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Commentary
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Identity, Otherness, and the Trinity

A Comment on Zizioulas's "Logic of Identity" Notes

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Abstract
This article offers a tentative interpretation and reconstruction of John D. Zizioulas's difficult handwritten notes on divine identity and the Trinity. The notes argue that the identity of created beings is bound up with otherness and negation, whereas God's identity cannot be grounded in non-identity with anything else and therefore requires a positive account. I first clarify this argument and suggest a way of formulating it within the setting of classical theism. I then interpret Zizioulas's positive account as proceeding in two stages: divine identity is related specifically to the Person of the Father, while the identities of the divine Persons are understood through their mutual affirmation. Because the notes express this relation through apparently contradictory formulas such as 1 = 2 and 1 = 3, I propose a reconstruction using the distinction between identity and numerical sameness developed by Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea. This distinction permits the Persons to remain genuinely distinct while being numerically the same God and clarifies Zizioulas's non-additive account of Trinitarian enumeration.

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Introduction

Zizioulas's handwritten notes form a cryptic and at times elusive text. Many passages—especially those on pages 2 and 3—resist confident interpretation. I shall therefore make no attempt at a definitive decipherment of everything he says. My more modest aim is to offer a coherent reading that renders the text philosophically and theologically plausible without manifestly departing from the spirit of its author.

The notes are themselves somewhat erratically structured. Pages 1 and 4 present a comparatively clear line of argument concerning what Zizioulas calls the "logic of identity." The argument seems to turn on the contention that this logic, in its ordinary form, cannot be straightforwardly applied to God, since the statement *God = God* does not carry the same implications as ordinary identity statements. The expression "logic of identity" is, however, somewhat misleading since Zizioulas's argument is better understood as articulating a particular approach to the metaphysics of identity. His conclusion is that this approach, however adequate it may be in the case of created beings, must be modified when applied to God. Pages 2 and 3 offer some indication of the form that such a modification might take.

The Central Argument

Zizioulas begins by maintaining that an identity fact of the form $A = A$ is either inexplicable or explanatorily grounded in the "negation (or the possibility of the negation) of something else."[1] Since negation is standardly construed as an operation applying to predicates or propositions, I take his claim to be that identity facts of the form $A = A$ are explained by facts of non-identity of the form $A \neq B$.

[1] Zizioulas, unpublished handwritten notes, 1.

Zizioulas frequently explicates the relevant notion of explanation in terms of "affirmation." "Affirmation" is an unusual term in this context and appears to be employed in at least three distinct senses. First, it denotes simply the opposite of negation: "the alternative of the negation is affirmation."[2] Second, it is used in connection with the semantic relation of reference to an object: "A = not B implies that in order to affirm something (A) you must negate something else (B)."[3] On this use, negation pertains to a semantic-epistemic criterion of identity: the capacity to distinguish *A* from what is not *A* is treated as a necessary condition for successfully identifying, and hence referring to, a substance.

Third, and more importantly for Zizioulas's argument, "affirmation" is employed in a distinctively ontological sense, as in the claim that "God has nothing next to him to negate in order to affirm his identity."[4] On this use, to "affirm" a substance is not merely to identify or refer to it, but to account for what makes it the particular substance that it is. Correspondingly, "negation" is itself construed ontologically: it denotes the principle (or one of the principles) in virtue of which a being possesses its determinate identity. I take this third, ontological sense to be predominant in the argument.

Having thus treated non-identity as the explanatory ground of the identity of created beings, Zizioulas's argument culminates in the claim that God's identity cannot be explained "negatively." Two considerations appear to underlie this conclusion. First, "God has nothing next to him to negate." Second, whereas the being of created substances rests upon negation and therefore "upon the assumption of non-being," in the case of God "non-being is not an accompaniment of being." He consequently concludes that "we must depart from the logic of 1 = 1," a logic that, on his account, is ultimately based on negation, and seek instead a "positive" explanation of God's identity.[5] Before attempting to interpret Ziziou-

[2] Zizioulas, notes, 4.
[3] Zizioulas, notes, 1, 4.
[4] Zizioulas, notes, 2.
[5] Zizioulas, notes, 1–2, 4.

las's sparse remarks concerning how such a positive account might proceed, however, I shall comment on the argument itself.

