A Christian understanding of personal being and God—the Holy Trinity: a contribution to a discussion of voluntary assisted dying

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John Zizioulas[1] begins to delineate the parameters of his discussion of the theological significance of personal being by a critical examination of its significance for Greek thought. This discussion is important since it relates directly to the cultural factors with which Christians in the Western world must contend in the formulation and articulation of the gospel. This is particularly relevant to issues concerning the nature of human existence that is at stake in the recently legislated permission for citizens to seek voluntary assisted dying.

Zizioulas's discussion takes up the question of personal being, its status and meaning, in terms of the philosophical presuppositions of Greek (and Western) thought. The discussion derives its relevance from the fact that Western culture is largely dominated by the rise in Europe of democratic nation states consequent on the breakup of medieval Europe as a result of the Reformation and subsequent religious wars, the rise of rationalism and romanticism in theology and philosophy, and the French Revolution of the eighteenth century. Democracy appeared as the political option which enabled people both to be

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1   John D. Zizioulas' book *Being As Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1985) includes extended consideration of major theological topics—the Trinity, Christology, eschatology, ministry, and sacrament, but above all, the Eucharist. The author propounds a fresh understanding, based on the early Fathers and the Orthodox tradition, of the concept of person and of the church itself. The concept of personhood implies basically two things simultaneously: particularity and communion. The term 'communion' is explained by Zizioulas (cf. p. 101). Zizioulas' central concern is human freedom and the relation of freedom and otherness. His argument is that freedom is not restricted, but is enabled, by our relationships with other persons, for the community in which God includes us and which becomes the place in which our personal identity and freedom come into being. God is intrinsically free and intrinsically communion, and this communion and freedom he shares with us. In his definition of personhood, he moves away from the classical obsession with substantialist ideas about human ontology and defines personhood as relational ontology. The uniqueness of the individual person is not found in the substance of the individuum that possesses certain classifiable universal categories, but is constituted by the relationship with the other. The person is other to the other first, and thus, by standing in contrast to the other, is differentiated as unique. Left to the individual self-as-substance, the self is isolated, in hell, and ceases to exist. Personhood, therefore, is relationality which is evident in the Trinitarian personhood of God. God is not a unified substance that possesses three modes of being. God is three persons-in-relationship. The church, and all of creation, is thus constituted in relationality. Ecclesiology forms the centre of Zizioulas' theology. This is based and developed on an ontology of the person and derived from a deep reflection on the nature of the Trinity. See also John D. Zizioulas, 'On being a person: towards an ontology of personhood,' in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton. Kings College Essays in Theological Anthropology (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 33–46; idem, 'Human capacity and human incapacity: a theological exploration of personhood,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), 408.

protected by social contract and to achieve ordinary human goals. Democracy presented itself as decent mediocrity over against authoritarian monarchs and absolute states with splendid corruption and unrelieved oppression.

The personal identity of an individual in democratic theory is not established by that theory, all citizens are assumed to be autonomous, creating values for themselves by the exercise of reason. (e.g., the American Declaration of Independence holds self evident truths to be the basis of its rationality ie., 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness').

The individual in a democratic society becomes the agent for creating value. The individual creates meaning by adopting a lifestyle of which there is not one but many possible variants. The individual who has a lifestyle can command esteem, the individual's own and that of others. Woody Allen's comedy[2] is a set of variations on the theme of the person who does not have a real self or identity and feels superior to the unauthentic 'adjusted' people who surround him. He regards himself as superior because he is self conscious of his situation, in not having an identity, yet at the same time feels inferior to others because they seem comfortable in their adjustment to society. Woody Allen's haunted comedy diagnoses the human dilemma of human beings in a democracy; it stems from the autonomous self who, in order to create meaning, must posit its own identity by creating values or a lifestyle. Its great strength is depicting the self-conscious role player, never quite at home in a role: interesting because there is this constant quest to be like others, who are yet ridiculous because they are unaware of their emptiness.

