



What is 'Left' of the Spirit?
Outline and Critically Assess Colin Gunton's Trinitarian Pneumatology

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Synopsis

This essay attempts to set out Colin Gunton's trinitarian pneumatology. It firstly discusses the contexts and concerns Gunton has with typically Western pneumatology; that the personhood of the Spirit is jeopardised and the *filioque* clause has sidelined the distinctive work of the Spirit, and minimalised the monarchy of the Father. Gunton's sees a better starting point as the social trinitarianism of the Cappadocians.

From here then, Gunton is shown to think of the person of the Spirit as the eschatological perfecting aspect of the Father's two hands in the economy, and reads this back into the eternal trinity, such that the person of the Spirit is described as the outwardness of God.

Along the way, issues are raised regarding Gunton's reading of the Fathers, and whether he gives the Spirit too much, such that it takes away from the Father.

Introduction

In any *discussion of the triune nature of God*, Letham has pointed out, 'human language labors under great poverty of speech'.¹ It follows then that an analysis of one person's *discussion of the triune nature of God* has more to grapple with than just God in himself, but also that person's human language. It is with this conservative anxiety that we may make an analysis of the role and identity of the Holy Spirit in Colin Gunton's trinitarian theology.

This essay will begin by outlining the context and concerns which Gunton's pneumatological theology springs out of. Then we will assess the moves which Gunton takes in defining the person of the Spirit within the Godhead, firstly in the Spirit's distinctiveness from the Son, and secondly in the Spirit's eternal relation to the Son. Finally several questions will be raised concerning Gunton's pneumatology and its implications for his trinitarianism.

A Perceived Need

Gunton's Pneumatology springs from a perceived need to define 'an account of the work of the triune God in which a more secure place is sought for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that has been often been the case in theology, especially the theology of the West'.² In his own words, he seeks 'to find a more concrete *persona* for the Spirit that the Western tradition often does'.³ Thus, it would not be too presumptuous to suggest that Gunton's Pneumatology is a reaction against the traditional Western conceptions of the *person* and *relation* of the Spirit within God.

Indeed, Gunton raises his own perceived problems with Augustine, Barth, and T. F. Torrance. Firstly, Gunton claims that 'Augustine's singleminded desire to fit the Spirit into his [psychological] scheme has meant that essential features of the economy scarcely feature'.⁴ The result of this is that Augustine 'obscures the specific hypostatic uniqueness of the Holy Spirit' or in other words, Gunton feels he

1 Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity In Scripture, History, and Worship* (New Jersey: P&R, 2004), 199.

2 Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Essays Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), xiii.

3 Gunton, *Father*, xiv-xv.

4 Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 50.

can ask, whether 'the Spirit is a distinct person within God's being?'⁵

Secondly, Gunton sees the trend continue in Barth who Gunton surmises as thinking 'personality is a function of the one God made known, [...] in three modes of being'.⁶ Again, because of this it is argued that the person and work of the Spirit is far too indistinct, so that Barth is presented as a major modern representative of the over simplistic view 'which tends to concentrate on the work of the Spirit as applying to believer and Church the benefits of Christ'.⁷

Lastly, Gunton interacts deeply with T. F. Torrance's trinitarian concept of the Spirit, and notes Torrance sees the 'epistemological role of the Spirit's *homoousion* is essential for the development for the doctrine of the immanent trinity'.⁸ However, even with this caveat, Gunton notes Torrance's discussion on the person of the Spirit is fairly brief, and kept mainly to the Spirit's function, so that Gunton again raises the concern that 'the particularities of the persons will be lost, as has been the case notoriously in the West'.⁹ Gunton therefore feels justified to unleash his climactic pronouncement; 'Like Augustine, therefore, Torrance conceives the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son'.¹⁰

Whether these are accurate interpretations of Augustine, Barth and Torrance, we can not deduce here. The important thing is these concerns form the context for Gunton's own trinitarian thoughts on the Spirit. He is fundamentally wary of the Augustinian 'modalist temptation to posit a God lying behind his acts [which] has been one of the perennial pitfalls of our tradition'.¹¹ Others, like Gerald Bray have the same concerns,¹² and even though Cary and Letham strongly object to Gunton's reading of Augustine,¹³ Letham is forced to agree with Gunton that 'most

5 Gunton, *Promise*, 51; Gunton, *Father*, 77. See also, Colin E. Gunton, *Theology through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 109.

