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Theologizing as Interlocution: The Cross-Pollination of John Zizioulas' and Colin Gunton's Eschatological Trinitarian Reasoning

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Abstract
This essay focuses on the cross-pollination between John Zizioulas' eschatological-trinitarian ontology and Colin Gunton's trinitarian theology, and endeavors to unearth in Colin Gunton's legacy some focal concurrences as well as central discrepancies between the two theologians on this aspect. These similarities and nuances indicate Gunton's and Zizioulas' genuine interaction, attentive interlocution, and profound correlation to each other's literature and discourses. In the interlocution of these two giant trinitarian theoreticians we have the profound theological lesson that to reason the Trinity theologically means to image the Trinity as such in one's personal reasoning and theologizing activities and manners. By putting this reasoning in the light of the eschatological Kingdom, it opens the horizon for future-based reflection and creative syntheses.

Keywords: Colin Gunton, John Zizioulas, eschatology, trinitarian ontology, patro-causal linearity, perichoretic trinitarian teleology, cross-pollination

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I. Introduction

In April 2003, the sudden passing away of Colin Gunton, the Professor of Christian Doctrine at King's College University of London, deeply shocked and saddened his colleagues, students, and friends and left a huge gap in trinitarian theological circles in the anglophone, Protestant (Reformed) world. In February 2023, the Christian theological world further witnessed the death of Gunton's ex-colleague and life-long friend, John Zizioulas. With the departure of the Metropolitan of Pergamon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople since 1986, the theological, Greek Orthodox world lost one of the most profound, renowned, and influential trinitarian thinkers in the Orthodox scene during the last decades of the twentieth century. After the absence of these two trinitarian authorities, many studies were conducted on each author's theological legacies, as had been done during their lifetimes. However, theological libraries lack sufficient comparative analysis and examination of these two theologians' cross-pollinational interlocution on the doctrine of the Trinity, which they conducted throughout their long-lasting friendship. Other than sporadic, incidental comments, as well as two publications wherein I pursued briefly such a comparison, no comprehensive, coherent, fully-fledged forensic assessment has yet been developed on the impact which these two theological fellows, and consistent close interlocutors, left on their mutual theological trinitarian reasoning.

In this essay, I continue a comparative trajectory I started treading on a few years ago but could not continue for various circumstances. It focuses on the cross-pollination between John Zizioulas' trinitarian discourse and Gunton's trinitarian theology, and endeavors to unearth in these theologians' legacy some focal concurrences as well as central discrepancies. These similarities and nuances indicate Gunton's and Zizioulas' genuine interaction, attentive interlocution, and profound correlation with each other's literature and discourses. The essay focuses primarily on the impact Zizioulas made on the thinking of Colin Gunton. Due to space limitations, the essay leaves the traveling on the other track of the impact of Gunton on Zizioulas' legacy to another study on

a different occasion. On the other hand, the essay does not aspire to chasing after Zizioulas' influence over all of Gunton's published texts. It rather looks specifically at one of his latest monographs that was published only one year before his passing away. This volume is titled, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. No one has yet paused at this latest literature, or at least studied it from the perspective of Zizioulas' impact on Gunton's systematic structuring of doctrinal interpretation.

This essay, firstly, demonstrates the affinity between Gunton and Zizioulas that is made manifest in the systematic framework and hermeneutic strategy which Gunton uses and develops in the forementioned monograph. The essay then moves into highlighting a basic nuance between Gunton and Zizioulas in order to contest a claim made by a group of Western scholars during the past few years: that Gunton fully embraced Zizioulas' trinitarian ontological interpretation, and echoed its ideas without any reservation, in total praise, and almost slavishly. The essay endeavors to demonstrate that this slavish echoing of Zizioulas' legacy is not quite accurate since the interlocution between the two intellectuals was genuinely cross-pollinational and reciprocal in nature, and cross-pollination presumes distinctions and nuances between the two interlocuting sides. The essay will, finally, end with a postscript related to the potential impact Gunton might have also left on Zizioulas' own trinitarian thinking. This will briefly, and in a postlude-like manner, pave the way for this trajectory without engaging any exhaustive or detailed digging through it.

II. Hither and Thither between Barth's Terrain and Zizioulas' Territory

In his contribution to the 2010 anthological *Festschrift* for Colin Gunton, the Barthian theologian, John Webster, starts his essay with the following comment on Gunton's relatedness to Karl Barth:

> Karl Barth was an enormously important figure in Gunton's intellectual formation, and a reference point in nearly all his mature work; even when he felt duty bound to part

> company with Barth (which was increasingly often as the years went by), he usually did so with the acknowledgment of the magisterial character of Barth's achievement.[1]

