

DOCTORAL THESIS

A critical study on Zizioulas' ontology of personhood

Jiang, Tingcui

Date of Award:
2014

[Link to publication](#)

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

ABSTRACT

This research is about a theological ontology which is based on Zizioulas' ontology of personhood. His ontological thought is manifested by a renewed view of God and the human person. Therefore, this thesis includes three parts. The first part examines the being of God as personhood. The second part examines the being of the human person as personhood. The third part analyzes and criticizes Zizioulas' ontology of personhood.

In Part I, I explore the background and source of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood in the Cappadocian Trinitarian theology. Zizioulas claims that there has been an ontological revolution against Greek substantialism: based on the identification of hypostasis with personhood rather than *ousia*; the ontological principle of God is traced back to the person (hypostasis). It means that God first is God the Father rather than his substance or nature. This is a reversal of a view which has prevailed in Western theology. The Father is the personal cause of the generation of the Son and of the procession of the Spirit. One of the significances of the Father as personal cause is that the personal Father generates personal otherness in the divine being. Zizioulas' ontology of personhood is based on the concepts of communion and otherness. He excludes essence or *ousia* from his ontological categories.

In Part II, I will explore the being of man as personhood. The Father as personal cause bequeaths us an ontology of personhood which also provides the metaphysical ground for the being of human persons. Personhood rather than human nature is the centre of anthropology. The mode of existence of the Trinity is the foundation for the transformation of human existence from a biological hypostasis to an ecclesial hypostasis. Personal otherness is constitutive of human person. Otherness as an ontological existence transforms the relationship between human beings in communion. The coexistence of otherness and communion in a Trinitarian model provides a foundation for the criticisms of Levinas' concept of otherness without communion.

In Part III, I will criticize the Western views of God and person, but also analyze and criticize Zizioulas' ontology of personhood. The significance of the ontology of personhood is shown by its providing an insightful and radical critique of the substantialist Trinitarian theology which understands One God as substance foremost. At the same time, it provides strong criticisms of individualist understanding of the concept of personhood.

I conclude that Zizioulas has reconstructed a new theological ontology and a new systematic theology which are significantly different from our customary thinking of theology. But because of his overlooking of the views of sin and justice in the ontological sense, I also criticize Zizioulas' ontology of personhood for its lack of a critical reflection on the society.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Above all, I would like to thank my family, the pastor, sisters and brothers from church for their encouragement and support which are the sources of my strength and confidence to sustain my study and research in the past few years especially when my health was not in good condition. Without their prayers and care I would not have survived those tough days.

My special appreciation and thanks go to my principal supervisor, Prof. Kwan Kai Man, who has guided me along the way with his tremendous patience and outstanding academic vision. I would like to thank him for correcting my bias and stubbornness and spending lots of time mentoring me in writing the dissertation. I would like to thank Dr. Richard Lee, my co-supervisor, for his academic guidance and patient instruction. I would also like to thank Dr. Chan Sze Chi, for his spending a lot of time to help me improve my dissertation including correcting the grammar mistakes. My thanks also go to other teachers from the Department of Religion and Philosophy for their encouragement and support.

Last, but by no means least, I specially thank my friends in mainland China—Wang Chengjun, Li Meilin, Baihong etc. They are all university teachers from Department of Philosophy, and their particular research on religious philosophy has inspired me a lot.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Introduction	1
Part I The Being of God as Personhood, or Persons-in-Communion	21
Chapter One The background and source of the ontology of personhood	22
1.1 The influence of Greek substantialism on the idea of One God	23
1.2 Problem of the ‘Person’ in the Trinitarian formula	25
1.2.1 Western Sabellianism in Trinitarian theology	27
1.2.2 Eastern Tritheism	27
1.2.3 Arianism and Eunomianism	28
1.3 Reasons underlying the problem of the Trinitarian formulation	31
1.3.1 The Logos approach to the idea of truth	32
1.3.2 ‘Persona’, ‘Prosopon’ and ‘hypostasis’ in Grace-Roman thought	36
1.4 A new idea of truth and an ontological revolution	38
1.4.1 A new idea of truth: the identification of truth with life	38
1.4.2 The Ontological revolution initiated by Athanasius	41
1.4.3 The Cappadocian Fathers continuing the ontological revolution	44
1.5 The influence of the ontological revolution on the Second Ecumenical Council and later Christological debate	47
1.5.1 Its influence on the Creed of Constantinople	47
1.5.2 Its influence on Chalcedonian Christology	49

Chapter Two Analysis of Zizioulas’ ontology of personhood	51
2.1 The meaning of the being of God as person	51
2.1.1 The being of God as person answering the question of ‘ <i>how</i> God is’	51
2.1.2 The being of God as person giving rise to otherness and communion	53
2.2 Further analysis of Zizioulas’ ontological concept of personhood	56
2.2.1 Has Zizioulas misunderstood the Cappadocian concept of divine person?	56
2.2.2 Zizioulas’ understanding of the concept of person vis-à-vis the Cappadocian Fathers	59
2.2.3 A different Trinitarian formula from the Cappadocian Fathers	62
2.3 Further Ontological Implications of Zizioulas’ unique understanding of person as the ultimate ontological category - Taking seriously ‘the Father as cause’	65
2.3.1 Monas refer to the Father ontologically	65
2.3.2 Stressing person to the extent of excluding <i>ousia</i>	67
2.3.3 Causality in Trinity transcending Greek cosmology	68
2.3.4 Person, relationality or communion as central ontological categories of the Trinity	69
2.3.5 Rendering communion primordial not in conflict with the ontological ultimacy of the Father	70
2.3.6 Personal ordering in the immanent Trinity not a substantial Subordinationism	71
2.3.7 Zizioulas’ ontology of personhood transcending necessity to bring about freedom	74
2.4 Preliminary evaluation of Zizioulas’ ontological proposal	75
2.4.1 Criticisms of the <i>monarchia</i> of the Father as cause	76
2.4.2 Criticism of Zizioulas’ ontology – Alexandrian ontology of relationality versus Cappadocian ontology of relationality	78
2.4.3 Evaluation of a part of discussion: further analysis of the true Cappadocian intention	82
2.4.4 Defense of the Father as cause- Calvin and others	85

