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978-0-521-42184-3 - The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity The Bampton Lectures 1992

Colin E. Gunton

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

When William Morris said that ‘Modernism began and continues, wherever civilisation began and continues to *deny* Christ’,<sup>1</sup> he indicated that salient aspects of modern culture are predicated on the denial of the Christian gospel. The reason for this is in part to be found in the direction that Christian history has taken. For all of its unifying vision, the era of Christendom was dearly bought, that is to say, at the expense of certain dimensions of the Christian gospel which became effectively submerged. But in reacting against Christendom, the modern world has bequeathed equal and opposite distortions of human being in the world. It is for that reason that I am attempting in this book neither to react against modernity nor slavishly to follow its lead. Modernity is like all cultures, in being in need of the healing light of the gospel of the Son of God, made incarnate by the Holy Spirit for the perfecting of the creation. But it is unlike some in that the distinctive features of its plight derive from its rejection of that gospel, albeit for some understandable reasons. The gospel will therefore not be served by the mere denunciation of modern rejection, but by probing how it came to happen. Christianity is indeed offensive to the natural human mind; and yet it is often made offensive by its representatives for the wrong reasons. This book is offered in the hope that it will illumine both the gospel and the modern condition, so that a continuing dialogue between them may take place.

<sup>1</sup> Cited by Peter Fuller, *Theoria. Art, and the Absence of Grace* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1988), p. 139.

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As the argument developed over more than a year, it became increasingly evident that this work is a theology of creation as much as, if not more than, a theology of culture. Part One can be understood as a seeking of the roots of the modern crisis of culture – its fragmentation and decline into subjectivism and relativism – in an inadequate exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis and the other biblical focusings of creation; Part Two as an attempt to draw out some of the implications for culture and our understanding of the world of a more explicitly trinitarian approach to the texts. The importance of Irenaeus in all this is considerable, for his straightforwardly trinitarian construction of the act of divine creation, in some contrast as it is to the later more sophisticated but also more Platonizing approaches, provides not the answers so much as the essential clues for the reshaping of the tradition that is necessary alike for Christian theology and for culture, oppressed as they both are by varieties of gnosticism.

Three main features of the doctrine of creation require to be emphasized in revision of the form it has often taken in the past since it was shaped by the Platonizing minds of Origen and Augustine. They represent rather different ways of interpreting the biblical orientation on creation from those of the two Fathers, and are as follows:

1. Creation is one and not dual. In a number of places in Augustine, the Genesis account is taken as indicating a double creation, first of the Platonic or 'intellectual' world, second of the material world made in imitation of the (created) eternal forms. The effect of the dual interpretation has led to the depotentiating of the Bible's affirmation of the goodness of the whole world, in favour of a hierarchy favouring the immaterial against the material creation. It also had the effect of tying the doctrine of creation to a belief that species were created as timeless and unchanging forms, a belief that made theories of evolution more difficult to engage positively during the nineteenth century. This book is in part an analysis of the damage that resulted long before Darwinism became an issue, and a proposal for an alternative approach. The general point is that a dualistic or Platonizing doctrine militates, despite its in-

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tention, against an affirmation of the true plurality and diversity of creation.

2. Human being in the image of God is to be understood relationally rather than in terms of the possession of fixed characteristics such as reason or will, as has been the almost universal tendency of the tradition. By this I mean that the reality of the human creature must be understood in terms of the human relation to God, in the first instance, and to the rest of creation in the second. The relation to the remainder of creation itself falls into two. In the first place, to be in the image of God is to subsist in relations of mutual constitutiveness with other human beings. In the second place, it is to be in a set of relations with the non-personal creation.<sup>2</sup> The human imaging of God is a dynamic way of being before God and with the fellow creature.

3. There is a continuity within discontinuity between the human and the non-human creation. The continuity derives from the fact that the human race is, like the non-human creation, created. As John Zizioulas has argued, in teaching us of this the theory of evolution is salutary for Christian theology. 'A blessing in disguise as we might call it, Darwinism pointed out that the human being is by no means the only intelligent being in creation ... Thus Man was thrown back to his organic place in nature ...'<sup>3</sup> The discontinuity is not that one part of the creation is rational, the other not, but that the one is in a particular form of relation to the other: that known as dominion, which should be understood as a responsibility under God for the proper perfecting of created things.

