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The Logic of Identity

(Handwritten notes)

John D. Zizioulas

Editor's Note: The text published here is not a typical work of the late Metropolitan John (Zizioulas) of Pergamon. What survives is four handwritten leaves among his unpublished papers in the Archives of Metropolitan John—closer to a draft of working notes than to a finished essay. Fragmentary as they are, they record a sustained attempt to state the problem of identity in relation to the Triune God.

Readers familiar with Zizioulas may recognize in them an affinity, at least in outward form, with certain procedures of analytic philosophy: conceptual economy, schematic notation, and an attempt to expose the consequences of competing accounts of identity. A British teaching context is plausible, given his years in systematic theology at Glasgow (1973–1987), following Edinburgh from 1970 and alongside King's College London from 1984. The manuscript itself, however, establishes no such provenance.

Analytic philosophy of religion brings conceptual analysis and formal logic to bear on theological claims, seeking to establish with precision what a doctrine asserts and what follows from it. Within analytic theology, the formal logic of identity has been employed to ask how numerical sameness and difference bear upon doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. Its principal instrument is

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Leibniz's Law, the indiscernibility of identicals: if x is identical with y, then whatever is true of x is true of y.

Zizioulas had long regarded the bare logic of identity as theologically sterile. In *Being as Communion,* he said so without qualification:

> The tautology "God is God" says nothing about ontology, just as the logical affirmation A = A is a dead logic and consequently a denial of being which is life. It would be unthinkable to speak of the "one God" before speaking of the God who is "communion," that is to say, of the Holy Trinity. (John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985], 17.)

The objection is not that self-identity is invalid or logically useless, but that Zizioulas regards the bare formula as ontologically uninformative: by itself it gives no account of what God is or how God exists. Nor does it leave the equation form behind. In Communion and Otherness Zizioulas writes the alternative out in precisely that form: for Chalcedon "the equation 'man = man' is unacceptable; it is that of 'man = man-in-communion-with-God' that emerges from its Christology." The first, he adds, "corresponds to the ontology and the logic of the 'self-existent'"; the second is "logically conceivable only if what has been said here about the ontology of personhood is accepted." (John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan [London: T&T Clark, 2006], 248.) What is rejected, then, is not identity but identity whose terms are specified in advance of relation. Here the equality sign functions as metaphysical shorthand rather than as the identity predicate of a formal calculus.

The present leaves extend that operation from the human being to God. They are also, for that reason, more than a curiosity. Zizioulas concedes in the passage just quoted that his second equation becomes conceivable only once the ontology of personhood is granted—which leaves the logic resting on the ontology rather than securing it. Whether these pages attempt to close that gap is the question worth putting to them.

A note on the status of the text. These are archival working notes, not a treatise that Zizioulas published or is known to have prepared for publication. Their survival warrants neither the assumption that he endorsed every inference nor the reconstruction of a final position from unfinished material. They are better approached as exploratory notes: first thoughts toward a wider argument, preparation for a lecture or discussion, or an attempt to test a line of reasoning against an interlocutor. The published passages quoted above contain recognizable echoes of the same concern, but they do not establish that Zizioulas intended to return to these particular pages. The essay that follows therefore evaluates a promising metaphysical intention without treating the surviving logical sequence as a finished proof.

The notes break off. Even so, they open onto a line of inquiry that has received renewed attention in contemporary Orthodox theology: the relation between formal reasoning and the theological understanding of person, relation, and communion. Discursive reasoning should not simply be identified with the patristic nous, whose purification belongs to the ascetical knowledge of God. The two need not, however, be opposed. These pages may be read as an attempt to place conceptual reasoning in the service of a theological vision that exceeds it.

The Logic of Identity

John D. Zizioulas

1. A = A is a tautology without justification or explanation. If you ask why that is so, you are faced with either a dogmatic answer (it is so because it is so), or with the only possible explanation, namely that A is A because it is not B.

2. A = not B implies that in order to affirm something (A) you must negate something else (B). But if that which you wish to negate (B) is real, then it must have the same reason for its identity which we applied to A. Namely, B is B because it is not A. Thus the affirmation of both A and B rests upon their *mutual negation*. Their being rests upon the assumption of non-being (cf. Plato).

3. God has nothing next to Him to negate in order to affirm His identity. Hence, if only A and B existed, God could not affirm Himself. He must be understood only as *positively* affirming, since non-being is not an accompaniment of being for Him. But how can A and B affirm themselves *positively*?

There are two possibilities only:

(a) By the affirmation A = B (and not "not-B"), and B = A (and not "not-A"). These are affirmations, but they result in the disappearance of the identities. If A is B, then it is no longer A, and vice versa.

(b) By the existence of a C. This will lead to the affirmation: B is not A, not because it is A but because it is not C; and C is real [...]

[W]hat makes it difficult to accept 1 = 3 is our assumption that the ultimate affirmation is 1 = 1.

Yet the compulsory nature of being is revealed in the tautology A = A through the fact that the question *why* A = A is not answered; A = A because it is so.

Thus, why 1 = 1? There is no answer *unless* there is a 2 and a 3, etc. which are *not* 1. Thus the only explanation of 1 = 1 stems from the *possibility of the negation* of something else. But if this something else really *is* (so that it would make it possible for 1 to be 1),

it is, in turn, only because it can negate the 1: being depends on negation, since even the affirmation 1 = 1 rests upon the possibility of its negation.

This is totally inapplicable to God, for He is not affirming Himself by negating something else (what else is there outside Him to be negated?). How then can God affirm Himself?

The alternative to negation is affirmation. But affirmation, as we have seen, cannot rest on the tautology 1 = 1, since that implies negation. Thus we must depart from the logic of 1 = 1. If we replace 1 = 1 by God = God, we realize that we say nothing of the being of God. Yet, if we say God = Father, we do say something. What is it?

1. That 1 is 1 because there is something other than 1 *which should not be negated but affirmed*. (God = God rests upon the exclusion of non-God, but Father is a relational term and rests upon the *existence* of non-Father; if you do not affirm the Son you lose the Father, too.)

2. That 1 is not 2; i.e., it is not to be confused with 2, not by way of the negation of 2, but by way of the affirmation of 2. Hence the affirmation of 2 leads to the otherness and distinctiveness of both 1 and 2. *The affirmation 1 = 2 does not mean that 1 ceases to be 1 and becomes 2, but on the contrary that through the affirmation of 2 it becomes 1 and not 2*.

Conclusion: Looked upon from the side of the otherness, God is 3; and from the side of oneness He is *one substance*. [Next problem: oneness as caused by Person (Father).]