Webster's erudite perception of Gunton's gradual parting ways with Karl Barth is quite telling indeed. It invites us to ponder seriously the fact that, despite his genuine indebtedness to Barth's legacy, Gunton was not exactly as staunchly Barthian as some of his other compatriot theologians, like Thomas Torrance and John Webster (whom Colin new closely). One of the reasons behind Gunton's qualified or diluted Barthianism lies in the fact that Gunton constructed his theological reasoning in consistent tandem with three other theological giants who were his friends and intimate interlocutors throughout his (and their) professional theological life: Christoph Schwöbel, Robert Jenson, and John Zizioulas. It is the particular impact of the Greek Orthodox theologian in this *trio*, I reckon, that specifically contributed to the balancing of the Barthian impact on Gunton's mind. This was achieved by means of a genuine and profound attention to the Eastern patristic and conciliar Trinitarian mind (especially the Cappadocian Fathers' legacy). This legacy equally inspired Zizioulas and Gunton of the hermeneutic centrality in theological thinking of notions like "communion," "relationality," "interpenetration," "personhood," "otherness," and "particularity." Stephen Holmes eloquently expresses Gunton's attention to patristic trinitarianism throughout his career when he says: "In place of Aquinas' *analogia entis* or Barth's *analogia fide*, Gunton seems to be reaching towards an *analogia personae et relationis*."[2]

It is my conviction that this development is the outcome of Gunton's close and intensive interlocutions with his friend John Zizioulas. One of the central aspects wherein one can trace Zizioulas' impact on Gunton's theological thought in general is related

[1] John Webster, "Gunton and Barth," in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (T&T Clark International, 2012), 17.

[2] Stephen R. Holmes, "Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*: Developments in Gunton's Trinitarian Thinking," in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, 42.

to Gunton's later decision to move his theological reasoning on Christian doctrine from its earlier framework within the boundaries of Barth's revelation-centered criteria into a new, more crudely trinitarian grounding of doctrinal reasoning within a framework derived from patristic, creedal, and ontological thought. Gunton started to reinterpret the trinitarian nature of God's divine revelation by means of more explicitly relying on patristic trinitarian reasoning. He uses this logic instead of the Hegelian-like thought-form that Barth used in his *Church Dogmatics*. Gunton based this paradigm-shift on no other than the achievement and success of the Cappadocian Fathers' trinitarian discourses, which are now, according to Stephen Holmes' assertion, "understood to be exactly what Zizioulas has claimed [them] to be."[3]

In order to see how Gunton expanded his revelational understanding of theology by moving it into a broader epistemological framework that circles around patristic, creedal reasoning, I will invite us to look at one of the latest writings which Gunton left behind shortly before his sudden death. In 2002, Gunton produced an introductory volume on his reading of Christian Doctrine. This systematic, constructive discourse states from the outset Gunton's attempt to theologically explain and analyze the objective content of Christian faith as it was articulated in the patristic, creedal confession of faith. This is why he structures the main parts of the book in a trinitarian order that starts with the Father, proceeds to the Son, and then ends with the Holy Spirit. He also titles the triadic parts of the volume with statements extracted from the creedal confession of faith *per se*: Part 1 of the Father is titled "Maker of Heaven and Earth"; Part 2 of the Son is titled "His Only Son, Our Lord"; and Part 3 of the Holy Spirit is titled "And in the Holy Spirit." For Gunton, this creedal-trinitarian objectivity differs in theological reasoning from both the Hegelian dialectic triadic logic of "thesis-antithesis-synthesis" of Karth Barth and revelationist theology, on the one hand, and the subjective stance of the believer who upholds this faith in the herme-

[3] Ibid., 34.

neutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and existentialist theology, on the other. Gunton expresses in *The Christian Faith*'s preface his belief that this methodological choice places his theology clearly on a theological trajectory that is totally different from the "universal subjective dimension of the human being," which "took its most influential form in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher at the beginning of the nineteenth century."[4]

According to Gunton, the most prominent and referential source for the content of faith is epistemologically the hermeneutics of divine revelation as they are unfolded in the patristic, trinitarian theology that is articulated in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of faith. This confessional, hermeneutical strategy was made by the Church *for* the service of the community that believes in a God of a specific Triune divine nature; in a particular incarnate savior, Jesus Christ, who is a unique revelation of the triune God's personal and relational Being in history; and, finally, in a perfecting Holy Spirit who brings the trinitarian process of the "God-Creation" relation into its eschatological fulfillment. In other words, for Gunton, who has always been fond of Irenaeus' metaphor of "the two arms of God,"[5] the doctrine of the Trinity and its two arms of Christology and pneumatology is the hermeneutical and epistemological foundation of ecclesiology and eschatology alike.

Such an Irenaean-like analogy is reminiscent of Zizioulas' similar speech about personhood (imaged in the Trinity) and communion (imaged in the Incarnation and in sanctification) as the founding pillars of ecclesiology and its eschatological completion. What Gunton pursues in his systemization is similar to Zizioulas' construction of his interpretation of communality on a frank (trinitarian) ontological preconception that witnesses its fulfillment in the eschatological future of the Kingdom of perfect communion. Gunton similarly orders and constructs his textual dis-

[4] Colin G. Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), viii.