There is a relation between the way the doctrine of creation was formulated in the West and the shape that modern culture has taken. It is far from being a simple matter to elucidate, but has much to do with the way in which all three of those stresses were in some way neglected. It led to what I shall call the contradictions of modernity. If, in the following chapters, the

<sup>2</sup> I have sought to explicate some aspects of the relatedness involved in *Christ and Creation. The 1990 Didsbury Lectures* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> John D. Zizioulas, 'Preserving God's Creation. Three Lectures on Theology and Ecology. I', *King's Theological Review* XII (1989), 1–5 (4).

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words paradox and contradiction are used from time to time, the reason is to be found in the odd character of the modern age. On the one hand, the age, or aspects of it at least, arose out of a failure of the doctrine of creation, as the reader will see. On the other hand, the opposite could also be said, that aspects of modernity took their direction from the very success of the doctrine. At any rate, as these lectures have been written, revised for delivery and again revised for publication, the conclusion has become inescapable: that modernity, in its greatness and its pathos, has a queer and what could be called dialectical relation to that most central and neglected of Christian doctrines.

The relation between the doctrine of creation and modern science has long been the subject of debate and speculation, but the direction of the discussion was changed with the publication in 1934 of the article by Michael Foster that will be referred to in the body of the book. Whatever be the outcome of the debate recently renewed on the basis of the article, it is no longer possible to accept what was for long the received view, that science arose in the teeth of Christian theology. In many respects, the relationship is far more positive. That, however, is not to deny that much modern culture did take shape in contradiction of some Christian teaching, for modernity is far more than science: it is also modern art, literature and philosophy, and indeed most of the distinctive forms that culture, including theology, has taken in recent centuries. It is in the juxtaposition of the two opposing streams that the root of modernity's oddness is to be discovered.

In order to develop a theological account of modernity, I have in each of the first four chapters taken a sounding in different aspects of the ideology and practice of modernity. The soundings were suggested by the concepts which will provide the framework for the second and constructive phase of the project, so that the critical part of the book has been shaped in advance by the later constructive development. What kind of description of the modern condition is, then, being essayed? It is not primarily a genetic or causal account, a neutral description of how and why modernity came about, that is

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being sought. To be sure, causal influences will be suggested and analysed, but the centre of interest is to be found in the kinds of attitudes, ideologies and forms of action that are characteristic of the era we call modernity, within which are to be included some of those which are described as postmodern. Indeed, the continuities and essential community of interest between the modern and the postmodern are of far more interest for a theology of modernity than the naive assumption that something truly new is happening in the reaction against modernism.

To the four soundings of modernity in the first phase of the book there correspond four constructive essays in the second. The shape of the whole is chiasmic, because the reconstruction takes its orientation from the final chapter of the first part, in which the intellectual outcome of modernity, with its decline into various relativisms and subjectivisms, is charted. The rebuilding begins with an essay at a theory of meaning and truth which seeks to avoid the pitfalls both of the antiquity against which modernity rightly rebelled and of the catastrophic outcome of its rebellion. The proposal is one in which, with the help of Coleridge, I call for a transcendental enquiry that avoids the weaknesses both of the ancient (Platonic) and modern (Kantian and Hegelian) approaches. On its basis, I seek in the final three chapters to pick up some of the pieces left lying at the end of the first three. In the third chapter were traced some of the deficiencies of the modern treatment of relationality as they were revealed in certain modern conceptions and use of time. Correspondingly, the sixth chapter is designed, with the help of a theology of relation in time and space made possible by the economy of creation and salvation, to develop an account of how things can be understood to be related to each other in time and space.

In the second chapter were described some of the roots of the modern world's difficulty in treating particularity, both human and worldly; in the seventh there is an answering attempt to develop a way of dealing with the particularity of things that does not reduce them, as do so many of the pressures of modern life, to a bland homogeneity. In some ways, the proposals in this chapter are among the most important of the work. Most of the

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things in the book have been said elsewhere, or in similar ways, but not, I think, what is attempted there, the transcendental development of the concept of *hypostasis*. In the first chapter the scene was set by showing how the opposing alternatives for thought and social order presented by Heraclitus and Parmenides have left to Western thought a legacy of a dialectic in which the rights of neither the one nor the many are adequately sustained; in the final chapter a vision is sought of a trinitarian sociality in the light of which we may understand something of who we are and what is the world in which we are set.

