
A Free Corrector: Colin Gunton on the Trinity, Creation, and the Legacy of Augustine

Saint Augustine once wrote that when it came to his legacy, he desired “not only a pious reader but a free corrector.”¹ It may be argued that he got his wish in Colin Gunton (1941–2003).

Perhaps as much as any modern theologian, Gunton sought to provide a rectification to the supposed consequences of Augustine’s massive influence. His basic argument, as we will see, was that a monistic imbalance in Augustine’s doctrine of God was connected to a damaging dualism in Augustine’s doctrine of creation. Thus, over time, the triune God was allegedly distanced from the economy of salvation, and modernity both reaped the consequences and reacted

1. Augustine, *Trin.* 3. preface, 2. This translation is that of the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Arthur Haddan, revised and annotated by W. G. T. Shedd, series 1, vol. 3 (New York: Cosimo Classics, 1887, 2007). Subsequent citations are from this same translation unless otherwise noted.

violently to this theological fragmentation. In all of this, Gunton was indeed, a *very* “free corrector” of the man from Hippo Regius. Yet a crucial question still remains: Was Gunton’s reading of this history (to use Augustine’s word) a “pious” one? Was it fair?

For at least one scholar who disagrees with Gunton’s Augustinian narrative, it is important to note that even his harshest critiques were grounded in a commitment to the gospel. As Stephen Holmes remembers, “[Gunton’s] chief glory as a teacher was that, somehow, he communicated . . . how to think . . . about theological questions in a way that hazarded all on the gospel, that can cut through the faithless games and apparently *pious* evasions.”² For Gunton, to be a truly “pious reader” meant to question the received tradition in such a way that the gospel might again ring clear. Yet unlike Augustine, who lived long enough to sum up his literary project in the *Retractationes*, Gunton’s sudden death in 2003 left what was meant to be his magnum opus (a three volume dogmatic theology) still unfinished.³ Thus, as we have now eclipsed the ten-year anniversary of his passing, it is Gunton’s work that is receiving “free correction.”

In time, the eulogies give way (as they no doubt should) to scholarly critique. Trends change within theology, and while the twentieth century brought a so-called renaissance of Trinitarian thought, more recent years have brought a stiff critique of those modern theologians who might move too quickly from the inner life of God to certain social, ethical, or ecclesial applications.⁴ Along these lines, Gunton’s work has sometimes been included in the now

2. Stephen Holmes, in introduction to the posthumous publication of Colin Gunton, *The Barth Lectures*, ed. P.H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 7–8. Emphasis mine.

3. The first volume of this project exists only in draft form as *A Christian Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God: A Doctrine of the Trinity as Though Jesus Makes a Difference*, 2003, unpublished typescript. Cited in Robert Jenson, “A Decision Tree of Colin Gunton’s Thinking,” in *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 16.

4. See, for instance, Stephen Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 2012.

widespread critique of those theologies that may be broadly labeled as *social Trinitarianism*.⁵ Thus a recent journal article even went so far as to proclaim the *failure* of Gunton's entire theological project.⁶ Likewise, on the subject of Gunton and Augustine, Bradley Green has provided the lengthiest critique of Gunton's particular arguments, while drawing heavily upon the contemporary Augustine scholarship of Lewis Ayres and others.⁷ Despite the value of these prior studies, it will be our contention that there is more to be said of Gunton's theological legacy. Thus the objective of this book will be to provide a *fresh* evaluation of perhaps the most disputed element of his work, the treatment of Augustine's *legacy* on the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of creation.

How though will this study stand distinct from prior scholarship? While Green confined his monograph to Gunton and Augustine, the present work goes further in examining Gunton's claims regarding Augustine's "afterlife" (that is, the diverse appropriations of Augustine's thought by various medieval and early modern thinkers). To do so, while remaining within the confines of a single volume, presents a daunting challenge. Augustine's corpus is massive, and when one moves on to survey those later thinkers who have been greatly influenced by him, the amount of primary and secondary source literature quickly balloons to even more gargantuan proportions. To mitigate this considerable difficulty, we will seek the help of a noted church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, who along with other specialists, will help us gain some perspective on Augustine's numerous intellectual descendants. The reason for selecting Pelikan

5. See, for instance, the lumping together of Gunton's work with that of Jürgen Moltmann. Karen Kilby, "Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?" in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 12, no. 1 (Jan., 2010), 65n1.

