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Stephen N. Williams

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CHAPTER I

Spotlight on epistemology

What is at stake in the claim that the gospel is ‘public truth’? Once it was a truism; now it rings defiant. In July 1992 a major conference of theologians and church leaders assembled in England to ponder, to question or to endorse it. No one was or is more closely identified with its defence than Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who in the previous year had published his Osterhaven Lectures in a short volume called *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*. In it he aimed ‘to affirm the gospel not only as an invitation to a private and personal decision but as public truth which ought to be acknowledged as true for the whole life of society’ (p. 2). He spoke of the massive need for cultural renewal comparable to what Augustine accomplished in and in relation to a decaying classical world. Augustine constructed the elements of a Christian world-view by unashamedly starting with dogma, Christian dogma. But then came the Fall when Descartes led the way in persuading us to start our intellectual constructions not with dogma but with doubt. From then on the critical method expanded, eventually to implode under the pressure of its own logic, leaving the stark and sinister Nietzschean will as the source of understanding. In response to this, Newbigin proposed a rationale for a new Augustinianism, making belief again the starting-point for knowledge. The modern mentor here is Michael Polanyi.

In his volume, Newbigin proceeded to make moves designed to redress both false objectivism and false subjectivism in the Churches and to avoid false quietism and false ideology in politics. But these contributions are set in the sphere of a renewed epistemology and it is this concern with epistemological issues

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which prompts the curiosity generating the enquiry which will detain us. In enlisting Polanyi as the most prominent of his aides in the task of epistemological renewal, Newbigin was just reiterating a theme developed with some passion and force in three previous works, beginning with *The Other Side of 1984*.¹ Together they constitute a proposal for intellectual reconstruction built on a critique of the legacy of the Enlightenment. They touch on a number of issues and consistently embody aims of the highest significance, including the restoration of meaning and of hope. Newbigin has no doubt that the Enlightenment brought great gains which must be preserved. But they can be properly preserved only in a Christian frame of life and thought, for the broad Enlightenment framework, which was not authentically Christian, turned out to be disastrous. It has led us to loss of meaning and of hope. The crucial flaw in its make-up was epistemological. In brief, doubt was given epistemic primacy over belief. This found its most significant expression in the scientific world-view. Speaking of faith (here the same as 'belief') and doubt, Newbigin said:

The reversal of roles between these two words was at the heart of the experience which ushered in the modern scientific world-view . . . At the centre of the movement which created our modern culture was a shift in the balance between faith and doubt (p. 20).

Despite the negative comment on Descartes cited above from the later work, it is Locke who merits the stick at this stage and so we are chronologically into the early stages of the Enlightenment. Polanyi identified the problem bequeathed by Locke. This was the elevation of demonstrative reason over faith, constituting the hallmark of the critical mind at its advent. Augustine and Polanyi are thus pitted against Locke and Descartes in the enterprise to restore faith as the ground of all true knowing. Polanyi is weighty because he is a philosopher of science and science is 'the intellectual core', the 'mental and spiritual heart', of our culture, its abandonment of teleology being the key to its understanding of nature and its generalized philosophy containing the epistemological poison that entered

¹ The others were *Foolishness to the Greeks* and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*.

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the bloodstream of Western thought.² While Polanyi does not espouse Augustinian faith in particular, he makes room for and gives support to a contemporary appeal to Augustine's epistemological method, that of grounding knowledge in faith and presenting truth on a foundation of dogma.

Of course, there is nothing new in the reiterated claim that epistemological revolution is at the heart of the Enlightenment and the drive to what we sometimes dub 'modernity'. But the claim is receiving fresh attention on the contemporary theological scene. In propounding his thesis and in the direction of his constructive response, Newbigin is joined notably by Professor Colin Gunton, who engages in rather more detail with some of the issues. In a volume prepared in conjunction with the 1992 conference, Gunton took as his theme the 'epistemology of the concrete'.³ Here Gunton advances the proposal that 'the Gospel's unique contribution to epistemology is best illustrated by means of an instance of creative and imaginative rationality, which is still essentially grounded in the concrete and the particular' (p. 94). And the context is the 'baneful legacy which Enlightenment epistemology has bequeathed to our culture' (p. 85). The personalistic theology Gunton sketches out in response is allied to Polanyi's brand of *fides quaerens intellectum*.

In this essay, Gunton sustains a line he has adopted for some years: epistemology is more than just *an* issue. Just before 1984 had run its course, Newbigin wrote a foreword to Colin Gunton's book on *Enlightenment and Alienation*. Although he developed it differently, Gunton sets out a thesis close to that of Newbigin. The Enlightenment, the argument goes, produced a variety of alienations but the first mark of alienation 'is the tearing apart of belief and knowledge' (p. 5). Gunton tackled his theme in three parts, but described the first as the main one (p. 52). It is duly concerned with epistemology. Descartes is at the bottom of our problems. He succeeded in dividing the world dualistically into a world of senses and a world of intellect, and this issued in an alienation of mind from the world. By forging such a badly

² Although he regularly discusses science, *Foolishness to the Greeks* is especially important here.