The question one poses for Woody Allen is whether his humour only helps us to feel comfortable with the nihilism he so astutely observes at the heart of liberal democratic values.[3] Words such as 'lifestyle', 'identity', 'commitment', 'passion' are now practically every day words used by people seeking to articulate their understanding of life. The most popular schools of psychology and their therapies take value positing as the standard of healthy personality - not realising that it is precisely this question which belies the emptiness which the therapy seeks to heal. The crisis in people's identity in mass culture cannot be overcome by pretending that the void is simply the absence of positive self-affirmation. Such answers in terms of 'lifestyle', 'commitment' etc., must assume a value which is not relative in order to overcome the nothingness caused by the relativity and emptiness of the democratic experience. But since the social sciences are built upon the premise of value relativism, there can be no rational basis for asserting any value which is of permanent validity. There is no doubt that this malaise, which leads to scientific and philosophical indifference to good and evil also afflicts the church's self understanding.

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2   Cf. *Manhattan* (1979), *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), *Crimes and Misdemeanours* (1989), *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), *Midnight in Paris* (2011).

3   See the analysis in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), also idem, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1982). Also, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988).

God becomes intellectually irrelevant or is relevant only in terms of privatised religious lifestyle options.

Zizioulas' contention is that the philosophical background to the debates about the trinitarian dogma in the early church have relevance to the issues of contemporary interest since they bear on the same issues of *personal identity*. The dogma of the Trinity was worked out by the church in a cultural context which had many similarities with the questions of personal identity which are found in modern democratic culture. In Platonic thought, the idea of personal being is impossible, since the soul which ensures one's identity is not permanently united with the individual. The soul lives eternally and can be united with other concrete individuals by reincarnation. With Aristotle the idea of person is impossible precisely because the soul is united with the individual. The individual endures so long as the psychosomatic union endures. Death dissolves the union definitively. The person has no enduring reality. The reason for the inability of Greek thought to endow human individuality with permanence lay in the view that being constitutes a unity despite the multiplicity of appearances. Greek thought is monistic. God and the world are bound together in the unity of being. In such a view, human freedom is an impossible predicate of existence, yet it is a necessary precondition of being a person.

This contradiction in Greek culture is the recurrent theme of the Greek tragedies. It is here that the word 'person' appears. Person (*prosopon*) is identified as the actor's mask. The theatre is the setting for the conflict between human freedom and the rational unity of thought and being. The question addressed in the tragedies is: 'how can the human strive to be free, to rise above the rational unity, the necessity grounded in the unitary nature of all being?' A cosmic battle is engaged between humans, nature, and the gods. It is here that human beings learn there is no escape from their fate. The human cannot continue to show '*hubris*', individuality, pride, in the presence of the gods. Human freedom is illusory, consequently the *prosopon* is nothing but a mask.

Similarly Roman thought, influenced as it is by Greek thought, sees the *'persona'* of the individual as the role played in the social and legal relationships which constitute the corporate state. The Roman idea of *persona* expresses the problem of necessity and freedom involved in understanding the idea of the human person by maintaining that to submit to the organised whole is to ensure oneself of the possibility of personhood.[4] This analysis is not far removed from the contemporary culture of which we have already spoken. For example, the sociology of our time cannot be understood without reference to this Roman idea of *persona*. Sociology understands society as a series of statuses or roles to each of which is assigned specific rights and duties. Each individual can have many roles, but the roles are like the successive layers of an onion: when they are all peeled away there is nothing left. It is social institutions which define roles, and one becomes a person by learning to fulfil such roles. The individual becomes a person by the grace of society and subsists only as such.

Both *prosopon* and *persona* remain highly ambiguous definitions of the personal being

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4   Cf. Zizioulas, 'On being a person,' 33–34.

of the human and indicate the continuing dilemma of modern society and its social and individual neuroses. Over against this development which drastically shapes society's tacit assumptions about the nature of the human person, the church developed its understanding of person in relation to the dogma of the Trinity. Here the idea of person is no longer understood to be an adjunct of being whose reality is defined by external factors in the form of the state, society, gods, fate; here far from being an *adjunct* to something, person comes to mean *being* itself.