6. Bernhard Nausner, "The Failure of a Laudable Project: Gunton, the Trinity and Human Self-Understanding," *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, 62, no. 4 (2009): 403–20.

7. Bradley G. Green, *Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine: The Theology of Colin Gunton in Light of Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

rests not merely on the breadth of his historical scholarship,⁸ but also on the fact that Augustine specialist James J. O'Donnell can refer to him as the “best guide” to Augustine’s massive influence upon the subsequent centuries.⁹ With this evaluation in mind, Pelikan will serve as a kind of primary arbiter between Gunton and his critics when the subject turns to Augustine’s theological legacy.

In the end, the basic argument will be as follows: *while Gunton was indeed unfair to Saint Augustine, not all his claims about Augustine’s “afterlife” may be so easily dismissed.* In turning especially to Augustine’s intellectual descendants, we will see that certain points in Gunton’s argument remain viable, albeit in more limited respects. Most notably, we will see that Gunton was justified to contend that Augustine’s “inward turn” (that is, his decision to look inward in order to encounter truth, or the divine)¹⁰ would contribute to certain problems as this notion filtered through the subsequent centuries. Ideas have unintended consequences; they evolve, and one cannot control the unique ways in which one’s thought may be adapted by the subsequent tradition. Thus while one goal of this book is to defend Augustine against Gunton’s often overblown critiques, another goal will be to show how Gunton was partly right in noting the way in which Augustine’s “inward turn” would unwittingly contribute to a certain rationalism, individualism, and subjective introspection within the modern ethos.

Before this final verdict may be rendered, however, a more basic task must be accomplished within this opening chapter. Our purpose here will be to provide an introductory sketch of Gunton’s basic claims on the (1) Trinity, (2) creation, and (3) the influence of

8. In the words of Mark Noll, Pelikan “chronicled the history of Christian doctrine . . . on a scale no one has attempted in the twentieth century.” Mark A. Noll, “The Doctrine Doctor,” in *Christianity Today*, Sept. 10, 1990, 17–8.

9. James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper, 2005), 336.

10. See especially Augustine, *Conf.*, 7.10. Ch. 3 will explore this move in detail.

Augustine upon these central doctrines. What exactly did Gunton claim with regard to these subjects, and how did his thinking develop in interaction with others? While the following sketch must remain brief, its placement will provide some necessary context for the more detailed work to come.

In terms of method, our approach within this opening chapter will be consistent with one of Gunton's most basic arguments: "As human persons," he wrote, "we are, in large measure, what *others* have made us."¹¹ We are, in Gunton's view, the result of "mutually constitutive relationships."¹² Since this was Gunton's claim, it seems fitting that an introduction to his own *project* would deal also with those *persons* who served to shape his thought. Thus we will introduce the relevant portions of Gunton's work by highlighting some (though certainly not all) of the "constitutive relationships" that helped to spawn his most distinctive theological insights.

The Trinity

We begin with the Trinity, and three figures (Barth, Coleridge, and Zizioulas) who would prove formative for Gunton's thought. From each of these constitutive relations he would both modify and selectively appropriate certain insights that would go on to characterize his constructive doctrine of the Trinity. Thus in chronicling these influences one comes to see again that Gunton's project was indeed a mixture of *retrieval* and *revision*.¹³

11. Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 83. Emphasis mine.

12. *Ibid.*, 152; cf. Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 208–9.

13. See Bradley Green, "Gunton and the Theological Origin of Modernity," in Harvey, *Theology of Colin Gunton*, 165–81.

Karl Barth and the Revelatory Trinity

Across the breadth of Gunton's corpus, the story starts (and almost ends) with Karl Barth (1886–1968). Gunton's own doctoral thesis, begun under the guidance of Robert Jenson,¹⁴ examined the doctrine of God as seen in Barth and Hartshorne.¹⁵ And while Gunton died before the task could be accomplished, he would speak in later years of a desire to write a final book on Barth, perhaps upon retirement from King's College London.¹⁶ Sadly, this never happened, and the posthumous publication of Gunton's *Barth Lectures* is as close as we can get to Gunton's final thoughts on the great Swiss-German theologian.

