A review from a theological perspective

di CALLAN SLIPPER*

This is a book of tensions. Despite implicit agreement that the category of "relation" is fundamental for our understanding of reality, and the book's central intuition that the relational nature of the Trinitarian God connects in significant ways with the relational nature of the physical and human world, the authors do not fully agree with one another's views. They do not concur either upon the meaning of the term "relation" or upon its value for our understanding. For this reason the essay by Wesley Wildman, *An Introduction to Relational Ontology* introduces a welcome note of scepticism, with paragraph after paragraph questioning the uses of the term. His solution which, as Sarah Coakley points out in her *Afterword* critiquing the book's contributions, is asserted rather than strictly argued, is that "relation" is best understood as "causation". This has its advantages because it respects the significant ways in which the varieties of relatedness between entities affect, change or influence the entities themselves. Its disadvantage is that, as Sarah Coakley also points out, it «closes off some very significant debates that have animated the discussion of "relation" in analytic philosophy in the last generation or so» (p. 195).

From a theological perspective it could be argued, nonetheless, that, properly understood, it is precisely the aspect of relation as causation that is its most significant feature. It is here that there can be found, in the other essays in the book, a series of responses to Wildman's questions. It is not that other authors are unaware of the complexity of the issues. As John Polkinghorne says in his *Introduction*, «the history of twentieth-century physics can be read as the story of the discovery of many levels of intrinsic relationship present in the structure of the universe» (p. vii), and he goes on to suggest that the kind of relationality seen in the various kinds of discourse, such as about the physical universe, the human worlds of psychology and sociology, and theology, have a «cousinly connection» (p. viii). Polkinghorne says that while recognizing the semantic flexibility, we should not stipulate a single limited meaning, because, despite their obvious differences, there is a degree mutual congruence between the different forms of relationality. It is this congruence, in the midst of the tensions, that leads to creative thought. And taking into account Lewis Ayres's questioning of the nature of analogy in his *(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontology*, which helps to focus our thinking, some profound insights are rendered by looking through the lens of relationality.

Two of the most intriguing essays that provide such insights are explicitly theological and interestingly not in complete harmony between themselves. They are Kallistos Ware's *The Holy Trinity: Model for Personhood-in-Relation* and John Zizioulas's *Relational Ontology: Insights from Patristic Thought*. John Zizioulas, of course, is well-known for his contributions in this field and his present offering

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is characterized by its clear and well-rounded presentation. He brings a useful precision to the category of causality as the way of understanding relationality, and starts with seeing it within the divine being. While his interpretation of tradition, both in his historical analysis of the Cappadocians and in particular his view Western thought, is open to doubt, his emphasis upon causality within the Trinity, whereby the relationship (*schesis*) between the *hypostases* is the result of the Father's causality eternally bringing about the Son and the Spirit, leads to some very useful clarifications. In particular, Zizioulas distinguishes between the ontological "what" and "how" of beings. He does this to respond to the perceived dilemma of bringing together the two dimensions of substance and relation. He claims that, following classical Greek thought, the priority of substance is a matter of simple logic for the Western mind: «you first *are* and then you *relate*» (p. 146). Hence «a stone, or for that matter an individual human being, can be conceived as existing, as being there, without necessarily being in relation to something else» (*ibid.*) This kind of ontology, as Zizioulas says, received its fullest expression in Aristotle, and historically it was with the emergence of Trinitarian theology that it first began, in effect, to be questioned. The problem, which Zizioulas does not point out, is that this ontology is clearly flawed. No stone, and for that matter no individual human being, in fact exists or can exist in the cosmos as we know it without the existence of the cosmos. To conceive of such a possibility as existing alone would be, for instance, to say that a person can be born without parents. Relationality is not an optional extra but a necessary dimension of being. While Zizioulas does not make this explicit challenge to "substance ontology", he does spell out how substance and relation fit together as in effect complementary ontological dimensions. Hence, with reference to the divine being, he presents the illuminating formula:

> "what" (*ti*) = substance (*ousia*, *physis*)
> "How" (*pos* or *hops*) = hypostasis/person = mode of being (*tropos hyparxeos*) = relation (*schesis*) (p. 149).

A further step is to see that a similar move can be made with regard to any being, that is, of created as well as Uncreated being. All things are made to be as they are because of their relations (in all their variety); "what" always and only ever exists as "how". In this way Ziziouslas's fascinating essay answers, with precision, the challenge set by Wildman and, potentially at least, gives a grounding in the divine being for why one should see causation as the key to understanding relation.