³ Gunton, 'Knowledge and Culture: Towards an Epistemology of the Concrete'.

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skewed philosophy of perception, Descartes magnified epistemological error and generated an eventual incapacity for epistemological realism. And that led to outlawing claims essential in any sound theological epistemology. In such a context, Kant was able to spin out a philosophical anthropology and moral philosophy that featured an autonomous moral subject, separated in freedom from the external world of causal order and convinced that any external authority, supremely God, was an interference with autonomy and thus with moral agency. That means, according to Gunton, that in the end we are alienated from our world, our true selves and our God.

‘In the end . . .’ – if epistemology is in the beginning, what is the end? Like Newbigin in general direction, but again limning a somewhat different contour, Gunton is concerned with the atheistic issue of the trends he exposes. Whereas, with Newbigin, he followed Polanyi in the indictment of Locke, he followed Jüngel in the denouement of Descartes and of Descartes as a significant source of atheism.⁴ According to Jüngel, Western atheism is eminently the reaction to a God whose predominant attribute is power. Descartes’ methodological doubt had two relevant consequences in this area. Firstly, in the process of Cartesian demonstration, God turned out to be necessary for human identity. But if God is necessary, we are dependent, and the thought of such dependence, such a relation to power, is what fuels atheistic revolution. But secondly, the Cartesian conclusion could be and was reversed. Descartes so placed God in the intellectual scheme of things that in effect God now became dependent on ‘man’, for he emerges at the end of his human logical operations.⁵ Then God is conceivably the product of my thought. Ontological power is perched precariously on a most suspect appearance of logical necessity. Enter Fichte, Feuerbach and Nietzsche, who will reverse the trick.

⁴ See Jüngel’s *God as the Mystery of the World*, especially chapter 10.

⁵ The principle of use in relation to ‘man’ adopted in this book is that the word is retained when expounding the writings of authors in the past who adopted that language. Obviously problems of translation and interpretation abound here, but that is the rule generally followed. It may be argued that when such authors used such language it did in fact involve the limited reference to males and its retained usage in exposition serves to make the point.

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Like Newbigin, Gunton offers a rich and positive contribution to a theological resolution of these problems, his own being relentlessly trinitarian.⁶ *Enlightenment and Alienation* was the ‘intellectual ancestor’ to the recent Bampton Lectures, *The One, the Three and the Many*.⁷ For all their fecundity and force, it is not the substantive proposals offered by Gunton, Newbigin or Jüngel that will occupy us, though obviously these have not been overlooked in the shaping of the response offered in this book. Rather, we shall dwell on their report of the past. Several questions arise in connection with it.

TOUCHING ON AUGUSTINE

In *The Other Side of 1984* Newbigin drew on Charles Norris Cochrane’s work *Christianity and Classical Culture* for his interpretation of Augustine’s philosophy of cultural renewal, and in *Truth to Tell* he confesses how much this work has influenced him.⁸ It is interesting to ask why Newbigin takes the trajectory he does from Cochrane’s work. For Cochrane pointed out that Augustine could locate the error of classical culture in the moral realm of self-will even more significantly than in the intellectual realm of epistemological method.⁹ Of course, Cochrane here just shores up the familiar judgement about how Augustine maintained the centrality of the human will and of human pride in human thinking as well as doing. Prior to the Enlightenment one finds plenty of variants on this approach; in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they include those of Luther, Calvin and Pascal. Following the Enlightenment, Kierkegaard offers a strong but not a perverse version of the Augustinian line in a statement eminently quotable for present purposes:

⁶ ‘Relentless’ because he has kept up the trinitarian emphasis since at least *Enlightenment and Alienation*, which was subtitled *An Essay Towards a Trinitarian Theology*. Some essays are gathered together in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*. Newbigin also appeals to the Trinity (and incarnation) as a dogmatic foundation for theological reconstruction, but he does not ground it in this alone. See *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth*, pp. 11 and 17, the former referring to resurrection.

⁷ Full title: *The One, the Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*.

⁸ Newbigin, *Truth to Tell*, p. 15.

⁹ C.N. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), esp. pp. 45off.

