

## Creation and Redemption in the Theology of Colin Gunton

WHAT EXACTLY ARE GUNTON'S objections to the theology of Augustine? Gunton's criticisms of Augustine show up in practically all of his works, whether on Christology,<sup>1</sup> creation,<sup>2</sup> the atonement,<sup>3</sup> and the Church,<sup>4</sup> and one of the clearest expositions of Gunton's position on Augustine is found in Gunton's *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. For example, in the opening pages Gunton writes: "One of the theses to be argued in this set of essays is that there is much to be said for the claim that the way in which Augustine formulated the doctrine of the Trinity did bequeath problems to the West, and that in solving them some help is to be sought from the Cappadocian Fathers."<sup>5</sup> It is fair to say that this remark summarizes the thought of much of Gunton's theological writing: Augustine has led us astray, and the way back is to be found (in part) through the Cappadocians (as well as Irenaeus). Gunton notes, "the shape of the Western tradition has not always enabled believers to rejoice in the triune being of God. The Trinity has more often been presented as a dogma to be believed than as the living focus of life and thought. . . . [Thus] if the real God is known as one, the tacking on of his threeness

1. *Christ and Creation*.

2. In addition to *Christ and Creation*, see especially *The One, the Three and the Many*.

3. *Actuality of the Atonement*.

4. "Church on Earth," 48–80.

5. *Promise*, 1–2.

simply appears as an unnecessary complicating of the simple belief in God.” Gunton continues: “Hence there developed the apparent mathematical dimensions: the hopeless quest for analogies that will somehow make sense of the otherwise illogical.”<sup>6</sup> And Gunton concludes: “As we shall see, this has much to do with Augustine’s famous quest in the latter part of his *De Trinitate* for threefold patterns in experience, and particularly mental experience, which might be seen in some way to mirror the being of God as three.”<sup>7</sup>

In our exposition of Gunton’s thought, particularly as it reflects on the trinitarian theology of Augustine, we survey Gunton’s thought with an eye to the problem of the One and the Many. This is a key theme for Gunton, and it generally pervades most of his writing in one way or another. But two other key themes are the categories of (1) Creation and Redemption, and (2) Ontology (particularly nature, persons, and relations). But undergirding the entire discussion will be the over-arching matrix of the One and the Many, which is *the* conceptual backdrop for Gunton’s understanding of the history of Western thought. At the heart of Gunton’s critique is Gunton’s claim that Augustine *begins* with the oneness of God and that Augustine also *overemphasizes* the One at the expense of the Three. As Gunton reads Augustine, this orientation was key to Augustine’s own theology and had a thoroughgoing (and ultimately disastrous) influence on the history of Western thought. While this preeminence of the One in Augustine’s theology serves as a summary of Gunton’s general critique of Augustine, this “problem” flows quickly into, or is intricately related to, other difficulties that Gunton sees with Augustine and his legacy, problems we will treat in turn.

In *The One, the Three and the Many*, the ancient philosophical problem of the One and the Many serves as *the* conceptual backdrop for Gunton’s analysis of modernity and how we got there. While Parmenides emphasized the One (i.e., reality is totally unchanging), and Heraclitus the Many (i.e., reality is flux and change), Western thought has struggled with how to hold the One and the Many together.<sup>8</sup> The question of the

6. Ibid., 3.

7. Ibid.

8. Gunton, *One, the Three and the Many*, 18, posits that “the dialectic of the one and the many has provided the framework for most subsequent thinking about many of the basic topics of thought.”