[5] Irenaeus of Lyon, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching,* trans. J. P. Smith (Longmans, Green & Co, 1952).

course on Christian doctrine on the basis of a trinitarian, creedal form of ontological reasoning that seeks fulfillment in the completion of God's eschatological perfection of Creation. He displays the content of faith as a whole in the form of a building: the building's foundation is the confession which Creation declares of its triune, relational Creator.[6] The building's body is the communal relatedness (mediatorial, for Gunton) to God's history of salvation (*Heilsgischichte*) in the person of the divine incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.[7] Finally, the whole building's decoration and the perfection of its entire erection that completes the economic project of God's relation to Creation, lies in the Churchly, ontological manifestation that the One who erected the building through the Son is continuously residing in it and is relationally involved in the life of its residents. He fulfills this vis-à-vis the sanctifying and glorifying agency of the Holy Spirit. The overall picture which Gunton paints depicts the core-meaning of the patristic trinitarian confession.[8] Nothing expresses Gunton's rootedness in such building and structuring metaphors than his assertion that "to create is to establish."[9]

Gunton's creation of a framework grounded on patristic, creedal trinitarian ontology, and his constructive interpretation of the Christian faith with triadic logic exceeds any narrow Hegelian dialectic or revelation-centered perspective. It equally withstands postmodernist theological trends, like the one of George Lindbeck, who construes the creeds of patristic confession as mere subjectivist discourses that are reflective of a socio-linguistic enterprise produced by a certain religious community within a certain conditioning context.[10] Gunton's systematic approach to faith on the basis of the creedal trinitarian order revives epistemology by means of a serious attention to ontology. This is something

[6] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 3–55.
[7] Ibid., 57–116.
[8] Ibid., 117–172.
[9] Ibid., 3.
[10] Goerge A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).

Zizioulas similarly follows in his balancing of praxical ecclesiology with trinitarian, communion-based ontology. In Gunton's version of this balancing approach, we encounter a resuscitation of the degraded and marginalized confessional, proclamational, and eschatological nature of the creedal trinitarian faith that is essentially grounded in the belief in a truth that has been bequeathed to us *from without* our mind. This truth was revealed so that the community of faith can express, reflect upon, and re-articulate its reality as a response to the encounter with God *from within*; that is, from the depth of a personal-relational human manifestation of the *imago trinitatis*. It is this ontological-trinitarian foundation that drives Gunton, as it drives Zizioulas in his eschatological ecclesiology, to avoid departing epistemologically from the present human condition of the Church's community, or not to fall into purely imagining a triadic activity proceeding hypothetically within the mind alone. Both theologians similarly start, instead, from this community's confession and future promise of the imaging of the community's triune *arche* and encountering the divine triune Godhead as three *hypostases*, not just three modalist forms of a singular divine reality.

Neither Gunton nor Zizioulas ignore the Church's present, historical role, context, responsiveness, awareness, and expressiveness, which constitute the "from-within" dimension of relationality. They emphasize this dimension in the service of concentrating on the *eschaton* or "over-realized eschatology," as John Zizioulas has been cited as doing since 1989.[11] What Zizioulas and Gunton

[11] Zizioulas was first criticized about this in the 1989 monograph of Gaetan Baillargeon, *Perspectives orthodoxies sur L'Eglise Communion: L'oeuvre de Jean Zizioulas* (Editions Paulines, 1989), 256. Afterwards, other authors rearticulated a similar criticism. See for example: Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1997), 101; and Edward Russell, "Reconsidering Relational Anthropology," in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5/2 (2003): 181–182. In response to these critiques, Nikolas Asproulis has recently suggested that Zizioulas' prioritized eschatological reality in his writings do not overshadow the church's historical identity and life. Zizioulas does this, Asproulis suggests, because he "feels that the most important question at hand is choosing which reality inside the church should take precedence in terms of theological *method*." (Nikolas Asproulis, *Theologically Reading Metropolitan of Pergamon John Zizioulas: Orthodox, Ecumenical and Modern* [Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2025], 125).

do, rather, is to harbor this present from-within-ness state of being in its natural *habitat*; namely the creedal, trinitarian eschatological-ontological promise, or the relation between the third divine *hypostasis* of the Holy Trinity and the *ecclesia* of faith. That eschatological perception of ontology is something Gunton and Zizioulas equally endorsed and frequently expressed. It is what makes Zizioulas, for instance, speak about experiencing the trinitarian ontological promise as a movement "from the end to the present" and about the *Parousia* or eschatology as "*the remembrance of the future that dominated the remembrance of the past. The past was remembered via the future*."[12]

It is noticeable that, in the third part of his monograph, *The Christian* Faith, Gunton talks about the relation of the Christian incarnation of trinitarian communion (the Church) with human society vis-à-vis the perfecting work of the Holy Spirit.[13] Zizioulas follows the same track in different parts of his major book, *Being as Communion*.[14] Both theologians are equally convinced that the relation with the person of the Holy Spirit never snatches the community of faith away from its temporal, human, and rational embodiment as a community in history. This is something Gunton spoke about at length, and in great depth, in his 1993 significant monograph, *The One, the Three and the Many*. There, he touched upon this in-history perception by means of developing a trinitarian ontological interpretation of the "one-many" equation and its manifestation in modernity and postmodernity, pondering this within the framework of a trinitarian and pneumatological perception of worldliness.[15] Zizioulas also elaborates on this, yet in a far more doctrinal, almost mystical-ontological, accent, when he gives the historical and existential reality of personhood eschatological, metaphysical, and relational dimensions that

[12] John Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future: Toward an Eschatological Ontology*, ed. Maxim Vasiljevic (St. Sebastian Press, 2023), 11, 17 [Original emphasis].

