

God *is* Communion: A Spirituality of *being*

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In our contemporary world “community” has become one of the ubiquitous ‘buzz’ words that punctuates our everyday discourse. Whether used to describe on-line chat groups; to refer to “marginalised communities” who become the fortunate (or one could argue unfortunate) recipients of social program or policies to re-incorporate them into the global market; or, used as a realtors marketing tool to attract potential investors to buy into exclusive ‘gated communities’; the term “community” pops up everywhere. Likewise the word has entered the common parlance of church-life. One constantly hears discussions of the desire of congregations to connect with their local “communities” (and the accompanying designing and implementation of programs to bring this about) and the expressed aspiration to *build* a clearer sense of “community” within the church itself.

While the use of the term “community” can be understood as a response to the loss of social capital which seems to characterise contemporary western societies and points to a genuine yearning for a more authentic and richer expression of shared life, one wonders whether “community” and the experience of “communion” can really be reduced to a program or a series of tasks that one can implement; an experience that can be marketed and consumed? For all the bandying around of the word “communion” do we actually have a clear idea of what *communion* is and therefore of what it is that we aspire to? Below, I will suggest that a Trinitarian spirituality – a spirituality of *communion* – rather than being co-opted and reduced to a series of commoditised and marketable processes or programs, responds to the deep yearning we see in contemporary society, by offering an inversion of both our understanding of *communion* and of *spirituality*.

Like all concepts in Christian theology, the word “communion” gains its content, not from an elaboration of human philosophies, but rather is grounded upon our reflection on “communion” as evidenced to us in the revelation of the Trinitarian God. As Colin Gunton states: ‘it is only through an understanding of what kind of being that God is that we can come to learn what kind of beings we are and what kind of world we inhabit.’¹

While ostensibly Trinitarian, western theology of the 19th and 20th century – following the influence of Schleiermacher – generally viewed the doctrine of the Trinity as an irrelevance. The belief, espoused by Immanuel Kant, that ‘From the doctrine of the

¹ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), xi – Preface to 1st edition, included in the second edition.

Trinity, taken literally, nothing whatsoever can be gained for practical purposes...'² was one seemingly shared, in general, by Christian theologians.³ While the last half century has seen a renaissance in Trinitarian theology⁴, Western theology, stemming from its Augustinian legacy – which begins by stressing the one divine essence of God and then, only *afterwards* interprets God as three persons – has tended to dichotomize between the understanding of God as One and God as Trinity (*De Deo Uno* and *De Deo Trino*) and therefore has struggled to provide the necessary theological resources for the development of a spirituality of “communion”. It is this seeming failure of Augustinian Trinitarian thought to be able respond to the issues of contemporary life that has led to a burgeoning interest in non-Western theologies, and, in particular, the theologies of the Eastern tradition, in which the starting point for any discussion on the Doctrine of the Trinity, is not the oneness (essence/*ousia*) of God, but rather the three *hypostasis* of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁵

The Theology of John Zizioulas

One particular theologian, whose work has gained considerable acclaim and influence, has been Eastern Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas.⁶ Zizioulas, influenced by his reading of the Cappadocian Fathers, argues that critical to our theology and spirituality is an understanding that *God is communion*. In contrast to western thinking – shaped by Greek philosophical presuppositions in which *being-*

² Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten*, Ph. B. 252, 33, quoted in Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1981), 6.

³ Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, commenting on the absence of the doctrine of the Trinity in theological writing, stated provocatively, that ‘should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.’ For Rahner, the great problem facing the Western church stemmed from its failure to realise the ‘existential relevance’ of the doctrine of the Trinity. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), 11, 14.

⁴ It is in the mid 20th-century, in the face of the challenges posed by modernity and the turbulence and violence that seemed to stem from the “modern” man, that Western theologians – notably Karl Barth and Karl Rahner – begin to actively explore the relevance of the Doctrine of the Trinity to the living of contemporary life.

