

Preface

This study is an examination of John Zizioulas' personalist trinitarian ontology. The expression 'personalist trinitarian ontology' refers to Zizioulas' reflection on *being*, founded on the notion of *person*, as encountered at the *intra*-trinitarian level (for it is within the Trinity that Zizioulas sees the full realisation of personal reality), the understanding of which is rooted epistemologically in the event of divine-human communion, particularly in the Eucharistic *synaxis*. That said, attention is focused on Zizioulas' reflection on the *person of the Father as the primary ontological reality of trinitarian personal being*. His understanding of the Father as the principle of distinction and foundation of the trinitarian personal union will therefore be studied as the *incausate ontological cause* of being as personal being, trinitarian being and ontological freedom. The study will conclude with an examination of the notion of ontological freedom in the case of the *caused person*, with reference to the Son, the Holy Spirit and humanity.

The question of the ontological principle of the Trinity, on which much of Zizioulas' speculative activity has focused, concerns the heart of the trinitarian mystery and therefore of the Christian faith. When this question is examined in relation to the reality of the person – primarily that of the Father – and of freedom, it reveals important implications on the level of anthropology, ecclesiology and pastoral care, as well as of Christian ecumenism and dialogue with the Abrahamic religions. Zizioulas' thought acquires even more relevance when one considers 'how little ontological investigation into the meaning of freedom is carried out by modern theologians', according to Tillich, 'given the immense role the problem of freedom has played in the history of theology'.¹ It should

¹. As recalled by R. KNEŽEVIĆ, '*Homo Theurgos*: Freedom According to John Zizioulas and Nikolai Berdyaev', p. 1, at: <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:>

be added that the evaluation of Zizioulas' proposal by scholars is still debated and, although there are many publications on the subject, there is still no specific doctoral study. In fact, many critics object to Zizioulas' lack of adherence to the Fathers of the Church on whom he claims to base his reflection, which reveals a subordinationist understanding of the Trinity, they claim, due to modern philosophical projections. Other scholars, while favouring his ontology of the person, seem to waver when their examination reaches the theological *vulnus* represented by the assumption that the Father constitutes the only ontological principle of trinitarian being. On the other hand, it is worth noting that Zizioulas has always endeavoured to show that the doctrine of the ontological monarchy of the Father is the most appropriate one for accounting for the data of Scripture, patristic texts, conciliar formulations and the *lex orandi*, as well as the salvific content of trinitarian dogma, with its existential value for humanity today.

There are a number of difficulties in approaching Zizioulas. The first consists in the *unsystematic nature of Zizioulas' reflection*, which requires patient exegetical and hermeneutical work on his vast, fragmented production, which in some cases is not easy to find. The second difficulty lies in the *very object of the reflection*. The question of the cause of being, in the horizon of trinitarian ontology, poses complex questions, which are located 'at the limits of ontology'² and meet an obstacle in the human mind itself, marked as it is by the 'experience of fragmented time'.³ The third difficulty consists in the *interpretation of the Fathers, and in particular of their intra-trinitarian reflection*. This is a very difficult task, as will be seen with regard to the patristic studies that will be examined, which from time to time present a multiplicity of interpretations that are often not easy to harmonise.

At a general level, this study aims to present Zizioulas' proposal in a systematic way and to verify its conformity to dogma and its internal coherence. Specifically, it intends to ascertain what role should be

089576a0-a649-43ba-9055-86474e4f0964/download_file?file_format=pdf &safe_filename=Homo%2520Theurgos-3.pdf&type_of_work=Thesis (accessed 29 April 2020). Knežević refers to P. TILlich, *Systematic Theology* (Digswell Place: James Nisbet, 1968), p. 202.

² *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. by D.H. KNIGHT (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2008), p. 60.

³ 'Trinitarian Freedom: Is God Free in Trinitarian Life?', in G. MASPERO AND R. WOZNIAK (eds), *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2012), pp. 193–207, here at p. 202.

given to the patristic foundation of Zizioulas' theological discourse, the plausibility of his reading of the Fathers, his theological development and the role played by his recourse to modern philosophy, especially existentialist philosophy.