[13] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 157–171.

[14] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 154–158, 181–203, 257–260.

[15] Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 180–231.

never de-historize human communion. He, rather, eschatologizes this communion in a trinitarian, personal-relational manner.[16] It seems to be the case that Zizioulas was the one who inspired Gunton to understand human historical personhood as an eschatological state of being, an eschatological state of hypostatization, the perfection of which lies in Creation's final and perfect relatedness to the personal-communal reality of the immanent Trinity, through the process of the eternal perfection of Creation.[17]

Gunton walks in Zizioulas' eschatological and pneumatological shoes when in *The Christian Faith* he unfolds his conviction that the Holy Spirit harbors the community of faith in the bay of the triune God's immanent personal-relational reality that is eschatological and processive in nature. The Spirit performs this by grounding the community in its human, historical, existential, and relational contexts. The Spirit leads the community of faith to activate its subjective communal self-perception by means of God's powerful domination over death.[18] The subjectivist dimension of the human self before, or in front of, the objective relational reality of God's salvation and trinitarian, hypostatic self-emptiness is now confessed by the triune God *per se*. It is revealed in God's insistence on the high value of human existence, if not all Creation's existence. This is the backbone of Gunton's promotion of the belief that the crux of the *Evangelion*, or the *Kerygma*, as such is not submission or judgment, but "life."[19] This stress on human life in all its dimensions, bases, and contexts is Gunton's manner of relating that the subjective dimension of faith, exemplified in the idea

[16] See, for instance, John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 171–208.

[17] Holmes, "Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*," 44. See also Colin Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," in *Persons, Divine and Human: King's College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, eds. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton, (T&T Clark, 1991), 60. Gunton here refers to what Zizioulas says in the very same collection of essays. See John Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 33–46.

[18] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 157–165. See also John Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (T&T Clark, 2006), 263–269.

[19] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 147–151, 161–165.

of "life," is basic and undeniable in the building of faith. It plays its intended role in this building process only when it is located in its accurate place; that is, after, and not before, the objective personal-relational ontological reality of the triune God's salvific re-creation of life after His image as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Be that as it may, patristic, creedal trinitarian ontology for Gunton, as for Zizioulas, is the theologico-hermeneutic foundational response made by the human community that has been first brought from death to life by a wholly other, hypostatic trinitarian God. Human communal existence, churchly and societal alike, is a reflection of the personal community of the Trinity's eternal divine life that created Creation's contingent life in its own image. Faith, therefore, is not ultimately an expression of relational epistemology. It is primarily an imaging of a *confessional, ecclesiological ontology* standing within an eschatological framework. It proclaims a trinitarian God, whose nature as "being in/as communion" is the basic framework for what is the real image of life, as well as the true theological reasoning about this life's eschatological nature. It is not the language that is used by the Church that created the notions of faith about who is God. On the contrary, "the common and inherited stock of language was drawn upon in the interest of a notion of Creation as personal divine action."[20] God's personal-relational triune nature is the epistemological and ontological inspiring source that makes us express God's actions in personalist language. Here lies not only the particularity of the Biblical, socio-linguistic discourse about God, but mainly the particularity of the truth of God's being in communion.

In both Gunton's and Zizioulas' trinitarian ontological epistemology, the track of theological reasoning is from the future of God's trinitarian relationality into the present of the universe's belief, not the other way round: from God's relational being that was promised in Scripture and its patristic, creedal interpretations, into the human present personal-communal confession and imaging of that being-ness. This methodological approach in *The*

[20] Ibid., 4.

Christian Faith monograph is demonstrative of Gunton's following in the footsteps of Zizioulas' methodological choices that are manifest in the latter's *Being as Communion*. Every section in both monographs begins with interpretations of God's ontological, triune personhood and actions, and then ensues with unpacking the doctrinal implications of every item concerning humanity's relatedness to God's revelation. This framework is both Gunton's and Zizioulas' strategy for broadening and exceeding the revelation-centered, *analogia fide*, approach. But it is also their strategy for withstanding the whole postmodern anthropocentric, language-centered and deontological frameworks, where the starting point lies not, actually, in the content of belief that results from a relation the human makes with the divine as a recipient of a revealed truth from-without. It, rather, treats that content as the anthropological, linguistic basis of a personal religious attitude.