To arrive at this unique development of thought, given the context in which the early church expressed its understanding of the faith, the church fathers undertook a Herculean task turning upside down the Greek metaphysics of the contemporary world view. Those who maintain that the early church's trinitarian dogma was simply a transposition of the faith into the categories of abstract Greek metaphysics do not know either Greek metaphysics or the church's faith. The church fathers brought together firstly the Biblical view which understands the world to be created by God out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*. This view traces the origin of the world to a Being who is not tied by necessity to the world, but in majestic freedom relates to the world in an act of gracious condescension. By this means the fundamental premise of Greek metaphysics was denied because of the way in which God has acted in the Incarnation of God's Son Jesus Christ. The closed metaphysics of the Greek idea of the God/world relationship was broken open. The existence of the world was the product of an act of freedom, of grace, of love. The being of the world and its relationship to God was freed of necessity. The world and/or God was no longer a human being's fate.[5]

Secondly, the church fathers saw the unity of God as consisting not in an impersonal substance but in the being of the Father. The one God is not the one substance but the Father, who generates the Son and from whom the Spirit proceeds.[6] The unity of God is emphatically personal and relational. The personal existence of the Father constitutes God's being in which the three persons eternally coinhere.

This of course raises the systemic problem endemic in the Western doctrine of the Trinity, stemming as it does from Tertullian and Augustine, where the unity of God in terms of common substance was understood *prior to* God's threefoldness. Here person came to be defined by intra trinitarian relationships rather than God's action *ad extra*. The relationships between the divine persons came to be identified with the persons themselves. The relationships instead of being unique characteristics of persons are identified with the persons. Saint Thomas Aquinas was later to write, '*persona est relatio*', 'person is relation'.[7] When the common nature assumes the first place in thinking about the Trinity, the persons are obscured by an impersonal abstract essence. Consequently, in Western theology, the personal relationship between God and the creature devolves into a relationship within the

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5   Cf. the insightful analysis by Karl Barth of Western theological method along similar lines in 'Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie' (1929) in Karl Barth, *Gesammelte Vorträge 3, Theologische Fragen und Antworten aus den Jahren 1927 - 1942* (Zollikon, CH: Evangelischer Verlag, 1957), 54–92.

6   Cf. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 40–41.

7   Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I 40,2.

divine nature as such, and further expresses itself in a mysticism of impersonal spirituality centring on the individual eg., self realisation, new age, etc., or in an intellectualism devoid of personal experience.[8]

The dogma of the Trinity and creation ensured for the church that God's relationship with the world presupposed a personal relationship with the creature realised through Christ in the Spirit with the Father. The eternal survival of the person as unique and yet related, an unrepeatably free entity loved and made free to love, constitutes the basis of the Christian view of salvation experienced in the church as new creation. Jesus Christ does not justify the title Saviour because he brings information about God, but is God's personalising being in relation to human beings through whom created being is united to the personal being of God. The church, constituted through baptism into Christ is the vocation of every human being; in its fellowship created personhood is fulfilled. Human life as per Woody Allen's experience of alienation and escapism from the nothingness of despair is healed and the foundation of human community established within creation.

We thus may express this 'mystery of godliness'[9] that the Son of God in becoming a human did not cease to be God. For our human language and thought fulfil their intention in speaking of God when they terminate on Him. God, who exists beyond the spatio-temporal relationship established in Christ with the world is nevertheless free to become what God is not in order to relate to the creature. In Christ God accommodates God's self to the world that is created out of nothing. God *'becomes',* participates in a *coming into being* (ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, John 1:14).[10] This worldly language in referring to God, on the basis of God's act of condescension in the Son of God, must take into account God's voluntary condescension to the creature. By this means our speaking of God, with this worldly language, points beyond itself to the transcendent ground of its Truth in Christ.[11]

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8 On this see Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 9–48. According to Rahner, *The Trinity*, 17, the Western idea of the Trinity, 'produces the impression that it can only make formal statements about the three divine persons, with the help of concepts about the two processions and about relations…but even these statements however, refer to a Trinity locked within itself—one, which is not in its reality open to anything distinct from itself.'

9 1 Timothy 3:15–16.