6 Gunton, *Promise*, 164.

7 Gunton, *Theologians*, 105, 106.

8 Gunton, *Father*, 38; See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 97.

9 Gunton, *Father*, 49.

10 Gunton, *Father*, 49. See Torrance, *CDG*, 126-7.

11 Gunton, *Father*, 33. See Gunton, *Promise*, 93.

12 'If the Holy Spirit really is a person in his own right, we ought to avoid language that calls him the "bond of love" between the Father and the Son, even if there is a sense in which this is true, because the language itself has a depersonalizing effect.' Gerald Bray, 'The Double Procession of the Holy Spirit in Evangelical Theology Today: Do we Still Need It?', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/3 (1998): 422-423.

13 Phillip Cary, 'Historical Perspectives on Trinitarian Doctrine', *Religious and Theological Studies Fellowship Bulletin* Nov-Dec (1995): 9. Letham, *Trinity*, 190, 195-198.

Western Christians are practical modalists'.¹⁴

If this understanding of *Augustinianism* is what Gunton is wary of, his method into the discussion is via his understanding of *Cappadocianism*; or in other words, a social analogy of the trinity rather than a psychological analogy.¹⁵ Regardless of the fact whether the Cappadocians were *social* trinitarians,¹⁶ Gunton's view must be seen on its own merits; that the *being* of the persons is in their *relations*.¹⁷ 'For them [the Cappadocians], the three persons are what they are in their relations, and therefore the relations qualify them ontologically, in terms of what they are'.¹⁸ This *being* is what Gunton calls *substance*, and it forms the grounds on which all his theology about the triune God, the person of the Spirit and even humanity hangs off. 'Everything, [...] hangs upon the notion of substance that we develop'.¹⁹ As such, this will be particularly important when we assess Gunton's view of the Spirit.

Strongly related to this, for Gunton, are the issues of the Filioque debate and Monarchism. Firstly Gunton, like others, sees the shallow Biblical support for the filioque clause.²⁰ Secondly, Gunton claims that the doctrine of the double procession is the cause of much of the Western Church's poor theology of the Spirit.²¹

But suppose that the Spirit does come from the Father *and* the Son.
Can we avoid at least toying with the question of the reality which
gives the Father and the Son *their* underlying unity? In other words,
a double procession is an invitation to seek a deeper cause that the

14 Letham, *Trinity*, 212.

15 Gunton, *Promise*, 163-4. This may seem odd since Torrance holds to a social trinity, but Gunton's differences with Torrance regarding this will be noted later.

16 Richard M. Fermer, 'The Limits of Trinitarian Theology as a Methodological Paradigm: "Between the Trinity and hell there lies no other choice"', *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 41/2 (1999): 165-168.

17 Gunton, *Father*, 14, 73; Gunton, *Promise*, 90, 164-9; See John D. Zizioulas, 'On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood', in *Persons, Divine and Human* (ed. Christopher Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 33-46.

18 Gunton, *Promise*, 90.

19 Colin E. Gunton, *The One, The Three and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 194.

20 Gunton, *Promise*, 165; Bray, *Procession*, 424; Thomas A. Smail, 'The Holy Trinity and the Resurrection of Jesus' pages 63-78 in *Different Gospels* (ed. Andrew Walker; London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 69-70.

21 See Colin E. Gunton, 'Immanence and otherness: Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom in the Theology of Robert W Jenson', *Dialog* 30/Wint (1991): 24. Gunton, *Father*, 53.

Trinity, and thus a modalism.²²

Gerald Bray also feels the weight of this,

Probably very few Western theologians would think of the double procession as a factor in the relative depersonalization of the Holy Spirit, but it would be hard to deny that something of that kind has taken place in our theological perception²³

Gunton does not go as far as denying the filioque clause, but he argues against its inherent pneumatological implications.

All this demands a doctrine of the personal distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit in relation to both the Son and the Father, and that, in turn, demands an abandonment of the Western *filioque* doctrine whose chief function is to prevent such an individualisation.²⁴

It is not difficult to see then how the monarchy within God is tied up with this for Gunton. He suggests that the monarchy of the Father is lost if the Spirit is thought to proceed from both the Son and the Father, and downplayed if the monarchy is thought as that of the whole Trinity, as Torrance suggests.²⁵ How Gunton therefore perceives of this monarchy will be seen in the next section.