One and the Many is crucial, and one's position on the nature of reality (i.e., the One and the Many) is constitutive of one's view of the world and life in general. When considered theologically, we could say that one's view of God shapes one's view of everything else. As Gunton writes: "from the beginning of Western thought the concept of God, or its equivalent, has served to provide a focus for the unity of the world."<sup>9</sup> Thus, the chief error of Augustine is that Augustine, like Parmenides and Plato, overemphasizes the One at the expense of the Many. This is the heart of Gunton's quarrel with Augustine. Augustine, with his "monist" God has bequeathed to the West a plethora of problems, which has now manifested itself in modernity and even post-modernity (which in Gunton's view is best seen as a type of "late modernity"). Specifically, Augustine's emphasis on the One led to modernity because modernity is ultimately the rejection of the authoritarian One which has pervaded so much of Western thought. As Gunton writes: "The Western theological tradition . . . was strongly Parmenidean in much of its thrust, so that modernity has rebelled against God, the one, in the name of the many."<sup>10</sup> Indeed the modern (including the postmodern) penchant for unrelated particulars (or, one might say, radical "diversity") is in part an understandable reaction to the oppressive One: "The unity of God has been stressed at the expense of his trinity, and to that extent the modern critique must be understood as a recalling of theology to its own trinitarian roots."<sup>11</sup> In short, modernity is finally the ultimate rejection of the One in favor of the Many, and the blame for this tendency to emphasize the one is to be laid at the feet of Augustine.

In this chapter we will engage in a close reading of Gunton's writings with attention to the theme of creation and redemption. This rubric of "creation and redemption" will serve as the backdrop for our discussion of Gunton's position on the classical doctrines of the Christian faith. The use

9. *Ibid.*, 22. We will treat the whole issue of whether or not the Trinity is a "model" (e.g., for the Church or for the world) in more detail later. Gunton believes the Trinity serves as an example for both the Church and the world. Miroslav Volf also wishes to see the Trinity as a model for the Church in his *After Our Likeness*. Adam, "The Trinity and Human Community," 63, offers a more cautious note when he states that while "the Trinity may be a model for the church and for the world, it is worth remembering that these are minor themes in the Bible." He concludes, "The focus of the Bible is not on the model of the Trinity but on the message of the Trinity: and that message is the gospel of Jesus Christ."

10. *One, the Three and the Many*, 41.

11. *Ibid.*, 39.

of this rubric should both help us to see the coherency of Gunton's theological writings, and see how Gunton's negative portrayal of Augustine is a generally pervasive theme in Gunton's writings. We now turn to Gunton's writings and will examine them under the heading of creation and redemption.

## Creation and the Created Order

At the heart of Gunton's theology is a strong doctrine of creation. In the sense that creation is perhaps *the* central doctrine in Gunton's thought, he echoes H. H. Schmid's assertion that "all theology is creation theology, even when it does not speak expressly of creation but speaks of faith, justification, the reign of God, or whatever, if it does so in relation to the world."<sup>12</sup> One could say that this doctrine is a cornerstone to the rest of Gunton's thought. We will see in Gunton's writing on creation his recurring themes: the centrality of the Trinity to a full and complete understanding of creation, and key weaknesses in Western construals of creation—largely traceable to Augustine. Gunton notes three key features of a Christian understanding of creation, and seven key doctrinal features that flow from these three key features.<sup>13</sup> The three key features of a Christian understanding of creation are: (1) "creation as an article of the creed"; (2) "creation out of nothing"; (3) "creation as a work of the whole Trinity."

Seven doctrinal themes flow out of these three key Christian contributions to the doctrine of creation.<sup>14</sup> First, in creating out of nothing God did not use anything external to himself. God did not need anything outside himself in order to create. Additionally, the created order had a definite beginning in space and time.

Second, *creatio ex nihilo* does *not* imply that creation was an arbitrary act of the will on God's part. Rather creation is purposive in that (1) it flows from the love of God, and (2) creation exists for a reason—creation

12. Schmid, "Creation, Righteousness, and Salvation," 115.

13. A succinct and helpful summary of Gunton's doctrine of creation, and his perspective on how this doctrine has fared in the history of Christian thought can be found in Gunton, "Doctrine of Creation," 141–57. For a longer treatment see Gunton's *Triune Creator*. For a more detailed treatment of the christological nature of creation see his *Christ and Creation*.

14. Unless otherwise noted, these seven themes are explicated in Gunton, "Doctrine of Creation," 141–44.

has a *telos*; it is “going somewhere.” Thus, creation is not somehow “necessary,” as if God was “compelled” to create. Rather, God chose to freely create as an act of love. *But*, since God was already a loving community of three persons, the act of creation was not a necessary one that was needed in order for God to express love.