10 See the remarkable insight into the nature of 'being and becoming' in the following: Hermann Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic of Existence*, trans. H. Knight (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1959); Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959); Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton University Press, 1962). 'Although that which has historically become is immobilised in the past and thus unchangeable, it is not for that reason a product of necessity. Its unchangeability only means its real mode can no longer be otherwise, but this does not exclude that it might have been otherwise. But this unchangeability of the past is dialectically related not only to an earlier change from which it proceeded, but must also be dialectically related to a higher change by which its effect can be can be cancelled (as for example, in the matter of repentance, which operates to change the character of actualised reality). Only if this is true can the individual really assume responsibility for his historical becoming'. Diem, *Kierkegaard's Dialectic*, 27; cf. Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 90–104, and Marjorie B. Chambers, 'Was Jesus Really Obedient unto Death?' *Journal of Religion* 50, no.2. (Apr 1970), 121–130.

11 On the following see Thomas F. Torrance, *Transformation and Convergence in the Frame of Knowledge: Explorations in the Interrelations of Scientific and Theological Enterprise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); idem, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968); idem, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1976).

To take an example which relates directly to the question of the created nature of humanity and its relationship to God; the fact of our existence in time and space. This is a fundamental structure of human existence. When the church reflected on this issue it was confronted in the culture which it lived with radically different views than that which was presupposed by the incarnation of God in Christ. Greek/Roman thought tended in two directions in its speech about God. Either as materialism in the Atomists and Lucretius or to the idea that God is detached and unknowable, leading to a mystical non-rational communion in the Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition. The concept of space/time which presupposed this tradition saw space and time as an infinite receptacle independent of what went on in it. From Renaissance sources, Isaac Newton took up this idea and gave space and time an absolute status independent of the material bodies which it contained. Its role in Newtons system was to make natural objects determinate and thus knowable. But God could not be understood as contained by anything, therefore God could not be described in terms of space and time. He was the Container who contained the container of space/time. Newtonian physics was a powerful confirmation of the prevailing Deist theology of the 18th century who understood God as having only an indirect relationship to the world. It also provided the philosophical basis for the 19th century notion of the world as a closed system of mechanistic causality.

The early church, principally the Greek Fathers, rejected the view of space/ time which they found in the prevailing culture. In St. Athanasius' confrontation with the arch heretic Arius, we see the clash of these two views of reality. Arius denied that we can speak of God in this worldly term; to do so would be to make God a creature. Since there was once when God was not a Father, Jesus could not be called *homoousios,* of one substance with God, but at best could be described as *homoiousios,* 'of like substance' with God. The church rejected Arius' view of God in the Nicene creed of 325. But his view of the world in its relationship to God is still powerfully present in our culture. In our day, this idea of space and time led Rudolf Bultmann to propose a system of 'demythologising'; stripping away the space time language relating to God's activity and transposing it into a timeless idea of 'authentic existence'. The whole programme of demythologising and the various ideologies which seek to speak of God in 'images' which people find comfortable in terms of gender etc., are similar attempts to deny the possibility of God's condescension to be with us and for us in space and time as the personal God of the Incarnation.

Einstein contended with a similar problem in developing his theory of special relativity in confrontation with the prevailing Newtonian view of space/time. Einstein's theory shattered the receptacle notion of space/time, making it impossible to think of these categories as logical strait jackets which enclose the universe. His view of the world is directly opposite to that which sees it as enclosed from above by logically necessary notions of time and space. Instead of reality being described in terms of abstract propositions Einstein understood it as a 'field' of meaning consisting of relational continuities, rather than as patterns of static causality. What is 'scientifically' observable cannot be represented with scientific precision without reference to what lies outside observation altogether. In this context space/time/matter can absorb various patterns of order: without abrogating or contradicting each other they are meaningfully coordinated. This rejection by Einstein of

the radical dualism inherent in Newtonian physics between space/time and matter has had a profound effect on the way in which we may speak of God in relationship to the world.

In the so called 'scientific' view, the world is understood as a closed system of mechanistic causality in which God's relationship to the world is portrayed as mythological (i.e., depicting the other worldly in terms of this world), or in some anthropological category such as a subjective feeling. But in terms of Einstein's world view, events in this world are understood as occurring in a continuum of coordinated fields of meaning. Such a view of the world, contrary to the Newtonian view, does not by definition exclude interaction between God and the creature in terms of the space time structure of human existence.

