

Review Article

Evangelical Orthodoxy: A Trinitarian Revival?

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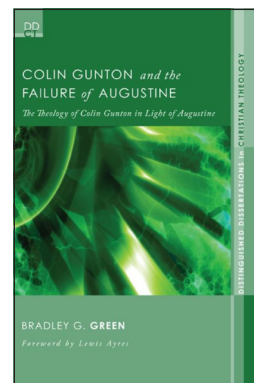
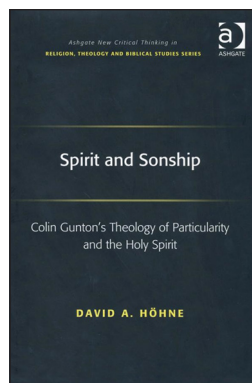
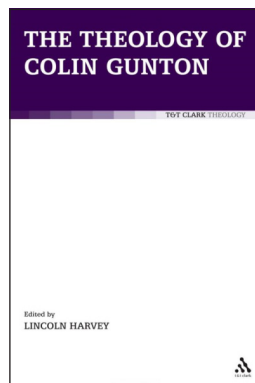
Lincoln Harvey (ed.), *The Theology of Colin Gunton* (London & New York, Continuum, T&T Clark, 2010), pp. xiv and 217.

David A. Höhne, *Spirit and Sonship. Colin Gunton's Theology of Particularity and the Holy Spirit* (Series: New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies; Farnham, UK, Ashgate, 2010), pp. viii and 187.

Bradley G. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in the Light of Augustine* (Eugene, OR, Wipf & Stock, Pickwick Publications 2011), pp. xiv and 226.

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| Doctrine of God | Trinity | Evangelical | Reformed | Creed | Systematic Theology |



Colin E. Gunton (1941-2003) is considered to be one of the more important orthodox theologians of the post-war generation: British, non-conformist, with a strong presence and respect for his work in the United States, and in German theological circles. Gunton taught for his entire career at King's College London initially lecturing in philosophy of religion, then as Professor of Christian Doctrine from 1984. As a Classicist, a trained philosopher, and a theologian, and as a United Reformed Church minister, Gunton understood the interface between revelation and reason like few of his peers. (King's was founded in the early part of the nineteenth century as a Church of England college within the University of London;

today King's is theoretically Anglican with the Archbishop of Canterbury as official "Visitor", and the Dean an ordained clergyman.)

Fundamental in the Postliberal reassertion of an axiomatic Trinitarian basis for anything we dare say about God, Gunton asserted how the Trinity should be at the heart of theological exposition. By the 1970s, with the exception of some orthodox theologians (in effect Roman Catholic and Evangelical, Reformed, Protestant) in Germany and America, the appearance in the academy was that the Trinity was a redundant and embarrassing doctrine. For example early in his career at King's one of Gunton's elder colleagues commented to him that believing in the Trinity was like believing in pixies! Gunton

was orthodox and evangelical in the sense that he was a creedal Trinitarian theologian, a believing minister and academic, not a subscriber to the late twentieth century liberal neo-Gnostic pseudo-Christian religions of Hickianity (John Hick's de-Christianized philosophical, though personalized, religion), Cupidity (Don Cupitt's nihilistic religious atheism), Armstrongism (Karen Armstrong's highly personalized syncretistic unified religion, centred on a unified mono-goddess) or the deconstructive humanism of the Jesus Seminar – all of which were subjective yet presented as universal.