The argument, as it stands, leaves several crucial issues unresolved. First, the claim that "there is nothing next to God," which is presumably intended to express God's transcendence, is metaphorical and requires more precise formulation. Second, it is unclear how this claim is related to the further assertion that, in the case of God, "non-being is not an accompaniment of being." Are the two claims logically independent, or is the latter intended to follow from the former? More importantly, the attempt to explain facts of identity in terms of facts of non-identity appears circular. A fact of non-identity such as $A \neq B$ obtains between relata whose determinate identities must already be ontologically secured. The point can be put another way. Suppose that we are asked to explain why $A \neq B$. A natural explanation would be that A, which is trivially identical with itself, differs from B, which is likewise trivially identical with itself, with respect to one or more of its properties. Self-identity facts therefore figure in the explanans of non-identity. To invoke non-identity in turn to explain self-identity is consequently circular. Moreover, it is unclear why self-identity should imply non-identity. Non-identity implies plurality, and vice versa. It is not, however, incoherent to suppose that the domain of some possible world contains only a single object that is trivially self-identical.

Despite these difficulties, the argument can be modified without affecting its intended conclusion. Within the setting of classical theism, a created being cannot be the sole existent, since it has been created by God, who is necessarily distinct from it. Createdness therefore entails plurality and hence non-identity. Since createdness belongs to the nature of a created being, it follows from the very nature of such a being that there is at least one substance—namely God—that is non-identical with it. It is therefore a necessary condition for a created thing to be what it is that there exist another substance—namely God—upon which its existence depends. We are thus justified in agreeing with Zizioulas that otherness, and hence negation, pertains to the identity of created beings.

For God, however, the situation is different. Assuming that creation is contingent, there are possible worlds in which God does not create and hence exists alone. This, I suggest, is the simplest way to interpret the claim that "God has nothing next to Him to negate." In such worlds, there is nothing that is non-identical with God. It is therefore not a necessary condition for God to be what He is that there exist another substance distinct from Him. And what is not necessary to God can neither belong to nor be entailed by His essence. Hence otherness neither belongs to God's essence nor is entailed by it. God's identity cannot, therefore, be accounted for negatively, in terms of His non-identity with something else; it must be accounted for "positively."[6]

The claim that, in God, "non-being is not an accompaniment of being" may be read as a consequence of the preceding point: non-identity is not involved in God's essence. Zizioulas's immediate reference to Plato may help to clarify the point. The likely background is the *Sophist* (257b-258c), where the Stranger from Elea rejects the view that negation signifies the contrary of what is negated. "Not-being" is not absolute nothingness but otherness: to say that something is not *F* is to say that it is other than *F*. Similarly, to say that *A* is not *B* is to say that *A* is other than *B*. Thus, not-being, in the relevant sense, is understood as otherness rather than as the opposite of being.[7]

Read against this background, Zizioulas's claim becomes intelligible. In creatures, being is necessarily accompanied by "non-being" insofar as their identity involves otherness expressed through negation. This is not so in the case of God. His being does not pre-

[6] Compare Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* II.11–12. Aquinas argues that although relations to creatures are predicated of God, such relations do not really exist in God and hence do not belong to His essence. I broadly construe $God \neq B$, where *B* is a creature, as expressing such a relation. If so, God's essence cannot be accounted for in terms of His distinctness from created beings. Nor, given divine uniqueness, can His identity be accounted for through His distinctness from another divine being. The point is not that God cannot be known or described negatively, but that His identity cannot be metaphysically grounded, even partially, in His non-identity with something other than Himself.

[7] Plato, *Sophist*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Hackett Publishing, 1997), 257b–258c,

suppose otherness in this sense. Accordingly, "non-being is not an accompaniment of being" in God.