Part II From God's Person to Human Person	89
Chapter Three The person of the Father as the ontological ground for the personhood of human beings	90
3.1 The ontological meaning of personhood	90
3.1.1 <i>Ekstasis</i> and hypostasis as two basic aspects of personhood	91
3.1.2 Three characteristics of the concept of personhood	93
3.2 The being of God as the ontological ground for the being of man	95
3.2.1 The Father as personal cause for personal existence	95
3.2.2 Christ is the way to personal existence	96
3.3 From biological to ecclesial hypostasis	98
3.3.1 The ontology of communion as a standard to distinguish two modes of existence	99
3.3.2 Biological hypostasis	101
3.3.2.1 The emergence of biological hypostasis	101
3.3.2.2 Death as an ontological problem for biological hypostasis	102
3.3.3 The ecclesial hypostasis	104
3.3.3.1 The emergence of a new particular hypostasis through Baptism	104
3.3.3.2 Eucharistic hypostasis as a relational expression between biological and ecclesial hypostasis	107
Chapter Four Personal communion and otherness	110
4.1 Personal otherness for the being of human person	110
4.1.1 The basic meaning of otherness: uniqueness and relationship	110
4.1.2 Otherness as constitutive of human person	112
4.1.3 Otherness beyond the conflict between the particular/person and the general/ nature	113
4.1.4 Otherness decides the end of ecclesial existence	115

4.2 Personal communion in otherness	117
4.3 Transformation of the relationship with the Other	120
4.3.1 Negligence of the Other	121
4.3.2 The self prior to the Other	122
4.3.3 An impersonal relationship	123
4.3.4 The necessity of renewing the understanding of personhood in theology	124
4.3.5 A personal relationship	127
4.4 Critique of Levinas' concept of otherness without communion	131
4.4.1 The 'otherness' as metaphysical desire in the thought of Levinas	133
4.4.2 An ethical relationship among humans without communion	134
4.4.3 A kind of communion not threatening otherness	136
4.4.4 A personal Christology breaking down totality	138
4.4.5 A Trinitarian model for the coexistence of otherness and communion	140
Part III Critical Assessment of Zizioulas' Ontology of Personhood	142
Chapter Five Critique of Substantialist view of God from the perspective of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	143
5.1 Western substantialist view of God	144
5.1.1 Augustine: God as absolute being	144
5.1.2 Boethius: one <i>ousia</i> and three substances	147
5.1.3 Thomas Aquinas: God as the subsistent being	148
5.2 Critique from the perspective of the ontology of personhood	149
5.2.1 Separation of <i>oikonomia</i> and <i>theologia</i> in Western substantialist approach to Trinity	150
5.2.2 Divergence between East and West in dealing with <i>oikonomia</i> and <i>theologia</i>	152
5.2.3 Substantialist approach causing the problem of <i>Filioque</i>	155

5.2.4 Zizioulas' reiteration of the Cappadocian notion of the Son's mediation in the procession of the Spirit	157
5.2.5 Substantialism dictates that unity precedes diversity logically or ontologically in God	160
5.3 Theological and philosophical significance of the ontology of personhood	165
Chapter six Critique of Western concept of personhood from the perspective of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	168
6.1 The concept of person in Western anthropology	168
6.1.1 Augustine: person as consciousness	168
6.1.2 Boethius: person as individual and rational substance	170
6.1.3 Thomas Aquinas: person as a subsistent individual	171
6.2 Criticism from the angle of the ontology of personhood	173
6.2.1 Individualism in the concept of personhood: there is no otherness and communion	173
6.2.2 Relationship between God and human as an impersonal union	179
6.2.3 The problem of man as a moral issue rather than ontological one	183
6.3 Analysis of Zizioulas' criticisms	188
Chapter Seven Contributions and criticisms of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	195
7.1 Contributions of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	195
7.1.1 Reconstructing a theological ontology as a new approach to theological study	196
7.1.2 A personal knowledge or epistemology for Christianity	197
7.1.3 Salvation concerning foremost hypostasis rather than human nature	205

7.2 Criticisms and defenses of Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	207
7.2.1 Is Zizioulas' ontology of personhood philosophical rather than theological?	207
7.2.2 Defenses of Zizioulas' personal ontology	210
7.3 My criticism: lack of proper doctrines of justice and sin in Zizioulas' ontology of personhood	212
7.3.1 Sin only as an ethical concept for Zizioulas	213
7.3.2 Sin as an ontological problem and a relational concept	214
7.3.3 Divine-human communion lacking the idea of justice	217
7.3.4 Detachment from the injustice of reality	221
Conclusion	225
Bibliography	229
Curriculum Vitae	241