Gunton co-founded with Christoph Schwöbel the internationally renowned Research Institute for Systematic Theology at King's in 1988. A passionate academic who was unafraid to assert the truth of the Gospel within an academy that expected staff and students to proclaim universally an indifferent, impartial, neutral study of all religions, Gunton was responsible for a considerably large number of doctoral students who went on to teach all over the English-speaking world. His unexpected, premature death in 2003 left a vacuum in English theology yet to be filled. There has been *post mortem* unfinished work/projects published, however, we are now beginning to see analytical studies emerging. Is it possible to understand fully someone's work prior to their death? Death does complete someone's work in ways that are impossible in life! Yet, *post mortem* Gunton's *corpus* continues to develop. Initially volumes of sermons were published; then two volumes of his lecture programmes were published (for example the "famous" The Barth Lectures, an annual lecture programme attended by visiting doctoral students from many other countries). There are still plans to publish Gunton's unfinished Systematic Theology, though eleven years on this is still

bedevilled by delays. In addition Gunton's work is being analysed in various seminaries, colleges and university departments around the globe with studies just beginning to emerge.

The Revd. Dr. Lincoln Harvey (tutor in theology, St Mellitus College, London) in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, has drawn together essays which provide an assessment of Gunton's work. Harvey, as with most of the contributors, either worked with Gunton or studied under him. Such a connection to Gunton could be considered a criticism – all the authors are supportive and working from the same theological perspective as Gunton, all are like-minded. Is this collegiality a weakness? Or is it a strength? The range of authorship is wide. There are some big names such as John Webster, Robert Jenson and Christoph Schwöbel, while others are anonymous, barely-out-of-the seminary/college: this young blood is refreshing for such a volume; nothing but great and famous can result in a staid predictable volume of writers looking over their shoulders to ensure their CV credits are safe. All these writers know Gunton's work in depth. There are twelve essays in all—with an index.

So what do we have? The essays focus on the detail of Gunton's developed theology and attempt to contextualize them to what can now be seen as the Postmodern, Post-liberal developments of the later twentieth century. Gunton died in 2003, and therefore his corpus was complete before the ramifications of 9/11 and the hardening of attitudes between liberals and orthodox within Christian theology. The volume opens with "A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton's Thinking" by his long-time friend and theological colleague Robert W. Jenson; John Webster, also an associate, contributes "Gunton and Barth," focusing on the relationship between Gunton and perhaps the strongest

influence on his thinking: the Swiss theologian, Karl Barth. A former student of Gunton's, Stephen R. Holmes, looks at "Towards the *analogia personae et relationis*: developments in Gunton's Trinitarian Thinking." Alan Spence develops the debate into "The Person as Willing Agent: Classifying Gunton's Christology;" while Paul Cumin examines "The Taste of Cake: Relation and Otherness with Colin Gunton and the Strong Second Hand of God." Lincoln Harvey (the volume's editor, and also a former student) considers a detail that extrapolates on Gunton's theological agenda, "The Double *Homoousion*: Forming the Content of Gunton's Theology." John E. Colwell and Paraskeve Tibbs continue Harvey's debate by examining, respectively, "Provisionality and Promise: Avoiding Ecclesiastical Nestorianism?" and "Created for Action: Colin Gunton's Relational Anthropology." There is a heavy presence from former students of Gunton, for example, "Colin Gunton's Doctrine of Atonement: Transcending Rationalism by Metaphor" by Justyn Terry; "Colin Gunton on Providence: Critical Commentaries," from Terry J. Wright; and Brad Green's "Colin Gunton and the Theological Origin of Modernity." The final essay is from Gunton's colleague for many years at King's, Christoph Schwöbel, who concludes on "The Shape of Colin Gunton's Theology: on the Way Towards a Fully Trinitarian Theology."

If one is allowed to be selective, Brad Green's "Colin Gunton and the Theological Origin of Modernity" is particularly pertinent given the background to Gunton's enterprise where still by the 1980s English theology had not come to terms with a Barthian-type agenda: "Gunton's understanding and explication of modernity is a recurring theme in his writings" (p.166), Green succinctly shows how Gunton knew modernism (and its Cartesian, Kantian, Lockian, and

