

Relational Ontology and the Problem of “Quasi-Causality” in Human Communion

John Zizioulas’s ontology of personhood inseparably relates personal being to relation (schesis), communion, and otherness, while his Trinitarian ontology places particular emphasis on the monarchy of the Father as the cause (aitia) of the personal existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit. This paper explores the anthropological implications of this principle, focusing on the role that a concrete human other may play in the realization of personal identity.

The question becomes particularly acute in light of Zizioulas’s statement that, “Ontologically, persons are givers and recipients of personal identity.” What precisely does such “giving” mean at the anthropological level? Does the human other become in some sense constitutive of my personal identity, or should a stricter distinction be maintained between the causation of personal being and its mutual affirmation within communion?

This paper explores the latter possibility. If the human person receives true hypostatic identity in Christ through participation in his filial relation to the Father, human persons need not be understood as sources of one another’s personal being. Rather, in communion they freely receive and affirm one another in their irreducible uniqueness.

This distinction also has existential consequences. If the other becomes a source of my identity, the other may become a condition—and even a burden—of my existence, paradoxically in the name of love itself. Understanding human communion instead as mutual affirmation rather than interpersonal causation may help preserve some of Zizioulas’s most radical theological insights: the monarchy of the Father, the freedom of the person, and the possibility of receiving the other precisely as other.

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