Third, a Christian doctrine of creation affirms that creation is in a sense both dependent and independent, and is moving toward a *telos*. That is, the world is indeed not God, and is indeed a separate entity, but that God—through the Son and Spirit (the “two hands” of Irenaeus)—is continually relating to the world, allowing and moving the world toward its appointed end.

Fourth, closely related to the third feature above, a proper understanding of how God is related to the created order helps us to understand such themes as conservation, preservation, providence and redemption. All of these works of God are carried out through the Son and Spirit, with particular emphasis to the incarnation. Conservation and preservation refer to God’s continued maintenance and upholding of the created order, while providence and redemption look more forward to God’s work, through the Son and Spirit, of moving the world to its appropriate *telos*.

Fifth, a Christian doctrine of creation has a certain perspective on the perennial problem of evil. Christianity does not have the option of tracing evil to matter, since creation is ultimately “good.” Rather, evil should be seen as somehow parasitic upon, and a perversion of, the good. Evil is “that which corrupts the good creation and so thwarts God’s purpose for it.”<sup>15</sup> Due to the reality of evil and sin, the created order must be redirected to its proper end, indeed redeemed, and this work of God again must be conceived of in trinitarian—christological and pneumatological—terms.

Sixth, for historic Christianity, creation includes a preeminent place for man, who is made in God’s image. Rather than locating the image in some human endowment, like reason, it is better to see the image in terms of “a conception of the whole of human being as existing in relation to God, other human beings and the rest of the created order.” And this image must be understood christologically. We truly image God more and

15. Gunton, and indeed the Christian tradition as a whole, is clearly indebted to Augustine at this point. Cf. *Triune Creator*, 203, where Gunton writes that evil “is not intrinsic to the creation, but some corruption of, or invasion into, that which is essentially good.”

more as we are being conformed to the image of Christ, and we shall fulfill our “dominion” role properly only as we are being conformed to Christ.

Seventh, the doctrine of creation implies a certain ethical standard and mission. Since God has created the world, and since redemption entails the perfecting of the world, a bringing of the world to its appointed end, Christians are called to live their lives ethically, in response to God.

We might summarize Gunton’s analysis with the following three propositions. The first main theme in Gunton’s doctrine of creation is the goodness and limited independence of creation.<sup>16</sup> The material world is good, and there is no matter/spirit dualism. Additionally, creation has a limited independence. That is God created the world, and the world has a purpose which must be fulfilled.

The second main theme in Gunton’s doctrine of creation is the concern to affirm the continuity between creation and redemption. Redemption is not simply a “rescue operation” out the world. Rather, redemption is to be seen as bringing or moving creation to its true end, of perfecting creation.

Third, Christ is central to creation. Christ is both the mediator of creation, and Christ is the mediator of redemption. Any doctrine of creation which does not keep Christ at the center really does not deserve the name “Christian.”

Having summarized Gunton, how does Augustine fit into Gunton’s construal? Gunton summarizes the history of the doctrine of creation by pointing to several key figures who offered positive construals and are exemplars of helpful developments of the doctrine. Justin Martyr helped differentiate Christianity from Platonism, and by differentiating man from God opened up the possibility of his contention that knowledge of God is possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus affirmed *creatio ex nihilo*, the goodness of the created order, the eschatological, or redemptive *telos* at the heart of the created order, a redemption which is brought about by the “two hands” of God, the Son and Spirit.<sup>18</sup> Basil the Great argued, against Aristotle, that all things are created, and that matter is not eternal, while John Philoponos (sixth century) also argued against the eternality of the universe.

16. *Christ and Creation*, 91.

17. “Doctrine of Creation,” 148.