Most importantly, Gunton learned from Barth that theology begins only after "God reveals himself."¹⁷ Thus for both men, *revelation* must be granted preeminence over any system of human *reason*.¹⁸ With regard to the Trinity, this truth is essential because if the God revealed is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then the Trinity is, as Gunton put it, "[not] merely a dogma to be believed," but "the living focus of life and thought."¹⁹ In the view of many commentators, the resurgence of Trinitarian theology within the twentieth century can be largely traced to Barth's substantial

14. For the importance of Jenson to Gunton's thinking, see especially Gunton's comments in "Creation and Mediation in the Theology of Robert W. Jenson: An Encounter and a Convergence," in *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. Colin Gunton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 81.

15. Colin Gunton, *Becoming and Being: The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth*, new ed. (London: SCM, 2001).

16. See Paul Brazier's preface to Gunton, *Barth Lectures*, xv.

17. Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 128. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, vol. 1/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 296–98. Hereafter: *CD*, by volume and page number.

18. While Gunton recognized the importance of reason, his qualm was in giving it a "capital R" and allowing it to determine what theology could or could not say about God. See Gunton's posthumously published classroom lectures on this subject, *Revelation and Reason*, ed. P. H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 12–13; cf. *Barth Lectures*, 52.

19. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 3.

influence.²⁰ For Gunton, this can be glimpsed in the headings used within his own doctoral thesis. Here Hartshorne's "Neoclassical Theism" was to be contrasted with Barth's "*Trinitarian Theology*."²¹

Over time, Gunton would become increasingly dissatisfied with the *content* of Barth's theology, even while affirming the *method* of beginning with God's gracious self-revelation. In particular, he came to believe that Barth followed Augustine and "the West" in failing to be sufficiently Trinitarian in his view of God. By this, he meant that Barth sometimes displayed a tendency to (1) play time against eternity, (2) to deemphasize the full-humanity of Jesus, and (3) to neglect the role of the Holy Spirit as the *Perfector* of the project of creation.²² While the relative merits of such claims cannot detain us here, we will return to such charges frequently when examining Gunton's claims against Augustine and his supposed influence. In the first place, Gunton took from Barth the profound conviction that belief in the Trinity should structure the way one does theology.²³

Second, Gunton also took from Barth what may be seen as a Trinitarian polemic against the alienating effects of certain currents within modern culture.²⁴ As Holmes notes, "Barth, alone among the truly great theologians in [Gunton's] opinion, is one of us, he is modern, and does theology while conscious of that."²⁵ As will become clear, Gunton was no fan of modern Western individualism, yet this was not merely because it produced what he viewed as a fragmented, and ironically homogenized,²⁶ society. For Gunton, the

20. So says Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 4.

21. See the table of contents in Gunton, *Becoming and Being*. Emphasis mine.

22. See Gunton, *Barth Lectures*, and the 2001 epilogue to *Becoming and Being*, 225–45.

23. Stephen Holmes, "Towards the 'Analogia Personae et Relationis': Developments in Gunton's Trinitarian Thinking," in Harvey, *The Theology of Colin Gunton*, 34.

24. See Colin Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

25. Gunton, *Revelation and Reason*, 9. For further elucidation of how Barth's doctrine of the Trinity impacted Barth's treatment of creation, see Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 6–7.

ultimate problem with an individualistic ontology is that it remains out of touch with *reality* as structured by the triune God.²⁷ And with this, we mark a further step in Gunton's Trinitarian development.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the Triune Transcendentals

If Barth provides the revelatory foundation for Gunton's doctrine of the Trinity, then a flash of applicatory inspiration came from the effusive pen of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).²⁸ Upon appointment in 1985 to the chair of Christian doctrine at King's College, Gunton gave an inaugural lecture in which he credited Coleridge for suggesting a Trinitarian hermeneutic as the *only* alternative to monistic and dualistic readings of reality.²⁹ Seven years later, this insight would be developed into what has been described as Gunton's most "magisterial"³⁰ work: *The One, the Three and the Many*.³¹

In this book, Gunton seized upon Coleridge's hint that the Trinity is the *idea idearum*, the idea that sheds light on all aspects of reality. By claiming this, Gunton sought to highlight some ways in which created being (whether things or persons) may be seen to bear the abiding marks of the Trinity. As Gunton wrote, "Of the universe as a whole we should conclude that it is marked by relationality. . . . All things are what they are by being particulars constituted by many and

26. See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), ch. 1.

27. *Ibid.*, ch. 8; cf. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, ch. 5.