Humeian roots) and how the Enlightenment "god" was roundly exposed as a chimera by Gunton. Paraskeve Tibbs' in "Created for Action: Colin Gunton's Relational Anthropology" illustrates the relative uniqueness of Gunton's anthropology – "the principle consideration for any Christian anthropology is humanity-in-relation to God as opposed to the uniqueness of human creation vis-à-vis non-human creation" (p. 116); Gunton's anthropology of course exposes the Darwinian agenda that bedevils so many of today's New Atheists. Tibbs opens with a reference to John S. Mbiti's contradiction of Cartesian egocentricity (*cogito ergo sum*, or given the obsession with consumerism, should it now be *Tesco ergo sum*?) which epitomises Gunton's relational theology: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (quoted on pp. 116 & 127, from, John S Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, London: Heinemann, 1989). Stephen Holmes in his essay examines how at the centre of Gunton's Trinitarian thinking is how we speak of and about God – the *analogia personae et relationis* – Holmes' comments resonate with the work of John Zizioulas (who for many years attended the Research Institute for Systematic Theology at King's) more than with Barth. The question and use of analogy is taken further by Justyn Terry in, "Colin Gunton's Doctrine of Atonement: Transcending Rationalism by Metaphor," and how transcendent rationalism can be seen in Gunton's doctrine of creation, which is one of his more enduring legacies, along with his doctrine of atonement. The essays—often focusing on specific doctrines—chart the manner in which Gunton's theology and philosophy developed, particularly in the context of his work at King's.

David A. Höhne (Lecturer, Moore Theological College, Sydney) in, *Spirit and Sonship. Colin Gunton's Theology of Particularity*

and the Holy Spirit, provides what is probably the first monograph on Gunton's theology since his death. Höhne's work is therefore essentially the first assessment of Gunton's work as a systematic theologian. Höhne's work is a valuable restatement of the central thesis from Gunton's *The One, The Three, and the Many* (1993); Höhne grounds his observations about Gunton's work in the Fathers, in particular the Cappadocians (who, along with Irenaeus, Gunton readily acknowledged as in many ways parallel to Barth in importance to him). Höhne frames his assessment, critically, in the context of Augustine's theological anthropology (the "failure" to distinguish between *ousia* and *hypostasis* adequately), an insufficiency that Gunton addressed: "persons are ultimately particularised by the Spirit perfecting, for them, filial relations with the Father, through the Son. The Spirit opens the sonship of the Son to incorporate others and they are given a name son or daughter. This is the ultimate sense of what Gunton described as personal *hypostoses* bearing the image of the Messiah." (p. 175). However, Höhne takes the hypothesis further with an interpretation of scripture, but methodologically gets somewhat "lost" in a conversation, as he terms it, between Gunton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This conversation is essentially a restatement of human personhood from Gunton's theological description of particularity. Therefore Höhne's work is towards the development of a theology of particularity: "to explore, appraise and develop Gunton's theology of particularity . . . [with] the need for greater exegetical description in the form of a theological interpretation of the Luke-Acts narrative . . . [T]hus the particularities of the Lucan narrative gave coherence to the actions of God through the Spirit, for the Messiah, in the economy of salvation." (p. 173.) Therefore,

as Höhne notes pertinently, "Gunton contended that we could only understand the identity of the eternal Son in the life of the man Jesus. . . . Furthermore, our development of Gunton's personal *hypostases*." (p. 176.) Gunton not only drove—with a handful of other British, German and American theologians—a revival of Trinitarian thinking in the latter third of the twentieth century, but drove deep into an exposition of what triunity meant for humanity adopted through the Incarnation.

Along with many other Reformed theologians, essentially Barthians, Colin E. Gunton repudiated the theological heritage of Augustine of Hippo. Karl Barth and Thomas Torrance regarded the influence of Platonic dualism as a flaw in Augustine's theology; Torrance asserted that Barth referred to Augustine's theology as *süses Gift* (sweet poison). Gunton likewise saw Augustine as suspect. Bradley G. Green, a former student of Gunton's, takes Gunton to task in a systematic piercing and well-thought out study: *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in the Light of Augustine*.