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People try to persuade us that the objections against Christianity spring from doubt. The objections against Christianity spring from insubordination, the dislike of obedience, rebellion against all authority. As a result people have hitherto been beating the air in their struggle against objections, because they have fought intellectually with doubt instead of fighting morally with rebellion.¹⁰

Kierkegaard alerts us to two things here. The first is the possibility of a diagnosis of the Enlightenment in the spirit or lineage of Augustine which is alternative to those proposals we have heard. The second is that we need to raise a related but much broader question about principles of reading intellectual history, something we need to pursue for a moment. Note how Gunton reads Augustine. Although possibly he agrees with Newbigin's positive account of Augustine as far as it goes, it is the negative and not the positive features of Augustine's intellectual effort that persistently arrest his attention. A good example of this is found in his essay on 'The History. Augustine, the Trinity and the Theological Crisis of the West'. What we have here is a sustained interpretative and critical treatment of arguments in Augustine's *De Trinitate*. It amounts to more than an attack on Augustine's understanding of the Trinity. It is an indictment of the consequences of Augustine's trinitarian error. Gunton is persuaded that 'at least one of the causes of Western atheism is a theological tradition which encourages thought in the essential unknowability of God' when such unknowability is so maintained as to 'suggest or teach that the unknowable God can in no way make himself known' (p. 31). Difficulties have arisen largely because of the way the doctrine of the Trinity has been treated in the Western tradition. Augustine is the *fons et origo* of this error. His particular trinitarian doctrine located in its wider conceptual context 'lacked the conceptual equipment to avoid a final collapse' into various heresies whose entertainment ultimately establishes 'that deep-seated problematic about the knowledge

¹⁰ See the citations in S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, eds. H. and E. Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 11. See too Kierkegaard's preface as editor of *The Confusion of the Present Age* as it appears in *Authority and Revelation*, tr. W. Lowrie (New York: Harper & Row, 1966): see in this connection p. liv. I draw attention to the work published under this title because the less detailed interpretations of Kierkegaard often seem to fail to take it into account.

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of God with which we now so anxiously wrestle' (p. 55). Specifically, this difficulty is the one faced by post-Kantians when they try to propound a knowledge of God that stands the test of scepticism, atheism and agnosticism. Augustine's ontological and epistemological foundations are all wrong, the former on account of his interpretation of the divine essence, the latter on account of his neglect of the divine economy, the whole being the product of platonizing.

Gunton's substantive theological criticism of Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity is not our quarry. What interests is the approach to intellectual history. Gunton is certainly aware of the perils of being sweeping, but even so he does sweep and does so in a questionable fashion. In this essay on Augustine, he comments little on the historical course of the crisis in religious epistemology in the West: Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel are mentioned, but no more than that. Now one is not in the business of constantly clamouring for accounts littered with historical discussion, crowded with names and dates. It is rather that their absence in this case alerts us to a distinction Gunton does not consider. For he slides from the argument that Augustinian ideas are *conceptually* incapable of resisting epistemological crisis to the assumption that they were a *historically* significant contribution. One can certainly make that move without eliciting the mildly opprobrious description of a slide. In particular, one might appeal to Hegel's discussions of the historical unfolding of the logic of ideas in defence of this approach, as Michael Buckley carefully does in his work *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*.¹¹ But Gunton does not: if he did, one could contend with him. The point is that no explicit allusion is made to the principles or philosophy of reading intellectual history. Yet one wants to know how it is that ideas reach their destiny, reap their desert. What about the question of what individuals *do* with ideas? If Augustine's trinitarian theology was unsound, then, indeed, one might logically generate a crisis in religious epistemology on that

¹¹ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, pp. 333ff. For a statement of the point *vis-à-vis* Hegel which I am making here and which Gunton might find persuasive, see P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Duckworth, 1916), p. 47f.

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basis. But do we not need to say something about the conditions under which that logical possibility was actualized? And is it the only or the main possibility? Whatever one *might* do with ideas, is this historically what *was* done? Ironically, while Gunton accuses Augustine of harbouring a Trinity that floats free of the divine economy in time, he himself is insufficiently watchful of floating conceptual relationships that drift free of historical currents in Western time.

Of course, different responses are available to this line of objection. Perhaps what is demanded can be supplied, either in relation to the narrower question of more detailed documentation of the Augustinian blight on modernity or on the wider question of the historical unfolding of the logic of ideas. To which one must reply: perhaps, indeed, but sins of omission remain sins at present, even if future amends are possible. Meanwhile, there is a positive impetus behind the supposition that there is something serious about the incompleteness in this particular account. Augustine and Kierkegaard provide it. Western atheism may be understood as a spiritual movement of the soul as well as an intellectual movement of the mind. Paul Holmer aptly remarks that ‘just what religious unbelief is among the educated today is ... difficult to say. Exactly what the breakdown of concepts has to do with it is a very complicated matter.’¹² This applies to the historical genesis as well as the contemporary form of unbelief, where we have to disentangle causes from reasons, motives from concepts in the formation of unbelief. Reading Gunton in particular, one wonders whether or how a logical move or theological mistake causes the seed of atheism to germinate in the soil of religion. With respect to Augustine, we may lament an overdose of Platonism, chafe at introspection, resist predestination, point out a lack of sufficient christological control in the construction of his theism and so forth. But does Augustine’s enterprise do more to encourage religious agnosticism than it does to encourage a christological criticism of his work that is religiously positive? If so, what is the evidence? If not, why was the former route taken? Perhaps the question turns out to be incoherent. In which case, pending a more successful

¹² Paul Holmer, *A Grammar of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 125.