There is a number of supporting theses which form threads running through the fabric of the argument. One is that antiquity and modernity are remarkably alike in having a defective understanding and practice of what I call relationality. Both eras, in the main streams of their thought, play the one against the many, or the many against the one, in such a way that the rights of both are often lost. Both eras have difficulty in giving due weight to particularity, both in developing a truly relational account of what it is to be, in large part because they are in thrall to a doctrine that the one, but not the many, is of transcendental status. A second thesis is that modernity tends to displace God from the transcendent to the immanent sphere, so that the locus of the divine is to be found not in a God who is other, but in various aspects of this-worldly reality. I argue that the displacement is damaging and sometimes demonic in its outcome, because only where relatedness is held in tension with genuine otherness can things, both human and divine, all be given their due. A third thesis is that the fragmentation of the realms of truth, goodness and beauty – a fragmentation begun with Plato – has rendered the modern deeply uneasy in the world. To a large extent, our treatment of the arts betrays the symptoms of a deep-seated moral predicament as the result of which we know how to behave neither toward each other nor toward the world. Aesthetic factors bulk large in the argument because they form the most prominent symptom of the general disorder. A fourth thesis – and this is more than a supporting thesis since it returns us to the heart of the matter – is that an account of relationality that gives due weight to both one and

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many, to both particular and universal, to both otherness and relation, is to be derived from the one place where they can satisfactorily be based, a conception of God who is both one and three, whose being consists in a relationality that derives from the otherness-in-relation of Father, Son and Spirit.

My overall concern is to aid a process of healing the fragmentation which is so much a feature of our world. There are, in the modern world, proper limits to how such an enterprise might be attempted. The will of Canon Bampton directs that the lectures he endowed should serve 'to confirm and establish the Christian faith, and to confute all heretics and schismatics'. The Christian faith is best defended, I believe, on the joint bases of a confidence in its truth and an openness to the reception of criticism and truth from whatever quarter. That has not always been the manner of things, and it makes the task of contemporary defence more difficult than it might be. That is another of the ways in which theology has at once to learn from and to qualify the dogmas of modernity.

I have argued here for the relevance of what I have called trinitarian transcendentals for the overcoming of some of the characteristic unease of the modern condition. Drawing on Coleridge's notion of the *idea*, and his belief that the Trinity is the idea of ideas, I have argued that trinitarian conceptuality enables us to think of our world, in a way made impossible by the traditional choice between Heraclitus and Parmenides, as both, and in different respects, one and many, but also one and many in relation. In this way, I have hoped to contribute both to modern thought and to what is now called the renaissance of trinitarian theology in our times. Of course, trinitarian theology only has point if God is indeed triune, and there is still much to be debated there. But theology is a practical, not a merely theoretical, discipline: it aims at wisdom, in the broad sense of light for the human path.<sup>4</sup> Our theological enterprises must therefore be judged at least in part by their fruit, and my hope

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel W. Hardy, 'Rationality, the Sciences and Theology', *Keeping the Faith. Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 274–309; and Nicholas Maxwell, *From Knowledge to Wisdom. A Revolution in the Aims and Methods of Science* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

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is in this work to have directed a little light on to the dark paths that we moderns must tread in the years that lie ahead, and to have suggested that the paths are not as lonely as fashionable doctrines often make them. For are we not in a double sense beings in communion?

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**PART ONE**

*The displacement of God*

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## CHAPTER I

### *From Heraclitus to Havel. The problem of the one and the many in modern life and thought*

#### I THE IDEA OF MODERNITY

There are those who speak almost as though human nature has changed in the modern era, so that some quite new kind of human being has emerged. That is quite wrong. Despite what is sometimes asserted, there is a common human nature, at least in the sense that certain patterns of human social behaviour are virtually invariant, recurring wherever there is human life. We can read letters between members of families from all kinds of times and places, and know what they are about because we ourselves have the same kind of worries and concerns. The same is true of the patterns of thought and culture which form the context of our social being. Some Greek plays speak more truly to our condition than do some modern ones, while Juvenal's satires on the mores of ancient Rome could easily be adapted to speak directly of modern ways. And yet, all eras are also different. Like the unhappy families of Tolstoy's famous saying, all cultures also express in quite different ways the being of the fallen human creatures who make them up. And that brings me to the question which will be at the centre of this book, the distinctive character of the modern world, or modernity as it is sometimes called.

My aim is to make a theological assessment of our era. I shall look at the world which we all share, believer and unbeliever alike, through a focus provided by the doctrine of the God made known in Christ and the Spirit, and in a process of identification and elucidation shall hope to illumine where we stand now, so laying the basis for an approach to a Christian theology