After analysing the sources and the hermeneutical and epistemological questions, I shall examine Zizioulas' patristic reading, proceeding in a historical-comparative way and comparing it with the texts of the Fathers themselves and patristic studies of them. On that basis I shall identify and examine the theological development that Zizioulas brought to patristic reflection. Accepting the hermeneutic principle that Zizioulas says he kept in mind when approaching the Fathers, namely, that a systematic theologian, unlike a historian, must 'make explicit what is implicit'⁴ in order to deepen our understanding of dogma, I shall try to make explicit what seems to be implicit in Zizioulas himself.

The primary sources of my research are Zizioulas' literary corpus, which consists almost entirely of articles, mainly in Greek, English and French. First, there are the trinitarian writings – including the more Christological and pneumatological ones – and the anthropological writings. In second place, there are the epistemological, sacramental and ecclesiological writings. These sources are studied in chronological order, in order to grasp the development of the author's thought, using the editions in the original language and comparing them with the official translations, where present. Alongside Zizioulas' sources are patristic, magisterial and scriptural sources. Studies on the author, together with patristic, philosophical, theological and historical studies of dogma, as well as manuals, dictionaries, lexicons and encyclopaedias, complete the bibliographical apparatus.

After a general introduction to the life and thought of John Zizioulas, in which a first look is taken at Zizioulas' notion of *personhood* and his Eucharistic epistemology, the work is divided into two parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part is on Zizioulas' reading of the patristic texts that form the basis of his reflection. Such an analysis is necessary, first, because of the authority Zizioulas acknowledges in the Fathers, second, in order to assess the possible merits of criticisms that have been made of aspects of his theology that he traces back to patristic teaching and, third, in order to identify the theological developments in his proposal in Part II.

⁴ 'Person and Nature in the Theology of St Maximus the Confessor', in M. VASILJEVIC (ed.), *Knowing the Purpose of Creation through the Resurrection* (Alhambra, CA: Sebastian Press, 2013), pp. 85–113, here at p. 108.

The second part aims to identify and examine the elements that constitute Zizioulas' theological development with regard to patristic thought. The first of its two chapters examines his personalist ontology, specifically that which constitutes the fundamental reality of God's personal existence, namely the person of the Father. After clarifying the fundamental meanings of the notion of freedom in reference to the Father, in its meanings of *freedom for* and *freedom from*, I address two fundamental questions: the role of the Father in the Trinity, as a *principle of distinction* – 'the Father is Trinity' – and his role as the foundation of *henōsis* – 'the Father is the One'. I shall thus attempt to clarify in what sense the Father is understood by Zizioulas to be the *sole cause* of trinitarian being, and how his being is understood as an *uncaused cause*, *ontologically free* and the *cause of ontological freedom*.

The second chapter of Part II addresses the question of the personal being of the *person caused* and therefore tries, with reference to the Son and the Holy Spirit, to verify whether there is a difference, qualitatively speaking, between the ontological freedom of the person caused and that of the person causing. I conclude with a comprehensive and critical survey of the results of my research.

Patristic texts are cited in the standard form, with the titles in Latin. With regard to Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium*, the following should be noted. The work is cited by Zizioulas mainly from Migne, sometimes from Jaeger, and sometimes in an unspecified manner. For consistency the bibliographical references of this work are to Migne.

This book is the English language edition, abridged, adapted and with some modifications, of the Italian original, *La libertà di Dio è la libertà del Padre. Uno studio sull'ontologia personalista trinitaria in Ioannis Zizioulas*, which was based, in turn, on my doctoral research, conducted under the direction of Professors Basilio Petrà and Konstantinos Agoras, and successfully defended in December 2020 at the Facoltà Teologica dell'Italia Centrale, Florence. I thank Norman Russell for the valuable work of editing the text. Special gratitude goes to my mother.

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