The "Positive" Account of God's Identity

On pages 2 and 3 of the notes, Zizioulas appears to be developing, albeit tentatively, a "positive" account. Much of the discussion is obscure and plainly provisional, but its theological setting is unmistakably Trinitarian. He writes:

"God has nothing next to Him to negate. Hence if only A and B existed, God could not affirm Himself. … But how can A and B affirm themselves positively?"[8]

Two difficulties immediately arise. First, it is unclear what the terms *A* and *B* are intended to denote. Second, if A and B, as seems likely, are distinct, it is difficult to understand how they can exist given the claim that there is nothing "next to God."

I suggest that the passage be glossed in the following terms: since, in Zizioulas's theology, God is identified with the Father (see footnote 15), *A* and *B* may be taken to denote the other two Trinitarian Persons, the Son (S) and the Holy Spirit (HS). Zizioulas may then be entertaining provisionally the possibility that God could affirm Himself positively through the identities *God the Father* = *S* and *God the Father* = *HS*. The proposal, however, is immediately abandoned, since it would collapse the distinction between the Son and the Spirit: if both are identical with the Father, then, by the symmetry and transitivity of identity, *S* = *HS*. This would explain Zizioulas's apparently disapproving remark at point (a) on page 2 that the affirmations *A* = *B* and *B* = *A* (on the present reading, *S* = *HS* and *HS* = *S*) "result into the disappearance of their identities. If A is B it is no longer A and vice versa."[9]

The proposed identification of *A* and *B* with the Son and the Holy Spirit also clarifies their occurrence immediately after the claim that nothing exists "next to" God. The Trinitarian Persons are not beings external to God; they are themselves divine and

[8] Zizioulas, notes, 2.
[9] Zizioulas, notes, 2.

therefore do not stand alongside God in the manner of creatures. Point (b) at the end of page 2, however, remains opaque to me.

Page 3 confirms that the entire discussion is situated within a Trinitarian context. Zizioulas maintains that the identity *God = God*, unlike *God = Father*, is wholly uninformative with respect to God's essence. By contrast, *God = Father* says something substantive about God and, in doing so, implicitly introduces the Son.[10] The positive account of God's identity thus appears to be articulated primarily in terms of the Father and, secondarily, through His relations to the other two Persons.

The status of the identities of the Persons themselves, however, remains to be clarified. Zizioulas offers no explicit account, although the question seems to underlie his inquiry on page 2 into how *A* and *B* can "affirm themselves positively." A passage in *Communion and Otherness* suggests the direction in which his thought may be moving.

"If the three persons co-emerge and are not derived from anyone or from any Other, their unity must be sought in the very 'fact' of their co-emergence and co-existence."[11]

The picture that begins to emerge is therefore one in which God's identity is positively disclosed in the Father, while the identities of the Persons are themselves mutually affirmed.

This conception also offers a promising way of approaching a particularly difficult passage on page 3:

"That 1 is not 2, i.e., not to be confused with 2 not by way of negation of 2 but by way of 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 it ceases to be 1 and becomes 2 but on the contrary through the affirmation it becomes 1 and not 2."[12]

Again, I take the numerals to designate the Trinitarian Persons. Zizioulas's point appears to be that their distinction is real—"1 is

[10] Zizioulas, notes, 3.

[11] John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (T&T Clark, 2006), 135.

[12] Zizioulas, notes, 3.

not 2"—but is not grounded in negation in the manner characteristic of created beings. The identity of a creature involves its non-identity with God; the identity of a divine Person, by contrast, cannot be understood on this model, since the Persons possess one and the same divine essence that unites them with an intimacy incomparably greater than that obtaining among created beings. Their distinctness cannot therefore be adequately expressed through the negation of one another. The occurrence of negation in the expression "1 is not 2" in the passage above is consequently liable to mislead, since it reflects the limitations of the linguistic resources available to us for expressing divine otherness. In seeking to overcome, or at least mitigate, this limitation, Zizioulas appears to envisage that even the distinctness of each Person must receive a positive rather than a negative account: each is affirmed in and through the affirmation of the others. This may be what he intends by the claim that "the affirmation 1 = 2 does not mean that it ceases to be 1 and becomes 2 but on the contrary through the affirmation it becomes 1 and not 2." It remains difficult, however, to see how such a proposal can be rendered formally coherent.