18. *Ibid.*

But not all the developments in Christian thought were helpful or faithful to the tradition which preceded them, and particular blame is to be directed against platonizing tendencies found in thinkers like Origen and Augustine. Origen errs in his two-fold doctrine of creation, which affirms a matter/spirit dualism, in which spirit is superior to matter, and Origen failed to fully appreciate the goodness of the created order, which is seen largely as simply a means toward redemption.<sup>19</sup>

But it is Augustine who comes under particular fire. The interconnectedness of creation and redemption is a key theme in Gunton's analysis, and he sees serious deficiencies in Augustine's thought on this score. Indeed, Augustine's failure to affirm the interconnectedness or continuity between creation and redemption is simply an outgrowth of his insufficient construal of the Trinity—i.e., his failure to properly construe the One and the Many. Thus, as Gunton sees it, this problem of the One and Many flows quickly into other problems. In Gunton's view, Augustine's trinitarian construal diminishes the link between creation and redemption. This is tragic, because as Gunton sees it there is an intricate relation between creation and redemption. He writes: "Creation was not simply the making of the world out of nothing, not even that world continually upheld by the providence of God, but the making of a world destined for perfection, completedness."<sup>20</sup> Both creation and redemption are ultimately trinitarian acts, and Gunton (looking to Basil), sees the Holy Spirit as the "perfecting cause of creation." Indeed, for Gunton, the Holy Spirit is the agent through whom God perfects *this* creation into a perfect order, rather than *simply* the "replacing" this order with another.<sup>21</sup> Gunton follows Karl Rahner in criticizing Augustine, for following Augustine theological writers generally write separate treatises, *On the One God* and *On the Triune God* (and Gunton and Rahner lament both the fact that they are separate treatises, and that *On the One God* precedes *On the Triune God*). On Gunton's view, such separate treatments, and the fact that the *oneness* of God is primary results in severing creation from redemption. Indeed, the result of Augustine's trinitarian doctrine is "that salvation history comes to appear irrelevant to the doctrine of God."<sup>22</sup> But how exactly

19. *Ibid.*, 149.

20. *Christ and Creation*, 45.

21. *Ibid.*, 46.

22. *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 33.

is this so? How is it that Augustine's (alleged) over emphasis on the one results in a diminishing of the link between creation and redemption?

Ultimately, creation is severed from redemption, since redemption requires the continued activity of God with particulars, and particulars appear to be problematic for Augustine.<sup>23</sup> That is, Augustine so emphasizes the one essence that he finds it difficult to make sense of the three (i.e., the particulars), and hence it is also difficult to conceive of God as *redemptively* related to particulars. Gunton contends that for Augustine, the "true ontological foundations of the doctrine of the Trinity . . . are to be found in the conception of a threefold mind and not in the economy of salvation."<sup>24</sup> That is, Augustine looks to the human mind rather than the redemptive work of God in the world for analogies of the Trinity. Therefore, Augustine's attempt to articulate psychological analogies for the Trinity tends to divide creation from redemption and reveals Augustine's antipathy for the material world: "*The crucial analogy for Augustine is between the inner structure of the human mind and the inner being of God, because it is in the former [the human mind] than the latter [the inner being of God] is made known, this side of eternity at any rate, more really than in the 'outer' economy of grace.*"<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as Gunton writes: "*The root of modern disarray is accordingly to be located in the divorce of the willing of creation from the historical economy of salvation.*"<sup>26</sup>

For Gunton, Augustine's neoplatonism taints his doctrine of creation, as seen in the fact that Augustine—even after his Christian conversion—maintains something of an antipathy for the created order.<sup>27</sup> Gunton contends that for Augustine, "Because God is timelessly eternal, nothing that he does can be understood to take time."<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Augustine creation *had* to be instantaneous, since creation certainly could not have taken *time*. But this type of doctrine of creation, according to Gunton, is in error, and ultimately leads to Deism. How? Ultimately, Augustine's emphasis on the timelessness of God "means that his theology is in the outcome far more 'other-worldly' than Irenaeus', and less able to be affirmative of the

23. *One, the Three and the Many*, 2.

24. *Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, 42–43.

25. *Ibid.*, 45.

26. *Ibid.*, 55; italics his.

27. *Triune Creator*, 73ff.