III. Exceeding Zizioulas' Patro-Causal Trinitarian Ontology

Colin Gunton's systematic construction of Christian doctrine's exegetical discourses via an eschatologically-shaped trinitarian, creedal reading game and hermeneutic strategy demonstrates, as I proposed, his affinity with John Zizioulas' equally eschatologically framed, patristic, trinitarian ontological reasoning framework. All of Gunton's friends, students, and colleagues, therefore, took this affinity on board, and chased after its traces throughout Gunton's career in his publications. They have paused particularly at Gunton's bashing of Augustine and alternatively embracing the trinitarian logic of the Cappadocian Fathers. Gunton adopted Zizioulas' attention to the Cappadocians' granting of an ontological weight to the notions of "person" and "relation." He gleaned from Zizioulas that the Cappadocians used these notions to conjure a new understanding of God's "is-ness" and, by analogy, of human "is-ness" as well. Gunton piercingly studied and used the Cappadocians' trinitarian ontology that is believed to treat God "as communion" (a Zizioulan phrase par excellence, yet not necessarily

fully Cappadocian[21]). On this particular impact of Zizioulas on Gunton, the latter's life-long friend, Robert Jenson, says the following:

> Gunton cites with satisfaction a letter usually attributed to Basil of Caesarea: God *is* "a sort of continuous and indivisible community." How much of this Gunton took from his sometime colleague at King's, John Zizioulas, and how much of it he would have come to in any case, is probably impossible to determine—and of course it makes no important difference.[22]

Stephen Holmes, an ex-student and another colleague of Gunton at King's College University of London, has also noticed Gunton's attention to Zizioulas' Cappadocian trinitarian ontology. In Holmes' opinion, Gunton's exceeding of Barth's shortcoming on the trinitarian concept of "person" and on personhood reflects nothing but Gunton's "simple celebration of the conclusions of John Zizioulas," and his "unsurprising" praise of the Cappadocian Fathers, whose achievement "is understood to be exactly what Zizioulas has claimed it to be."[23] According to Holmes, Gunton's unqualified and full-scale adoption of Zizioulas' account of Cappadocian theology is a mark of inconsistency and contradiction in Gunton's theological thinking. It makes him embrace with energy and passion, Holmes alleges, "positions that he had himself criticized as verging on the tritheistic not many years earlier."[24]

The impression that Holmes' insinuations leave on the reader is that Gunton suddenly decided to contradict his own earlier convictions and become a wholesale and slavish Zizioulan voice after he opted for embracing without any reservation the latter's

[21] On the nuances within the discourses of the Cappadocian Fathers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory Nazianzus regarding this, see Najib George Awad, "Between Subordination and Koinonia: Toward a New Reading of the Cappadocian Theology," *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 181–204.

[22] Robert W. Jensen, "A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton's Thinking," in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, 12.

[23] Holmes, "Towards the *Analogia Personae et Relationis*," 34.

[24] Ibid., 39.

Cappadocian trinitarian understanding of personhood and relationality. In the remaining lines of this section, I will concur with Jenson's more balanced perception of the affinity between Gunton and Zizioulas, yet I will equally beg to differ from Holmes' rather unfair allegation of Gunton's total and full-scale echoing and praising of Zizioulas' reading of the Cappadocians' trinitarian ontology. In order to do that, it is necessary to make a short detour to Zizioulas' mentioned reading, despite the fact that I already did this in detail quite a few years ago.[25]

Zizioulas, as all know, develops his "being *as* communion" thesis vis-à-vis implementing the Cappadocian trinitarian ontology in the service of developing an ecclesiological understanding of personhood, "in which he construes the church as the image of the triune personhood of God that ultimately lies in the concept of 'communion.'"[26] Aiming to extend the boundaries of the anthropology and theology of personhood, Zizioulas "grounds the concepts of 'communion' and 'relation' on an ontological foundation that lies in the trinitarian being of God."[27] Zizioulas philosophically and ontologically constructed this "communion-and-personhood-based" ecclesiological anthropology by means of conceptually identifying "person" and "relation" (person *as* relation), which he claimed to have derived from the Cappadocian Fathers who, according to him, identified the notion of "being" with the concept of "relationship," making "relation" definitive and constitutive of being-ness.[28] According to Zizioulas, "the Cappadocians represent a step beyond other Greek and Latin trinitarian theologies in that they successfully found a formula by which they spoke about the *ad intra trinitatis* distinction in God without splitting His being into plural substances ... They did this by

[25] Najib George Awad, *God Without a Face? On the Personal Individuation of the Holy Spirit* (Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 108–111, 172–182; and Najib G. Awad, "Personhood as Particularity: John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton and the Trinitarian Theology of Personhood," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4 (2010): 1–22.

[26] Awad, "Personhood as Particularity," 3. The ensuing lines on Zizioulas are derived from my earlier, aforementioned essays.

[27] Ibid., 3; Awad, *God Without a Face?* 172.