The difficulty becomes especially acute at the level of Zizioulas's notation. He appears to express this reciprocal affirmation by means of formulas such as $1 = 2$ and $1 = 3$, with 1, 2, and 3 standing respectively for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Yet if these formulas are construed as ordinary statements of numerical identity, they efface precisely the personal distinctions they are intended to articulate: in Zizioulas's own words, they "result into the disappearance of the [persons'] identities." What his proposal therefore seems to require is a form of sameness that preserves rather than abolishes personal otherness—a relation in virtue of which the Persons may be affirmed as One without thereby being numerically identical with one another.

From Identity to Numerical Sameness: A Reconstruction of the Notes

One possible way forward is to distinguish identity from numerical sameness without identity. The distinction, together with its technical elaboration, is famously developed by Jeffrey Brower and Michael Rea in "Material Constitution and the Trinity."[13] Their central proposal is that the apparent inconsistency among the claims that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct Persons, that each is God, and that there is only one God can be resolved by analogy with cases of material constitution. A statue and the lump of bronze that constitutes it may be non-identical because they possess different properties: the lump may survive being squashed whereas the statue does not—without thereby counting as two material objects. Brower and Rea characterize the relation between them as one of *numerical sameness without identity*. On their broadly Aristotelian analysis, substances are hylomorphic compounds of matter and form. Two such compounds are numerically the same material being if and only if they share the same matter; they are identical only if, in addition, that matter is organized by the same form.

Applied to the Trinity, the divine essence plays a role analogous to matter, while the distinguishing personal properties or forms (*hypostatic idiomata*)—unbegottenness, begottenness, and procession—play a role analogous to forms. The three Persons are therefore genuinely distinct; yet, since each involves one and the same divine essence, they are numerically the same God without being identical Persons.[14]

[13] Jeffrey E. Brower and Michael C. Rea, "Material Constitution and the Trinity," *Faith and Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2005): 57–76, https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil200522134.

[14] A possible objection, particularly pertinent to the present discussion, is that the account threatens to generalize in an unacceptable way. Since two distinct human persons, *A* and *B*, share a common essence, the theory might seem to entail the counterintuitive conclusion that *A* and *B* are numerically the same human being without being identical persons. The analogy, however, is misleading in several respects. The divine essence is necessarily shared by only three Persons, whereas there is no corresponding upper limit to the number of persons who may instantiate the human essence. Moreover, whereas human essence is naturally understood as a *universal* instantiated by distinct human be-

This distinction is particularly pertinent to the present discussion. Brower and Rea's account is, of course, significantly different from Zizioulas's. They explain divine unity by means of a metaphysical relation modeled on material constitution, whereas Zizioulas appears to account for divine identity positively in terms of the Persons and their relations, rather than by appeal to anything analogous to an underlying constituent.

Despite these differences in their underlying metaphysics, Brower and Rea's distinction can nevertheless be adapted so as to provide a formally consistent interpretation of Zizioulas's claims. Before presenting that proposal, however, one point requires emphasis. Unlike Brower and Rea's philosophical account of the Trinity, Zizioulas's theology follows the conciliar Trinitarian tradition in assigning a distinctive theological primacy to the identity *God = Father*. This identification is especially prominent in the present notes, although its broader theological significance emerges still more clearly elsewhere in his writings.[15] Indeed, it is through

ings, the divine essence may more plausibly be conceived as analogous to a *module trope*: a particularized property that is itself characterized precisely by the character it confers upon the whole which it is a part of (a redness module trope, for example, not only confers redness to the whole it is part of but it is itself red). A trope of divinity of this kind may plausibly be shared by non-identical Persons. More importantly, the divine essence unites the Persons far more intimately than shared matter unites ordinary hylomorphic compounds. A given portion of matter may receive indefinitely many forms and thus enter successively into indefinitely many compounds; the divine essence, by contrast, admits only the three personal forms. If Brower and Rea's account applies to distinct compounds sharing the same matter, it therefore applies with even greater force to the Trinitarian Persons. Zizioulas discusses Gregory of Nyssa's response to a related objection in *Communion and Otherness*, 171–72. For the distinction between *modifier* and *module* tropes, see R. K. Garcia, "Two Ways to Particularize a Property," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 4 (2015): 635–652, https://doi.org/10.1017/apa.2015.21.