This rediscovery of the importance and relevance of doctrine of the Trinity has continued to the point where as Colin Gunton now suggests “Suddenly we are all Trinitarians, or so it would seem.” Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, xv.

⁵ While some believe that Rahner and Gunton, in their criticism of Augustine over-state their case, their critique has stimulated both the rediscovery of the work of the Greek Cappadocian Fathers and likewise has led to a reinterpretation of Augustinian thought.

⁶ Though having taught at the University of Edinburgh and University of Glasgow, it is Zizioulas’ role as Visiting Professor at the Research Institute in Systematic Theology of King's College, London, and his friendship with British theologian Colin Gunton which has led to the broader dissemination and reception of his theology. Zizioulas’ two critical works are: John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, 2002 ed. (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985). and the later John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*, ed. Paul McPartlan (London / New York: T&T Clark, 2006)..

existence is understood in *substantial* terms, and, which following Augustine begins its theology with the *oneness* of God, the *substance* of who God is – Zizioulas, argues for a *personalist* ontology.⁷ In Eastern thought, the hypostases, that is, the personhood of the Father, Son and Spirit are not added-on extras that flow from the nature of God, but rather are themselves the ontological nature of God. For Zizioulas:

The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.... The Holy Trinity is a *primordial* ontological concept and not a notion which is added to the divine substance or rather which follows it.... The substance of God, “God” has no ontological content, no true being, apart from communion.⁸

This understanding of the Trinity, of the Divine persons, Father, Son and Spirit, not as independent, nor even interdependent identities who influence one another, but rather, as *personally interior* to one another as a *communion of divine persons*, is expressed through the Greek notion of *perichoresis*. Within this conception of the Trinity in which ‘in eternity Father, Son and Spirit share a dynamic mutual reciprocity, interpenetration and interanimation,’⁹ relations between the divine persons are not seen as secondary to the divine *ousia*, but rather are *constitutive* of the very being of God. As Colin Gunton states: ‘the persons [of the Trinity] do not simply enter into relations with one another, but are constituted by one another in the relations.’¹⁰ For Gunton, ‘God is not God apart from the way in which Father, Son and Spirit in eternity give to and receive from each other what they essentially are. The three do not merely coinhere, but dynamically constitute one another’s being.’¹¹

From this foundational premise that God *is a communion of Divine persons* Zizioulas develops his theology accordingly:

- 1) That *being-existence* owes itself to the free gift-giving of a personal God. That is, that *being-existence* is not one of *necessity* but rather of *freedom*. All of creation therefore is a gift – brought into being freely by the *ekstasis* of the Divine Persons – by a God who opens himself up to share his life and love in the act of creation.
- 2) All of creation therefore is designed to be *in communion* with its Creator, and humanity, made in the ‘image of God’, is specifically made to be *like* God. Humanity reflects the *imago Dei*, not through our nature – our substance/*ousia* – that is, through *what* we are, but rather through our mode of being, that is,

⁷ That is, a personalist understanding of *being-existence*.

⁸ Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 17.

⁹ Colin E Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity - the 1992 Bampton Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 214.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 164.

through *how* we exist. Humanity, as *created*, and therefore with a beginning and an end, can never be God by nature, but we are ‘called to exist in the way God exists.’¹² God’s mode of being, God as Father, Son and Spirit, who freely and in love ‘make room’ and space for the Other, is the ultimate and genuine form of human life.