[28] Awad, "Personhood as Particularity," 4–5; Awad, *God Without a Face?* 173ff.

completely identifying essence with relation and life with substance, so that 'to be' and 'to be in relation' become one and the same thing."[29]

It is within this circle of reasoning that Zizioulas developed his other, rather controversial, concentric patro-causal reading of Cappadocian trinitarian ontology. A major theme in Zizioulas' reading of the Cappadocians is his claim that "the particularity factor in relation to the divine person's identity should be understood causatively in the trinity *ad intra*."[30] Zizioulas gleaned this basically from his reading of the discourses of Basil of Caesarea. From Basil of Caesarea, Zizioulas extracted the conviction that divine causality in the immanent Trinity furnishes a patro-centric process within the circle of relatedness between the three *hypostases*, as it delineates a similar "Father-centered" causality in the historical, economic Trinity. On this basis, Zizioulas adopted a full-scale belief that, in the *ad intra trinitatis*, "everything that originally initiates from the Father passes through the Son and comes finally to us by the Holy Spirit, who is third in order in the economic trinity."[31] Zizioulas advocates this patro-causal logic in the following words:

> If this person is not Father alone, it is impossible to maintain the divine unity or oneness without taking resort into the ultimacy of substance in ontology, i.e., without subjecting freedom to necessity and person to substance.[32]

Based on his reading of the Cappadocian literature, Zizioulas goes so far as to assert that the *hypostasis* of the Father "makes the one

[29] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 173–174. See also John Zizioulas, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: The Significance of the Cappadocian Contribution," in *Trinitarian Theology Today: Essays on Divine Being and Act*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel, (T&T Clark, 1995), 45-47; and Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 15–34.

[30] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 108. See also Zizioulas, "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 33–46.

[31] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 108.

[32] J. Zizioulas, "The Teaching of the 2nd Ecumenical Council on the Holy Spirit in Historical and Ecumenical Perspective," in *Credo in Spiritum Sanctum* (Libraria Editrice Vaticano, 1983), 45.

divine substance be that which it is; the one God."[33] This means that, for Zizioulas, "the Father *alone* ... is constitutive of God's essence," and "the Godhead should be defined by virtue of the Father alone, as the *hypostasis* of the Godhead, for the Son and the Spirit merely confirm this Godhead by pointing to the Father."[34] In the monograph that was published in the same year of his passing away, *Remembering the Future*, Zizioulas jots down one of his probably most explicit patro-centric statements, which merits full-length citation:

> God, the *ὁ ὤν*, is not the divine *ousia* but the hypostasis of the Father whose being is constituted as Trinity, since being the Father implies his relationship with the Son and the Spirit, that is, an understanding of being as communion ... If death is conceived as the collapse of communion and the dissolution of beings into substances, the *ὁ ὤν* can never die, not because he is an eternal substance ... but because he is the Father whose being is by definition relational.[35]

This statement demonstrates that, for Zizioulas, the Father is not only the source of the Godhead or the arche of the divine essence. He makes the Father the ultimate and primary representative of "the Trinity." This is not just patro-centric logic—it is also, and more intriguingly, patro-monistic logic *par excellence*. The divine essence is no more exactly "Father, Son, and Spirit," nor is it exactly triune. It seems to be turned now into a "Father relating to him-

[33] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 41.

[34] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 109; Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 88–89. I have controverted Zizioulas' patro-causal logic in *God Without a Face?* and also in "Between Subordination and Koinonia," 188–190, 196–198. For other important critiques of the patro-causal logic, see Allan. J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (T&T Clark, 1996), 203, note 93; and Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Being with God: Trinity, Apophaticism, and Divine-Human Communion* (Notre Dame University Press, 2006), 154–160. John Zizioulas' response to Torrance and Papanikolaou, and his defense of the patro-causal logic is now posthumously published in John Zizioulas, *Knowing as Willing: The Ontology of Person, Nature, and Freedom*, ed. Maxim Vasiljević (St. Sebastian Press, 2025), 41–46.

[35] Zizioulas, *Remembering the Future*, 71.

self in a creative manner" or a "Father fulfilling his self in two distinguished, progenitive and spiritual, relational manners." The existence (the "never dying" capacity) of God lies not in the triune coinherence of the three divine hypostases, but in the fatherly personal identity of the one divine reality called "Father." Being is not exactly any more in "communion," but in "paternal dynamic relatedness."

The question one can ask out of this brief display is: Does Gunton slavishly embrace and adopt full-scale the abovementioned Zizioulan reading of the Cappadocian trinitarian ontology, as some have claimed? It is my belief, initially (as the previous section demonstrated), that Gunton's affinity to Zizioulas' theological reasoning is clearly evident. Discerning Gunton's borrowing of ideas and views from his ex-colleague at King's College University of London is not so impossible to determine, as Robert Jenson presumed. All this notwithstanding, and when it comes to the reading of the Cappadocians' trinitarian ontology in patro-causal, reductionist lenses, Gunton does not unreservedly embrace Zizioulas' reading game. "Gunton basically agrees with Zizioulas' ontological emphasis on the communal nature of being. But, Gunton's agreement with Zizioulas' trinitarian ontology is qualified."[36] Gunton not only avoids the language of "being *as* communion," but prefers instead "person with relational particularity" and refuses to concede the eschatological reduction of *hypostases* into mere relations, let alone into the complete manifestation of the Father as alone God in the *eschaton*.[37]

Even more essentially, Gunton conveys serious skepticism towards the patro-causal and patro-monistic reductionist reading of the Trinity *ad intra*. In his major monograph of 1991, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, Gunton sets forth his understanding of the Trinity as an in-between option in equal opposition to two extreme interpretations of the ontological particularity of the three divine *hypostases*, which Gunton believes must be avoided.