28. For the crucial text, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "On the Prometheus of Aeschylus," *Complete Works*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd, vol. 4 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1853), 344–65. Cited in Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 137.

29. Colin Gunton, "The One, the Three and the Many: An Inaugural Lecture in the Chair of Christian Doctrine" (London: King's College London, 1985). Cited in Holmes, "Analogia Personae," 38.

30. Stephen Holmes, "Obituary: Rev. Professor Colin E. Gunton," *Guardian*, June 3, 2003.

31. The italics distinguish the 1992 Bampton Lecture (*One, the Three and the Many*) from the 1985 lecture that preceded it.

various forms of relation. . . . All created people and things are marked by their coming from and returning to the God who is himself, in his essential and inmost being, a being in relation.”³²

For Gunton, a crucial goal behind this endeavor was to bring both diagnosis and healing to certain modern ills.³³ His claim was that only a Trinitarian perspective on all of reality can give due weight to both the One and the Many.³⁴ In his view, all other starting points must eventually collapse our interactions into either an individualistic pluralism or a totalitarian monism.³⁵ For Gunton, such false choices obliterated the “trinitarian transcendentals” (those universal marks of being) that God both embodies and, to a lesser extent, bestows upon creation. Such transcendentals were identified by Gunton as (1) *relationality*, the fact that all things are inextricably related to God, humanity and the created order;³⁶ (2) *particularity* (or “substantiality”),³⁷ the fact that all things are irreducibly and distinctly what they are;³⁸ and (3) *perichoresis*, the analogical means by which relationality and particularity are held together through a kind of mutual, though imperfect, reciprocity.³⁹

Given his impending critique of Augustine, it is important to note what Gunton saw to be a distinction between his “triune transcendentals” and the Augustinian search for the *vestigia trinitatis*. While both methods found traces of the Trinity within created being, Gunton’s charge was that Augustine focused on mathematical patterns of “three-in-one-ness” within the individual human person.

32. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, 229.

33. *Ibid.*, 2.

34. See also Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 62.

35. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, 7.

36. *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

37. *Ibid.*, 195. Here Gunton explains his synonymous usage of the two terms (*particularity* and *substantiality*). To avoid confusion, we will hereafter refer to *particularity* because Gunton makes use of it more frequently.

38. *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

39. *Ibid.*, 163–79.

Thus Augustine would devote much time, especially in the latter books of *De Trinitate*, to locating the presence of sacred triads within the inner realm of the individual human mind.⁴⁰ In response to this allegedly individual focus, Gunton believed that the search for such internal *vestigia* “obscure[d] the real possibilities for a relational ontology,”⁴¹ while the transcendentals do just the opposite by highlighting how all of creation bears the indelible marks of a triune Maker.⁴² We shall have to examine the viability of this claim.

Despite this search for “transcendentals” within *The One, the Three and the Many*, Gunton would also admit that this project had led him into the “perilous” territory of theological “speculation.”⁴³ His critics seize upon this fact,⁴⁴ and there is evidence that Gunton himself would later move beyond this enterprise. With the 1992 Bampton Lectures behind him, Holmes noted that “the hermeneutical deployment of the doctrine of the Trinity . . . would cease to figure prominently in [Gunton’s] work.”⁴⁵ With this shift noted, we may now transition from Gunton’s Trinitarian perspective on the *universe*, to his Trinitarian perspective on human *personhood*.