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formulation, one should still post the query: what hermeneutical assumptions are latent in Gunton's reading?

Nietzsche, philosopher of the will, suggested that we interpret the death of God as deed, not occurrence. 'We have killed him', quoth the famous herald of light and death in *The Gay Science*.¹³ And if the interpretation of Nietzsche's thought is contentious and the validity of Nietzsche's interpretation of atheism more contentious still, we can recall his more general comments. Nietzsche, like Fichte whom Jüngel associates with him, knew that our philosophy is an expression of the soul.

It has gradually become clear to me what every great philosophy has hitherto been: a confession on the part of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir; moreover that the moral (or immoral) intentions in every philosophy have every time constituted the real germ of life out of which the entire plant has grown. To explain how a philosopher's most remote metaphysical assertions have actually been arrived at, it is always well (and wise) to ask oneself first: what morality does this (does *he* –) aim at? I accordingly do not believe a 'drive to knowledge' to be the father of philosophy, but that another drive has, here as elsewhere, only employed knowledge (and false knowledge!) as a tool.¹⁴

Every philosophy is a foreground philosophy – that is a hermit's judgement: 'there is something arbitrary in the fact that *he* stopped, looked back, looked around *here* – there is also something suspicious about it'. Every philosophy also *conceals* a philosophy; every opinion is also a hiding-place, every word also a mask (BGE 289).

If it is prudent to eschew discussion of Augustine's theology, it is doubly prudent to avoid a discussion that is bound to feature Nietzsche and Hegel as well. In a theological context, all one can say is that the case for a Nietzschean perspective should elicit the immediate sympathy of those theologically convinced of the heart-springs of thought and action.¹⁵ And it ought to be pitted

¹³ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, section 125. From now on references to Nietzsche's writings will be abbreviated as appears in the bibliography. Unless otherwise indicated, references will be to section rather than page numbers in his works.

¹⁴ BGE 6. See Nietzsche's references to Spinoza and Kant in this connection.

¹⁵ A 'Nietzschean perspective' is deliberately used with great breadth here but it signifies the contrasts *ad hoc* between an implicitly Guntonian reading of intellectual history and a theological reading which identifies religious ground-motives in thought. Although I have not read his monumental *New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Press, 1953–8), the work of Herman Dooyeweerd comes to mind. See, e.g. *In the Twilight of Western Thought*.

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against the suggestion that the Augustinian soul transmigrated into the atheistic corpus – or, to switch our philosophical allegiance, became the form of the atheistic body – through the gland of a false trinitarianism. However, our quotation from Nietzsche has brought a concept to the surface which will demand more than surface attention from now on, though it will receive no conceptual analysis. It is the notion of ‘morality’.

A QUESTION OF MORAL AGENCY

In *The Other Side of 1984* and *Foolishness to the Greeks*, Newbigin made much of the rise of modern science and concomitant scientific method. The success of scientific explanation entailed the ideal of a scientific explanation which disabled people from accepting a form of explanation other than the narrowly scientific as providing a paradigm of knowledge. But in the succeeding work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, we encounter a rather intriguing confession. Already in *The Other Side of 1984* Newbigin had noted fleetingly the influence of the Renaissance on the final outcome of the seventeenth-century scientific method for theology.¹⁶ Now he refers to the fact that Reventlow’s detailed study of *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* has led him to see that broad currents of humanistic spirituality and rationality flow even deeper than the stream of scientific movement under the surface of modern culture (p. 1f.). Of course, the scientific movement has long been located in its wider humanistic context.¹⁷ Well might Newbigin slip in such a modifier on the basis of Reventlow’s work in particular. Reventlow documents the way in which the notion of Christianity as a scheme of moral action dominated the beginnings and development of biblical criticism until the eighteenth century and he does so in a way that gives clear prominence to the place of broadly moral considerations in the formation of modernity.¹⁸ What makes Newbigin’s confession intriguing is

¹⁶ Newbigin, *The Other Side of 1984*, chapter 11, ‘The Roots of Modern Culture’.

¹⁷ See Robert Mandrou’s occasionally partial but illuminating study, *From Humanism to Science 1480–1700*.

¹⁸ H.G. Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World*. The phrase ‘system of moral action’, used in the preface to the English translation (p. x), is a key hermeneutical phrase for understanding Reventlow’s contribution.