[36] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 194.
[37] Ibid., 194–195.

The first extreme, according to him, is the overstressing of the total equality of the three persons to such an extent that their particularities are obliterated. The second extreme, which concerns us here, is "the tendency to stress the primacy of the Father that there is a danger of an ontological subordinationism, with the Son and the Spirit, at least appearing to be less truly God than the Father."[38]

Siding with Wolfhart Pannenberg's trinitarian view, Gunton also calls for not reducing the perichoretic dynamic of relationality *ad intra trinitatis* narrowly to the relations of origin: "Who causes whom or who derives from whom."[39] Gunton intertwines this conviction with a frank endorsement of Zizioulas' argument that, if God is relational ontologically, the divine Godhead must image hypostatic communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Here, nevertheless, Gunton pauses at the answer Zizioulas offers regarding the inquiry about the source of this communal divine being and its ultimate eschatological manifestation. Zizioulas responds to this question by maintaining that this eschatologically fulfilled ontological "being-as-communion" is derived from the Father, or the causal *arche* of the communal Godhead in the Trinity.[40] In response, Gunton shares the following, profoundly telling words that merit full-length citation:

> While [Zizioulas'] claim preserves the due priority of the Father in the Godhead, I do not believe that it allows for an adequate theology of the mutual constitution of Father, Son, and Spirit. ... Whatever the priority of the Father, it must not be conceived in such a way as to detract from the fact that all three persons are together the cause of the communion in which they exist in relations of mutual and reciprocal constitution.[41]

[38] C. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (T&T Clark, 1997), xxiv.

[39] Ibid., xxiv. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (T&T Clark, 1991), I: 319.

[40] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 40ff.

[41] Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 196.

For Gunton, the priority of the Father in the scriptural attestation, which was established in creedal thought, "is not ontological but economic" in perspective, and it might relatively imply a form of a "subordination of *taxis*—of ordering within the divine life—but not one of deity or regard."[42] God in the perfection of His salvific history at the *eschaton* is fully consubstantial "Father, Son & Spirit" and not just "Father" relating to His beingness in two different manners. After all, Gunton wonders whether Zizioulas' patro-causal understanding of the ontological Trinity would impact his patrological and teleological implications in relation to the ontological Trinity, because it "endangers [Zizioulas'] own identification of being and communion," and whether or not "the free communion and mutuality of God risks being subsumed by a cosmological category of causality [and teleology]."[43]

Gunton opts for a clear and basic trinitarian model as an alternative to Zizioulas' patro-causal, patro-centric, and linear one. He allows Zizioulas' invitation for embracing patristic trinitarian legacy to carry him beyond, or even *prior to*, the discourses of the Cappadocians. Gunton opts for an analogy he finds in Irenaeus' trinitarian discourse: the analogy of the two divine distinguished arms of the divine creating God, which perfect the Father's creating work eschatologically as two fully consubstantial persons with the Father and equal to Him in being. This Irenaean qualification is employed as a criterial framework in Gunton's monograph, *The Christian Faith*. There, Gunton develops a trinitarian interpretation of the Christian faith's dogmatic discourses, including the doctrine of Creation.[44] In this interpretation, he avoids any linear procession model, and opts instead for a perichoretic dynamic, asserting that "God both maintains and crosses the space [between Creator and creature] by means of the energies of His Son and Spirit."[45] He manifests attentive perception towards the particu-

[42] Ibid., 197.

[43] Ibid., xxiii. Here, Gunton invokes a critical point made in Alan J. Torrance, *Persons in Communion*, 291.

[44] Gunton, *The Christian Faith*, 3–19.

[45] Ibid., 11.

larity of the creational agency of every *hypostasis* without drifting into relativistic plurality at the expense of communal unity. For him, there is unity in Creation as there is unity in the triune Creator's communion. It is a unity imaged after the unity-in-particularity that is held in the mediatorial operation of God, conducted through His two arms, the Son and the Spirit. Instead of a patrocentric, linear reductionism towards the processes of *opera ad intra* and *opera ad extra trinitatis*—"*from* the Father, *to* the Son, *through* the Holy Spirit" both in the present and the future—Gunton speaks about a perichoretic dynamic of existence and action, wherein the Father's will is reflected and reciprocated by means of the particular hypostatic wills and actions of the redeeming arm (Son) and the perfecting arm (Holy Spirit). They are all *together,* co-inherently one Godhead and all are equally referential and constitutive of the Godhead in the present and the future alike.

