to Orthodox Christians but also more widely through the publication of his books in several Western languages and, more importantly, his engagement with fundamental theological and philosophical themes that transcend confessional boundaries. He is a thinker, however, who frames his thoughts in essays and articles rather than in monographs. His most influential books, *Being as Communion* (1985) and *Communion and Otherness* (2006) are indeed collections of articles united by a common theme. This means that his seminal ideas are not developed systematically, as one would expect to find in a monograph. He returns to them frequently in different articles, examining them from various angles in ways that are not easily summarised. Herein lies the first important feature of Dario Chiapetti's book: its *systematic exposition* of Zizioulas' personalist trinitarian ontology gathered from a great many of the metropolitan's occasional writings. Such a systematic exposition, already initiated by Aristotle Papanikolaou in his book *Being with God* (2006), has now been carried forward in a significant way.

The second important feature of Chiapetti's book is its thorough examination of Zizioulas' patristic sources and its demonstration that he stands in *continuity with the patristic age*. This continuity has often been controverted. Although hailed by some as 'a modern Father of the Church', Zizioulas has been accused by others of mishandling his patristic sources under the guise of expounding them, and of insidiously introducing ideas deriving from modern personalism and existentialism. His philosophical enterprise has been ably defended by a number of scholars – to engage with contemporary personalism and existentialism

does not make him an 'existentialist' any more than engaging with the dominant philosophical tradition of their own time made the Cappadocians 'Neoplatonists' – but the interpretation of the patristic sources on which Zizioulas bases his arguments remains problematic. Chiapetti carefully examines the key notions of *ousia* (being), *hypostasis* (subsistent entity), *tropos hyparxeōs* (mode of existence), *prosōpon* (person as a relational concept), and *koinōnia* (communion) in their patristic setting and shows convincingly that Zizioulas' reflection on these notions, while treating them creatively, does not distort their meaning as determined by patristic usage.

The third important feature of the book is its demonstration of the *internal coherence* of Zizioulas' thinking. The metropolitan's theology of communion has often been welcomed as a counterweight to Western individualism. It is certainly true that he regards Western individualism (which he traces to Augustine and Boethius) as deplorable because it treats the 'other' as a threat rather than as a necessary constituent of relation. Yet at the same time, he lays great emphasis on the particular, on the hypostatic. This approach has yielded important results for how we are to conceive of the Trinity. Traditionally, we have tended to think of the one God as a unified essence differentiated as three *hypostaseis* or persons. Logically, the unity comes first (reflecting, perhaps, the monistic ontology of the ancient Greek philosophers), with the differentiation of the persons following upon this. Zizioulas, basing himself on Athanasius and the Cappadocians, has reversed the generally assumed logical order: it is the three persons who constitute the oneness, not the oneness that is differentiated as three persons. This is because the cause of the divine being is the Father, who is a particular hypostasis, not an undifferentiated essence. The Father has priority (in a causal, not a temporal, sense) and is thus the cause of the being of the Son and of the Spirit. 'Father' is a relational term. The persons of the Trinity are constituted by their relations. They are not the relations themselves, but it is their relations that determine their being. As St John Damascene says, 'the Father never existed when the Son did not exist, but at the same time there was a father and a son begotten from him, for a father cannot be called such without a son' (*De fide orthodoxa*, 8). The oneness of God rests not in the sameness of essence but in the monarchy of the Father, who freely and eternally begets the Son and pours forth the Spirit.

The *taxis* of the Trinity thus conceived, an ordering and a unity inseparable from the mutual perichoresis of the persons, fully accords with the economic Trinity as revealed in the Scriptures. The Son and the Spirit are sent into the world by the Father, in economic but not

ontological subordination to him, in order to make the Father known. Such a patterning is also reflected in the communion of Church, where, at least in principle, the faithful are united in the body of Christ under the presidency of the bishop in order to be transformed eucharistically and become in communion with each other what they were created to be.

In the twenty-first century, students of patristic thought have been much influenced by John Zizioulas. Some, however, such as Sarah Coakely and Morwenna Ludlow, have attacked Zizioulas' insistence on the priority of persons over substance; in her volume, *Gregory of Nyssa, Ancient and (Post)modern* (2007), Ludlow claims that this priority 'does not do full justice to the richness of the Cappadocian understanding of divine being'. Others, such as Lucian Turcescu and Alan Torrance, have objected strongly to what they see as Zizioulas' illegitimate use of modern 'personalist' ontology. Dario Chiapetti in this outstanding book faces these challenges squarely, vindicating Zizioulas as an accurate patristic scholar and enabling us to appreciate in considerable detail the brilliant structure and coherence of his trinitarian thinking.

Norman Russell  
February 2021