28. *Ibid.*, 77.

world of time and space.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, since Augustine finds it difficult to articulate the relation of God and the world, his God ends up being the god of deism, exiled outside of time, with no meaningful relationship with *this world*.<sup>30</sup>

Related to the above, Gunton contends that Augustine’s inadequate doctrine of creation helped keep Augustine from properly construing the relation of this world to the reality of redemption. That is, Augustine’s doctrine of creation kept him from being able to affirm the continuity between creation and redemption. As Gunton writes, it is with Augustine “that there comes into theology the notion of creation as the product of a kind of abstract omnipotence, inadequately related to the economy of salvation.”<sup>31</sup> That is, it is “sheer will” which drives Augustine’s God to create.<sup>32</sup>

In Gunton’s view, Augustine’s two-stage creation echoes Philo. God first creates “a kind of intellectual creature,” and only secondly creates an inferior material world.<sup>33</sup> Thus, we see again a matter/spirit type of dualism. Whereas Irenaeus had, in combating the Gnostics, argued that there were ultimately only two orders of being—God and the world, Augustine has forfeited this truth by positing a dualism within the world. Instead of two ontological categories of God and creation, we have with Augustine an ontological dualism *within* creation between matter and spirit, or between the material and non-material world. Gunton is generally not positive about Augustine, so we must mention a certain place at which Gunton is generally favorable to Augustine, at least at first. Gunton affirms Augustine’s contention that time is created *with* the world. That is, creation took place *with* time, but not *in* time, such that we must say that time only came into being with the creation of all things.<sup>34</sup> However, the problems begin when one tries to conceive of the relation of a timeless God to the world. That is, it is one thing to say that time was only created when the rest of creation came into being. It is another thing to *continue* to conceive of God as timeless while trying to construe this God

29. *Ibid.*, 83.

30. Gunton is also wary of a tendency he sees in Augustine of equating (1) being in time/being created with (2) fallenness. See *ibid.*, 83.

31. *Ibid.*, 16.

32. *Ibid.*, 76.

33. *Ibid.*, 78. Gunton is quoting Augustine’s *Confessiones* 12.9.

34. *Triune Creator*, 83.

as actively relating to his creation. And it is Augustine's effort to *continue* to picture God as timeless that is problematic for Gunton. As Gunton writes, "Augustine tends to conclude that because creation is the act of the timeless God, then all God's acts must be conceived to be timeless."<sup>35</sup> The problem, as Gunton contends, is that since "for Augustine God is by definition timeless, it becomes difficult to conceive of any involvement of God in time."<sup>36</sup> Thus, *time* itself is problematic for Augustine.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, since for Augustine the fact that events in time actually *take* time is a sign of fallenness, it becomes virtually impossible to conceive of God's continued relations with the created order. Thus, we are back to Gunton's repeated theme of the cleavage between creation and redemption, a problem found particularly in Augustine, and mediated to much of Western theology through him. Since time, by its very nature is concomitant with fallenness, and since this world exists in time, it is difficult for Augustine to hold creation and redemption together, since redemption requires an intimate relation to *this* world.

Another key component of Gunton's criticisms of Augustine is the charge that whereas Basil affirmed an ontological homogeneity of the created order, where all of creation was on the same plane ontologically, Augustine affirmed a hierarchy of being, where the highest strata had divine-like qualities, and the lower strata—matter—was "close to being nothing."<sup>38</sup> Gunton also quotes Augustine in the *City of God*, where Augustine can write that God "created man's nature as a kind of mean

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. Gunton's conclusion is interesting. We should conceive of God neither in terms of timelessness nor temporality. Rather, we should simply be apophatic. We simply should remain silent on the issue of God and time. We know that the "work of Christ and the Spirit indeed indicate God's positive relation with time, demonstrating both his freedom and sovereignty over it and the fact that it is not entirely foreign to his being." But we should stop there, for "anything beyond that is necessarily mere speculation. See *Triune Creator*, 92.

38. See *Triune Creator*, 78; 92ff. Gunton is quoting Augustine, *Confessiones* 12.7. However, we should note in the context Augustine is arguing from Wisdom 11:18 that in the first stage of creation God created a type of formless matter. In 12.8 he writes, "But at that first stage the whole was almost nothing because it was still totally formless. However, it was already capable of receiving form. For you, Lord, 'made the world of formless matter' (Wisd. 11:18)." Then Augustine writes, that out of this formless matter God makes the rest of the universe: "You made this next-to-nothing out of nothing, and from it you made great things at which the sons of men wonder."