It is such an Irenaean analogical perception of relationality that drives Gunton, in relative distinction from Zizioulas, to centralize the notion of "*perichoresis*" over even "person" and "relation" in his trinitarian scheme. "*Perichoresis,*" for Gunton, is the ultimate disclosure and demonstration that, beyond mere linear causality, "God's being is based on the reciprocal interpenetration of Father, Son, and Spirit"; so much so that what we have here is "ordered and free inter-relational self-formation."[46]

IV. Towards a Postlude

Between 2000 and 2005, I pursued research for the Master of Arts and first Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology degrees at King's College University of London. I was privileged to participate in, and contribute regularly to, Gunton's weekly Systematic Theology Seminar, which was attended every Tuesday morning by doctoral students of Systematic Theology, Philosophy of Religion, Ethics, Historical Theology, and Biblical Studies.

[46] Awad, *God Without a Face?* 197.

It was in that seminar that I had the chance to meet and listen to lectures from some of the most prominent and influential theologians, most of whom were Gunton's close interlocutors and friends throughout his professional journey. One of these memorable and impressive lecturing visitors was John Zizioulas.

It was sometime during 2002 when John Zizioulas came over to King's College to read in our seminar a paper on his most favorite subject (as he personally stated that day): The Cappadocian Fathers' theology and the trinitarian ontology of personhood. Besides the highly thought-provoking and impressively educative and inspiring content of his lecture, what remains carved into my memory on that unforgettable encounter was Zizioulas' benevolent, graceful, modest, and even pastoral embrace of the attendants, who were sometimes over-zealous and blunt in their inquiries and overtly critical of his ideas.

Those who, like me, got the chance to converse with Colin Gunton and John Zizioulas over their theological discourses might find themselves differing with them regarding aspects of the theology of the Trinity. One, nevertheless, cannot but confess that both walked in the shoes of Gregory Nazianzus, who centralized the idea of "reciprocity" in his understanding of the triadic, perichoretic trinitarian Godhead, and, more significantly, imaged and incarnated this logic in his own personal character, making his personality an incarnation of the idea of God's triune reciprocity.[47] Following his footsteps, Gunton and Zizioulas not only imaged this perichoretic Trinity in their relations with the students, but the relation between them (a long-standing friendship) was one of perichoretic interlocution that was demonstrative of the "unity-in-particularity" logic which characterized the cross-pollinational interaction between the two theologians of the Trinity. In terms of application, Gunton fully endorsed this logic in his trinitarian thought throughout his theological biography. Zizioulas, on the other hand, toward the latter part of his career started

[47] See Najib G. Awad, "'Through You, Man Lives Endowed with Reason': Gregory Nazianzen's Trinitarian Thinking as a Window to His Personal Character," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 127–142.

to more attentively tend to the dimension of "particularity," and to using that theme to amend his over-emphasis on the causal centrality of the Father alone.

One notices this development textually in Zizioulas' last collection of essays that were published in 2006 titled, *Communion & Otherness: Further Studies on Personhood and the Church*. Zizioulas' attention to particularity in his own writings, then, took place almost twenty years after the publishing of his magnum opus, *Being as Communion*. The title, *Communion & Otherness*, mirrors the evolution in Zizioulas' thought towards centralizing "otherness," or particularity, in his understanding of the dynamic of communion between the three *hypostases* in the immanent Trinity. Here we find that Zizioulas employs the notion of "otherness" to qualify his old patro-causal ontology. He states frankly that "a person, such as the Father, is inconceivable without relationship to other persons," and declares his readiness to "elevate particularity and otherness to a primary ontological status."[48] "Otherness," Zizioulas clarifies, is now conveyed as inclusive and never exclusive, so that "the Other is identifiable as particular not in *contrast* with, but in *relation to*, all Others with whom this particular Other is ontologically related."[49] The language of otherness and particularity is now employed to speak about the *hypostasis* of the Father as well: "The Father denotes a particular *hypostasis* which is 'other' while being relational, that is, inconceivable apart from his unity with the 'other' divine persons."[50]

Has Zizioulas followed Gunton's replacement of patro-causality with perichoretic causality without reservation? He did not do this, nor did Gunton follow Zizioulas' thought literally. Both authors maintained their theological particularities and intellectual distinctions, which in itself demonstrates the profound cross-pollinationality between them—for without distinction there is no cross-pollination or reciprocity. Maintaining an extent of distinction manifests in Zizioulas' attention to particularity. In *Com-*

[48] Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, 35.
[49] Ibid., 92.
[50] Ibid., 137.

munion & Otherness, Zizioulas reveals clearly that his mitigation of the character of his patro-causal logic was pursued vis-à-vis serious engagement in an open, reciprocal, and cross-pollinational interlocution with Gunton's take in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*.[51]

As I stated at the beginning of this essay, this work has not sought to study at full length the impact of Gunton on Zizioulas, nor the similarity and nuances in Zizioulas' discourse in relation to his interaction with Gunton's thought. Suffice it to end this essay by saying that in the interlocution of these two giant trinitarian theoreticians of the past few decades, we have the profound lesson that to study the Trinity theologically means to image the Trinity as such in one's personal reasoning and theologizing activities and manners. Colin Gunton and John Zizioulas certainly did this in their interlocutions with each other.

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[51] See Zizioulas' referral to, and correspondence with, Gunton's approach in Zizioulas, *Communion & Otherness*, 124, 136–137, 145–146, 154.

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