[15] Zizioulas gives systematic expression to this conviction by locating the ultimate ground of divine unity, in accordance with the Greek patristic tradition, not in the divine essence considered in abstraction from the hypostases, but in the hypostasis of the Father, who is uniquely the causal principle of the Son's generation and the Spirit's procession. He observes that, "in the case of the Eastern creeds … the phrase 'one God the Father' seems to attach divine unity to the divine Fatherhood," and further remarks that "the East did not adopt the easy way of dissociating the 'One God' from 'God the Father,' and preferred to face the Arian challenge in a way that was faithful to the biblical *equation* [emphasis added] of God with the Father." He likewise maintains that "the *identification* [emphasis added] of God with the Father, which we find in the Bible and in the early

this identity that Zizioulas appears to understand both God and the Person of the Father as being positively "affirmed."

The obvious question, however, concerns the other two Trinitarian Persons. How are the Son and the Holy Spirit to "affirm themselves"? As we have seen, their identities cannot be positively secured by means of ordinary identity statements such as $S = HS$, $F = S$, or $F = HS$, since such identities would efface the personal otherness that Zizioulas seeks to preserve. Nor can they be secured "negatively," through relations of non-identity, since the mode of differentiation obtaining among the divine Persons is not of the same kind as that found among created individuals. It is precisely here that the distinction between identity and numerical sameness becomes useful.

Adapting Brower and Rea's distinction for the purposes of Zizioulas's account, let $\equiv_G$ denote the relation of *numerical God-sameness without identity*, that is, the relation expressed by "... is numerically the same God as ...". In the present adaptation, however, "God" is to be understood as referring specifically to God the Father; in this respect, the proposal departs from Brower and Rea's original account. We may then represent the positive mutual affirmation of the Son and the Holy Spirit not in terms of either identity or non-identity, but in terms of numerical God-sameness: $S \equiv_G HS$. Thus, the Son is numerically the same God as the Holy Spirit, although the Son is not identical with the Holy Spirit. The relation obtains in virtue of the fact that both the Son and the Holy Spirit possess the same divine essence as God the Father.[16]

creeds, survives in the Cappadocians," as evidenced by their understanding of divine *monarchia* as referring to the one *arche* of divine existence. This *arche*, on Zizioulas's reading, signifies not merely "rule" or "power"—which could be common to the three Persons and thus pertain to the one divine substance—but, more fundamentally, the personal ontological origin of divine existence. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 117–19. The identity *God = Father* thus occupies a distinctive theological place in Zizioulas's account: the Father is not merely one of the three divine Persons but the personal *arche* of divine existence.

[16] Since the Father is identical with God the Father, and hence trivially numerically the same God as Himself, it follows, given that the Son and the Holy Spirit possess the same divine essence as the Father, that $F \equiv_G S$ and $F \equiv_G HS$ also obtain.

With the notation $\equiv_G$ now in place, we can give a more precise explication of Zizioulas's claim that "the affirmation 1 = 2 does not mean that it ceases to be 1 and becomes 2 but on the contrary through the affirmation it becomes 1 and not 2." If = in this passage is replaced by $\equiv_G$, the intended point becomes considerably clearer. Numerical God-sameness does not efface the distinct personal identities of the Persons. On the contrary, insofar as the Persons are mutually affirmed through this relation, it is precisely in and through their numerical sameness that each is positively established in its own particularity. In this sense, each Person "becomes" what it is, not through the negation of the others, but through the relation of numerical God-sameness that obtains among them.

This analysis also accords well with Zizioulas's claim that, "looked upon from the side of the otherness [that is, on the present reconstruction, from the side of distinct personal identities] God is 3, and from the side of oneness [that is, from the side of numerical sameness] it is one substance."[17] God is one substance because, on the present account, something x is a God—that is, a hylomorphic compound whose "matter" is the divine essence and whose form is "unbegottenness"—and every divine Person is numerically the same God as x, since each shares the same divine essence as x. On the other hand, "looked upon from the side of otherness," God is three because there are three non-identical divine Persons who are numerically the same God.