between angels and beasts.”<sup>39</sup> In such tendencies, Augustine is squandering the Cappadocian inheritance (here particularly Basil), which affirmed that all of creation is ontologically equal

### *Man, the Imago Dei, and Sin*

While discussing Gunton’s doctrine of creation it is appropriate to speak a word about man and sin in Gunton’s writings. Gunton has written full volumes on neither man nor sin. However, we can see the outlines of his perspective by looking at his work as a whole. Gunton is eager to affirm the goodness of the created order, including man. Rejecting any matter/spirit dualism, Gunton affirms the goodness of the created order, and as we have seen, he is eager to see redemption as bringing about the true end of the created order. That is, redemption is not “rescuing” persons out of the world. Rather, creation has always had a certain *telos*, and redemption is God’s work of bringing about that proper end. Within the created order, man does have a place of preeminence. Man is the image-bearer, and has been given dominion over the created order.<sup>40</sup> Gunton, against many current trends, affirms the centrality and supremacy of man in creation. Nonetheless, while man is at the apex of creation, and is at the center of redemption, the whole created order is included in God’s redemptive work.<sup>41</sup>

As image-bearers the doctrine of man must be understood in a christological sense, in that we only truly fulfill our role as image-bearers by being in, and relating to Christ. As Gunton contends, “Just as, therefore, we cannot understand the creation apart from Christ, so we fail even more completely to understand human being apart from Christ, and particularly apart from Christ crucified.”<sup>42</sup> Gunton here understands the *imago dei* less in terms of “reason” or some other human endowment, and more in terms of “the whole of human being as existing in relation to God, other human beings and the rest of the created order.”<sup>43</sup> That is,

39. *De civitate Dei* 12.21. It should be noted here that the context for Augustine’s discussion is the responsibility man had to obey the commands of God given him in the garden, and the dominion role man is to exercise over the rest of the created order below him.

40. *Ibid.*, 143–44.

41. *Christ and Creation*, 33.

42. *Triune Creator*, 196.

43. “Doctrine of Creation,” 144.

“To be in the image of God is not, therefore, to have some timeless quality like reason, or anything else, but to exist in a directedness, between our coming from nothing and our being brought through Christ before the throne of the Father.”<sup>44</sup>

This last point deserves elaboration. At the heart of Gunton’s attempt to appropriate the riches of trinitarian theology is the centrality of *relationship* as constituting the being of God. That is, the three persons in relationship *is* the being of God. In relationship to anthropology, Gunton wishes to extrapolate and say that we, like God, are duly constituted as relational beings. That is, being in relationship is what it *means* to be a human person. We are constituted by both “horizontal” and “vertical” relationships, “horizontal” in that we relate to the rest of the created order, and “vertical” in that we relate to God.<sup>45</sup> Gunton writes, “In sum, then, we know ourselves, we come to learn about the kind of beings that we are, as we live in terms of three different kinds of relations: as we live in the created world, with each other and before God our creator and redeemer.” Indeed, “To ignore any of the three is to fail to know who and what we are.”<sup>46</sup> While the most full way to relate to God is as a believer in the Triune God, and as one who confesses the lordship of Christ, God nonetheless is preserving the whole of the created order. Gunton contends that we image God in a trinitarian fashion. Our imaging of God is somehow modeled on how God images himself. So Gunton: “Imaging is therefore a triune act: the Son images the Father as through the Spirit he realises a particular pattern of life on earth.” Hence, “The representative bearer of the image becomes, as the channel of the Spirit the vehicle of the renewal of the image in those who enter into relation with him.” Thus, for those who are in Christ, there “is a ‘change into his likeness’ (2 Cor. 3:18), a being renewed in knowledge after the image of the creator’ (Col. 3:10).”<sup>47</sup> What Gunton appears to be saying here is that as we are in Christ, Christ renews the image of God in us. As Gunton writes, “Jesus is the true image of God and means of the restoration of its true form in others—those who are ‘conformed’ to his image (Romans 8:29).”<sup>48</sup>

44. *Christ and Creation*, 102.

45. *Ibid.*, 36f.

46. *Ibid.*, 74.

47. *Ibid.*, 101.

48. *Triune Creator*, 198.