Gunton's premise was that Augustine's influence on Western theology was great but this also bestowed fundamental shortcomings. The focus of Gunton's criticism was Augustine's doctrine of God, which created—so Gunton believed—unsolvable problems between creation and redemption. This defect was, claimed Gunton, Trinitarian: Augustine's apparent highlighting of the singularity of God over the triune simultaneity dislocated creation and redemption: Augustine's supposed emphasis on the timeless essence of God at the expense of the three real persons. For Gunton, as a follower of Irenaeus and the Cappadocian Fathers, this dislocation between creation and redemption had ontological implications and

creates a veil over our redemption. Bradley Green successfully argues that Gunton's conclusion is to be seen as wrong-headed. He demonstrates how Augustine did not dissolve a relative connexion between salvation and the created order. Such a demonstration requires a cautious acceptance of the *analogia entis* (which could have been more fully analysed, if creation allows us knowledge of redemption), in complementarity to Christ's Cross. For Green, teleology will allow the two to sit together: both represent an eschatological movement. Green does provide a cautious criticism of Gunton's position (but does not disparage or denigrate), and offers the sort of systematic analysis, building to a conclusion, that Gunton would—and did—rigorously train his students in. Can Augustine be re-read by Reformed and Evangelicals who soak up Barth's criticism (and Gunton's – in the wake of Barth) without really thinking through the issues? Bradley Green has done a good service in his work. There has been a significant revival in Trinitarian thinking in recent decades that has marginalized Augustine: Bradley Green's work does much to redress the errors postulated by Gunton in such a reading of Augustine, and allows Augustine to join the ranks of orthodox and traditional theologians who rightly challenge modernity. The essence for Green is on the being and ontology of God—and therefore in an analysis of *de Trinitate* (and its misuse). Green comments: "There is little doubt that Augustine does emphasise the oneness of God... the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God." (pp.165-66.) Green demonstrates by delving deeper into Augustine's work and the later chapters of *de Trinitate* how he defends the triunity of God and the divinity of Jesus, without harming the unity of a doctrine of creation with a doctrine

of redemption: "Augustine need not be a foe of Gunton. Indeed, key Augustinian insights seem quite friendly to Gunton's theological project, and Gunton seems himself to be an Augustinian at key points in his own thinking, even if this indebtedness is not completely recognized." (p. 205) Bradley Green's work is essentially about the Trinity and how a theologian acknowledges, presents, and frames a systematic theology in the context of the triunity of God.

So what do we make of Gunton's work? What is his legacy? When he arrived at King's as a young teacher the department exuded a pseudo-Unitarianism derived essentially from John Hick's work. The new regime—post-Gunton (thirty years on)—at King's, though different from Gunton and his followers, is nonetheless Trinitarian. Gunton was a lifelong admirer of Barth, but never ceased to be prepared to criticize the great Swiss master, though John Webster in his essay for Harvey's volume does expose the flaws and inconsistencies in Gunton's appropriation and interpretation of Barth. More and more, as time flows by, Gunton's important work in reasserting a doctrine of the Trinity will characterize the man, along with his work on the doctrine of creation (crucially considering the assertiveness of the New Atheists in a Dawkinsian interpretation of Darwin's agenda which is in effect an atheistic doctrine of creation which is then extrapolated into a *Weltanschauung*). Gunton is now classified—for better or for worse—as a Postliberal. Would he have liked such a classification? Did he, like Barth, eschew such classifications and the inevitable obsession with self-identity which has bedevilled Postmodernism? Gunton was a non-Conformist (minister, and as a theologian) and can rightly be credited as having restored British theology to an orthodox creedal ground, though the extent to which such a restoration

will last is another matter, particularly given the endemic and suffocating liberalism in the Church of England. These three works are an excellent start to the inevitable reflection on Gunton's work which will, in the fullness of time, see his work placed amongst the more important twentieth century orthodox, creedal, theologians.

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