Kallistos Ware's article, on the other hand, applies the power of Trinitarian thinking, rooted in an understanding of the divine being, to human relations. He gives a far more favourable reading of Western tradition (for all that he, like Zizioulas, is an Orthodox bishop), particularly picking up the thread running from Augustine (who did not only use a "psychological model" of the Trinity but also his version of the "social model") to the thought of Richard of St Victor. Ware sees the Western position, despite the significant differences particularly with Augustine, as essentially in agreement with the Cappadocians, since the so-called double procession of the Holy Spirit, the *Filioque*, for Augustine is never understood in a «stark and unqualified sense» (p. 120). As he says, Augustine «was careful to

insist that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *principaliter*, "principally" or "principially," and from the Son only in a secondary and derivative sense, *per donum Patris*, "by the Father's gift"» (*ibid*.). Ware also realizes the difficulties or limitations of the curious circularity of his kind of the social analogy when applied to the Trinity, saying in his concluding paragraph that «[t]he human experience of mutual love provides us with the least inadequate analogy of the mystery of the Trinitarian God; and the doctrine of the Trinity, in its turn, enables us to understand in some small measure why the world exists and what is the meaning of our own personhood» (p. 128). He is also quite clear that if we do not read back into Patristic or Mediaeval texts a present-day understanding of the "person", it is acceptable to use modern authors such as Buber and John Macmurray, although neither of them refers explicitly to the Trinity, to draw upon their insights as we frame a Trinitarian relational ontology. With this in mind, Ware is able to illustrate the power of Richard of St Victor's position, which in common with the Cappadocians, sees God as interpersonal *koinonia*. The great advantage of Richard's view, according to Ware, is that, in contrast with Augustine, he manages to give a fully personal account of the Holy Spirit. «The perfection of one person requires fellowship with another», Ware quotes Richard as saying (p. 121). This leads to mutual love. But mutual love only achieves its plenitude when there is a third, so that the mutual love is then shared. The lover does not only «love the beloved as a second self, but wishes the beloved to have the further joy of loving a third, jointly with the lover, and of being jointly loved by that third» (*ibid.*). Love, totally expressed as it goes from mutual to shared love, has no lack, as could be the case for instance in the possible egocentricity of lovers closed in upon themselves. In this way Ware also gives an answer to the challenge thrown out by Sarah Coakley in her *Afterword*: why three? Ware affirms that with three the pattern of love is complete. It is this complete love that then allows Ware to see how this Trinitarian pattern, which is the being of the Godhead, has far-reaching consequences in practical applications, politically, economically and socially, transforming every form of community, «the family, the school, the workplace, the local Eucharistic center, the monastery, the city, the nation» (p. 127).

Kallistos Ware and John Zizioulas certainly provide two cogent and deeply appealing essays. Nonetheless, speaking as a non-specialist in mathematics and physics, I found the first essays in the book dealing with relationality in twentieth-century science especially stimulating, if the most difficult to read. It is fascinating to observe how the category of relationship is so deeply woven into the very stuff of matter. Given the Trinitarian presuppositions outlined by Zizioulas and Ware, this should not be surprising although there is no obvious way of going, as it were, in the reverse direction and seeing in the relational structure of physical reality a necessary connection with deep or higher order ontology of the Trinity. The Trinity explains, or has the capacity to explain, nature; nature does not explain the Trinity, even though it does point towards relationality as an ontological supposition or characteristic of all reality. Quantum entanglement in particular shows how profoundly relational things are. Here the phenomenon of quantum teleportation is particularly intriguing. Following Schrödinger, Jeffrey Bub in his essay *The Entangled World: How Can It Be Like That?* explains the "particularly counterintuitive feature of entanglement" called "remote steering". In this two particles (A and

B) in an entangled state will react to one another, so that if another particle (C) changes the state in one of the original two particles (say, of A), it instantaneously changes the state of the other (namely, B). The change in the state of one particle of the entangled pair is recreated in the other. Now, the odd thing for our normal understanding is that this change comes about both instantaneously and however far apart the two original particles are – even if they are on either side of the universe. One could say that although the "what" of the particles remains the same, the "how" is teleported from one place to another.

These kind of experimentally confirmed phenomena (see p. 24) unsettle our understanding of physical reality. Various explanations have been put forward and these are explored briefly by Panos A. Ligomenides in his *Scientific Knowledge as Bridge to the Mind of God*. At the very least it is possible that the dimensions of space-time are not as we perceive them; perhaps there exists «a seamless indivisible "whole" somewhere outside the space and time of our own world» (p. 79). What emerges from twentieth century science, then, replaces the ideology of mechanistic determinism of past centuries with «a world that is evolving in an undetermined, probabilistically driven creative manner»; indeed, it is «one that, under appropriate conditions, may manifest holistic behavior» (p. 80). These new visions on the basis of scientific research make Ligomedes optimistic that they may lead to «a significant contribution to the development of spirituality, and even to the development of a new kind of religiousness» (p. 91).

Whatever views the various authors hold upon matters spiritual, many aspects of relational ontology, variously understood, do potentially impinge significantly upon such issues. If "relating" is a fundamental dimension of reality, then how can conscious, self-aware subjects best live in harmony with reality? What kind of relationality does this imply? Clearly, theological explorations are more apt to offer answers to these kinds of questions. Nonetheless, in their different ways, all the authors in this book present an approach to reality that, at minimum, has the capacity to disturb the way we see things. It is to their credit, however, that the essays do not ignore the tensions and difficulties and so, inevitably, present views that are sometimes, as it were, at counterpoint with one another. This is one aspect of what makes this book such a satisfying read. Of course more could be said – it always can – but what is said is worth the effort of close attention. It is just possible that a relational vision, and specifically from the angle of Christian revelation, a Trinitarian vision, in a way that does not close down or truncate the inquiry, may offer a «Theory of Everything» (see John Polkinghorne, p. 12) that gives a basis both for living and for fruitful scientific and academic exploration.