- 3) Sin therefore is the failure of humanity to live as image-bearers, to receive God’s gift of *being*, to live in communion with the Creator. Rather than choosing to walk in the cool of the garden with our Creator we violate the otherness of both creation and each other and hide from God. Death comes, not as a divine punishment inflicted upon us for our moral failings, but rather is the consequence of a creation living separate from divine communion. Cut off from the very breath of God (*ruach*) that brought us into existence, divorced from the loving communion and life-giving embrace of the Trinitarian God, and therefore isolated as individuals, our ‘biological’ existence slowly decays and moves towards death.
- 4) Though humanity is incapable of living in *communion* with one another and with God, Jesus, the God-Man, lives a human life in which he both accepts God’s gift and offers it back to God. Living, not as an individual, but in *communion* with the Father and for the other, Jesus, the second Adam, the true human person, paves the path for humanity – creating a new way to *be*.
- 5) For Christians, in receiving the gift of God’s grace and surrendering our self-controlled lives a twin process takes place. Through the ritual of baptism, we enter into the body of Christ – our lives are hypostasised into Christ and we enter into the *ecclesia; the called out community* – a community in which a new form of life is being lived: a life of communion. At the same time as we enter into the body of Christ, so the Spirit of Christ, enters into us and begins renovations – expanding our contracted living space, making room for others, and preparing us and ushering us towards our true home – *communion* with the Father.

A Spirituality of Communion

While the richness of Zizioulas’ Trinitarian theology provides a number of avenues for deeper reflection, there are two particular aspects of Zizioulas’ thought which I believe are worth highlighting in their contribution to the development of a *spirituality of communion* able to respond to the deep yearning within our world for “community”, while avoiding the pragmatic, programmatic and commoditising tendencies of our contemporary culture.

Firstly, and perhaps most significantly, an understanding of God as *communion* offers for many Western Christians a new insight into the nature and character of God. In contrast to Western-Augustinian Trinitarian thought in which personhood is

¹² Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 165.

understood in psychological terms and the *image of God* is correlated with our ability to be *rational*, a God of *communion* lays greater emphasis, not on our *rationality*, but rather on our *relationality*. A cerebral and rationalistic spirituality gives way to an emphasis on relationships and intimacy – a mystical and contemplative spirituality. The Doctrine of the Trinity becomes less a philosophical conundrum to be solved, as a reality to be experienced. Accordingly, Western theology, with its emphasis on *justification* and *moral sanctification*, so often accompanied by an *active* spirituality where one “*works out their salvation with fear and trembling*” is held in balance with a *passive* spirituality that recognises that *baptised into Christ* we are already a new creation, and that *theosis* – our transformation into the likeness of the Son, the preparation for our participation in the eschatological divine embrace – is not *a task we do*, but rather a work of the Spirit within us.

Secondly, Zizioulas reminds us that made in the *image of God*, there is no such thing as an individual person. To be a person is to recognise that we are constituted by the gift of the Divine Other (God) and called into relationship with the other. As Zizioulas states:

The person is an identity that emerges through relationship...; it is an ‘I’ that can exist only as long as it relates to a ‘thou’ which affirms its existence and its otherness. If we isolate the ‘I’ from the ‘thou’ we lose not only its otherness but also its very being; it simply cannot be without the other.¹³

Accordingly in a spirituality of communion, the other is not additional to the self, but rather is part of the self – that is, our very identity is shaped by our engagement with the other. Authentic personhood therefore involves not *freedom* from the other, but rather is a *freedom* for the other. Our mystical experience of the divine communion – does not draw us away from the world, but rather leads us back to the world – to an engagement with the human other.

This understanding of *communion* as the nature of God and therefore the nature of genuine human existence is perhaps most clearly expressed in the practice of hospitality. In Luke 10:38-42 at the home of the sisters Mary and Martha, Jesus reminds us that the practice of *hospitality*, the forming and performing of *community*, begins not with *our* actions of hosting, but rather originates in our receiving of hospitality from the divine host. Thus, a Trinitarian spirituality of communion is not primarily one of *doing*, of engaging in a new series of activities or performances, but rather is fundamentally one of *being*, of becoming recipients of God’s gracious act of hospitality and thus participants in God’s *communion*. It is in the seemingly idle sitting at feet of the Saviour and receiving his welcome that we become people of *community*, able to bring words and actions of hope to our “dislocated” world.

¹³ Ibid. 9.

Further Reading

- Gunton, Colin E. *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity - the 1992 Bampton Lectures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Gunton, Colin E. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997.
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- . *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church*. Edited by Paul McPartlan. London / New York: T&T Clark, 2006.