The present analysis may also shed light on another difficult passage in the notes, where Zizioulas observes that "what makes it difficult to accept 1 = 3 is the assumption that the ultimate affirmation is 1 = 1."[18] The expression $1 = 3$ may here be understood as a schematic representation of two distinct modes of counting operating simultaneously. Counted with respect to numerical sameness, the Persons (and God) are one; counted with respect to their distinct personal identities, they are three. The occurrence of

[17] Zizioulas, notes, 3.
[18] Zizioulas, notes, 4.

= in $1 = 3$ is therefore potentially misleading if it is read as the familiar sign of classical identity. On the present reconstruction, it is intended instead to express a hybrid relation combining classical identity with $\equiv_G$. Strictly speaking, such a relation would require a distinct symbol of its own, precisely in order to prevent its being conflated with identity proper.

The suggestion that $1 = 3$ involves two distinct modes of counting also provides a natural way of understanding the account of the enumeration of the divine Persons that Zizioulas attributes to the Cappadocians in *Communion and Otherness*.[19]

On his gloss, the Cappadocians permit the enumeration of the Persons only under considerable qualification. Number is necessary because human language possesses no other adequate means of expressing personal otherness; in this sense, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must indeed be numbered. Such enumeration, however, must not be understood additively, as though the three Persons were discrete units whose aggregation produced a plurality within God. According to Zizioulas, it is precisely such an understanding that the Cappadocians reject. Gregory of Nyssa excludes addition and subtraction from God, while Basil insists that number be applied to the Trinity "reverently," that is, without conceiving the Persons as added to one another. The three hypostases are therefore numerically distinguishable without being numerically additive: their distinction entails neither composition nor aggregation into a whole composed of independently countable parts. In Zizioulas's view, this conception of Trinitarian plurality without addition is carried forward by John of Damascus, who describes the hypostases as mutually related and indwelling, but neither composed nor added together.

Read in the light of the present reconstruction of Zizioulas's notes, these remarks admit of a natural interpretation. When the Persons are counted with respect to their distinct identities, the result is three; from this perspective, the Persons are added to one another. Such addition, however, reflects an *ontologically* mislead-

[19] Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 171–73.

ing mode of counting, according to which distinction implies both addition and negation (*A* is not *B*). Indeed, addition and negation are, in the present context, even more misleading than in cases of material coincidence, such as that of a statue and the lump of bronze that constitutes it, since the unity conferred upon the Persons by the divine essence is far more intimate than that conferred by shared matter upon two coincident hylomorphic compounds.

The mode of unity that renders negation inappropriate in the Trinitarian case is not fully intelligible. The mystery of the Trinity therefore remains irreducible, not least because the created order furnishes no instance of a unity of comparable strength. The available analogies can at most serve to domesticate the mystery; they cannot dissolve it.

To move beyond this perspective and represent the divine domain without such misleading implications,[20] the Persons must instead be counted with respect to Brower and Rea's relation of numerical sameness. The result is then one. The two counts are therefore not in conflict, since they proceed according to different criteria of enumeration. On this reading, the Cappadocian prohibition against additive numbering may be understood as also denying that the first mode of counting licenses the inference from three distinct Persons to three Gods. The point is not merely that one mode of counting yields three whereas another yields one, but that the enumeration of distinct Persons does not license ontological addition.

[20] The misleading implications at issue need not be strictly logical; they may instead arise at the level of conversational implicature, in something like the Gricean sense, insofar as the language of addition and negation may misleadingly suggest a degree of separation among the Persons that misrepresents the metaphysical intimacy of their unity. I do not have the space to develop this line of thought.

Conclusion

In this brief comment, I have sought to render Zizioulas's difficult and often obscure notes more intelligible by reconsidering them in light of the distinction between identity and numerical sameness. The reconstruction is deliberately modest: it does not claim that Zizioulas himself had this distinction in mind when composing the notes. Its purpose is rather to show that his remarks admit of a formally coherent reading that preserves their central theological and metaphysical commitments, clarifies the positive affirmation of divine identity, and gives a more precise sense to his rejection of additive enumeration in the Trinity. Whether Zizioulas would have accepted this reconstruction must, of course, remain an open question.

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