John Zizioulas and the Cappadocian Achievement

Even while Gunton was engaged in the metaphysical employment of the Trinity in order to unearth the triune transcendentals, another key relationship was forming. From the Greek Orthodox bishop John Zizioulas (b. 1931), he was introduced to what he would come to see as an Eastern corrective to Western (often spoken of as

40. See ch. 3.

41. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, 144n23. Gunton was exposed to at least one critique of Augustine’s *vestigia* through Barth. See Gunton, *Becoming and Being*, 136.

42. See Holmes, “Analogia Personae,” 39.

43. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, 167.

44. See ch. 2.

45. See Holmes, “Analogia Personae,” 39.

“Augustinian”) theological errors.⁴⁶ While Gunton had initially shared Barth’s squeamishness regarding the language of triune “persons,”⁴⁷ Zizioulas would later mediate the work of the Cappadocian Fathers to him, which would demonstrate, at least in Gunton’s mind, that the “personal” is indeed *primordial* in terms of God’s being.⁴⁸

Here God’s unity was not to be found, as it supposedly would be after Augustine, in some underlying divine substance, but rather in the *koinonia* of particular and perichoretic *persons*.⁴⁹ As Gunton wrote,

It is, of course, to the Cappadocians and particularly to Basil that the real development of a relational conception of the person is owed. By giving priority to the concept of person in their doctrine of God, they transform at once the meaning of both concepts [*ousia/hypostasis*]. The being of God is not now understood in the way characteristic of Greek metaphysics, but in terms of communion. God *is* “a sort of continuous and indivisible community” says the letter usually attributed to Basil of Caesarea. . . . The being of God consists in the community of *hypostaseis* who give and receive their reality to and from one another.⁵⁰

In all of this we will see that Gunton’s claims have been profoundly challenged.⁵¹ Yet for now, we merely note how Gunton’s

46. See Colin Gunton, “Persons and Particularity,” in *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church*, ed. Douglas Knight (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007).

47. See the 2001 epilogue to *Becoming and Being*; cf. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation*, 141.

48. Gunton, “Persons and Particularity,” 100. This dovetails with the notion that personhood is both an eschatological and a “protological” concept. On the latter, Gunton cites Graham McFarlane’s research as illustrative of this point. See Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 115.

49. Cf. John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 88. Cited in Gunton, “Persons and Particularity,” 100. In contrast to Zizioulas, Gunton was wary of what he saw to be an Eastern overemphasis upon the priority of the Father as the “source” of the Trinity. See Gunton, “Persons and Particularity,” 103. For evidence that Gunton was moving toward Zizioulas in even this regard, see Paul Cumin’s comments on Gunton’s partially completed dogmatics. Cumin, “The Taste of Cake,” in Harvey, *Theology of Colin Gunton*.

50. Gunton, *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 94.

51. See ch. 2.

understanding of triune persons came to shed new light on his view of human personhood.

By selectively retrieving and revising Trinitarian insights from the likes of Barth, Coleridge, and Zizioulas, Gunton could now state that “it is in our relatedness to *others* that our being human consists.”⁵² In this, he distanced himself from any attempt to identify the *imago Dei* as an individual possession. That was the alleged fault of Augustine, and in Gunton’s view, the West had never recovered from this theological error. As he argued, the human mind was not an image of the Trinity, rather human persons are, for “to be a person is to be distinct from other persons, and yet inextricably bound up with them.”⁵³

In this way, Gunton came to view the concept of *human personhood* in the light of the triune God.⁵⁴ Yet for him, this link was made possible only through the embodiment of the one who is indeed the true “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).⁵⁵ Because creation was formed “in” the Son (Col. 1:16), it was, for Gunton, the person of Christ, as sustained by the Holy Spirit, who allowed for a relation between a holy God and a fallen world.⁵⁶ And with this christological bridge in place, we are now prepared to provide a brief introduction to Gunton’s distinctive doctrine of creation.

52. Colin Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Persons, Divine and Human: King’s College Essays in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 58. Italics mine.

53. Colin Gunton, *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 43.

54. Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 209.

55. Subsequent biblical citations from the NIV (2011), unless otherwise noted.

56. Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 140–43. Gunton’s emphasis on creation “in the Son” rather than “in God” *simpliciter* distinguishes his Trinitarian doctrine of creation from the pantheism of Moltmann and others. See Gunton, *Triune Creator*, 141–43.