In the Christian tradition, the incarnation is the place where God identifies with our humanity in the Son of God who at the same time does not cease to be God. In Christ God binds this worldly existence to God's own personal existence and recreates our human being in relationship to God's own being. God unites our human being in a personal union in Christ within space and time. In Christ our space time structures are so organised in relation to God that we may think and speak with them of the transcendent ground of our existence. The early church generally spoke of this inconceivably free act of God in terms of the economy of salvation. This is the way God administers God's own action in creating that which is not God, the creature, and reconciling the cosmos to God's self in Christ. The relationship between the being of God in and for God's self and God's being for the creature, since it occurs by way of an inconceivably free act of God's condescension, cannot be correlated in terms of relationships. The relationship of the economy of salvation is the manifestation of God's freedom to be God for us.[12]

Our human nature, understood in this context, is shown to have its ground in Christ (John 1:1) through whom creation itself came to be. He is the basis of creation's rational order. His incarnation is the reconstitution of creation in its created relationship with God. *Christ, by his vicarious obedience for our sake, re-creates our human relationship with God at every stage of our human development from conception to death and beyond death.* ('conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontious Pilate, the third day he rose again from the dead') Such a theological context does not prescribe what ethical decisions Christians should make. But it does establish that human beings cannot be considered merely in terms of their bio-chemical make-up. The situation of the embryo in the womb or the aged person cannot be described without remainder, without reference, to the ground of their being in Christ. It is the action of God in creation and reconciliation which both defines and sustains human beings in such a manner as to include a relationship with God at every stage of their existence.

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12 See Rahner, *The Trinity*, 15: 'We know about the Trinity because the Father's Word has entered history and given us His Spirit…This starting point should not only be tacitly presupposed; the treatise (on the Trinity) should really start by positing at such'. On the economy of salvation see Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, Vol. 2 (London: Williams & Norgate, 1897), 262: 'Whereas Tertullian developed the Logos doctrine without reference to the historical Jesus, the truth rather being that he simply added the incarnation to the already existing theory of the subject, there is no doubt that Irenaeus, as a rule, made Jesus Christ, whom he knew as God and man, the starting point of his speculations'. See also Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper, 1919), 12–16; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I 10,1; III 16,6.

Therefore 'is' and 'ought' statements cannot be separated. Fact and value statements must be considered together as part of the integrated field of reality whose rationality is grounded in 'ὁ λόγος', the Word of God. What a person *is*, is determined by the relationship with God which undergirds and sustains all life. To treat another human being at whatever stage of their life as a means and not as an end is to treat the relationship with God which constitutes the fundamental ground of their existence as a means and not as an end.

This view, of course, is contrary to the current 'scientific' ideology where the components of the ethical decision-making process are deemed to consist of 'rational principles' accepted by reasonable people and that matters of theological value are relegated from the public world of 'facts' to the privatised world of individual belief. This sharp distinction between facts and values is a hangover of the Enlightenment view of the world. The Enlightenment defined reality in terms of the presupposed autonomous human reason. In this context, 'rights' are understood in terms of such notions as 'the public good' or 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. Law then comes to mean the will of the people as expressed by parliament and, by definition, is understood as the highest good.

The Christian church must reject such a facile view of 'rights' and the 'good'. The evidence of the effects of this ideology in the social disintegration of western society is apparent on every side. The situation will not be remedied by the church continuing to tacitly accept the alternatives presented by a self-serving media establishment or the strident voices of the self-serving ideologues who pose as spokespersons for enlightened reason. The church must seek anew to articulate the truth of human life in its relationship to God at every stage of human development. This truth is grounded in the personal nature of God's action for and on behalf of humanity; the acts of creation and reconciliation of the world in Christ.

Consequently, the mission of the church is not to be found by determining its sociological relevance to a society which has lost any understanding of the basis of personal being, as if the reality of the church was some sort of quantum which could be manipulated to fill a religious niche in the perceived need of the world. On the contrary, the mission of the church is to realise to the full its vocation of being the focus in creation of the possibility of personal being as the gift of grace fulfilled in a community of service. The church's mission is by word and action to call all people to participate in this reality.

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