So far, we have been outlining the context of Gunton's trinitarian thinking on the Spirit. He is concerned to give the Spirit true personhood, within a social trinitarian framework, and maintain the monarchy of the Father. It is from here then we can address what moves Gunton makes in identifying and giving content to the Spirit and his relation to the Father and the Son.

Identifying the Spirit

The first move Gunton makes in identifying the person of the Spirit stems from his concept, already discussed, of the monarchy of the Father. Gunton sees the best way to keep the monarchy of the father is to use Irenaeus' language of the Son and the Spirit being the two hands of God.²⁶

²² Gunton, *Father*, 55-56.

²³ Bray, *Procession*, 422-23.

²⁴ Gunton, *Immanence*, 24.

²⁵ Gunton, *Father*, 38-39.

²⁶ Gunton, *Father*, 30, 77.

I do not think we can do better than to hold Irenaeus' straightforward characterization of God's action in the world: the Father's works, as we have already heard, by means of his two hands, the Son and the Spirit.²⁷

But, Gunton is careful not to fall into either Arianism or there being no distinction between the Son and the Spirit, as he fears Irenaeus may have done.²⁸

The Father who begets and the Son who is begotten are together one God in the *κοινωνία* of the Spirit. They are one because the Son and the Spirit are, in a sense, though as God, subordinate in the eternal *ταχίς* as they are in the economy. But in another sense they are not subordinate, for without his Son and Spirit, God would not be God. [...] It follows that the distinctive personhood of each – their being each what they are and not someone else – derives first from the constituting action of the Father, but also from the responsive action of the Son and the particularizing action of the Spirit.²⁹

In other words, Gunton argues it is possible to maintain an Eastern sense of the monarchy of the Father without succumbing to an ontological hierarchy which renders the Son and the Spirit as less than fully divine.³⁰ Gunton is also wary of the falling into similar errors of the East and modern Charismatic churches where the work of the Spirit is thought of outside of the work of the Son.³¹ Rather, Gunton is careful to see that the two hands of God are always working with and through each other.

God's actions in the Spirit serve to bring about those things God purposes in Christ. In sum: all divine action, whether in creation, salvation or final redemption is the action of God the Father; but it is all equally brought about by his two hands, the Son and the Spirit.[...] All is the unified action of the one God³²

Therefore, the relation of the Father to the Spirit is in *one* sense equal to the relation of the Father to the Son – in that the Father is the eternal source of both. That leaves 2 questions to be answered; 1) What is distinctive about the Spirit compared to the Son, and 2) What is the relation of the Spirit to the Son?

27 Gunton, *Father*, 79-80.

28 Gunton, *Father*, 81.

29 Gunton, *Father*, 73.

30 Gunton, *Father*, 74.

31 Gunton, *Promise*, 168. See Bray, *Procession*, 419, 425.

32 Gunton, *Father*, 80.

The Distinction

The answer to the first question is seen in Gunton's second move in identifying the person of the Spirit. Gunton argues for the *perfecting* nature of the Spirit, both in the economic and therefore also in the immanent trinity.³³ This is hinted at in the previous quote; 'God's actions in the Spirit serve to bring about those things God purposes in Christ'.³⁴ Gunton argues again that classic Augustinianism fails 'to conceive the eschatological dimensions of the Spirit's activities'.³⁵ Gaffin agrees,

The Holy Spirit and eschatology; simply inseparable for Paul and at the very heart of his gospel, remain virtually unrelated in traditional Christian doctrine and evangelical piety³⁶

It is in this eschatological perfecting way that Gunton perceives the distinctiveness of the Spirit's relation to the Father compared to that of the Son.

It is the eschatological office of the Spirit that he is the one by whom the Father brings particular created things to perfection through the ascended Christ, beginning with the first fruits, his body incarnate, crucified and raised from the tomb.³⁷

In other words, the Spirit and the Son both together and in one another go out into creation to achieve the Father's purposes in particular beings. However, they are not interchangeable but have distinct functions or relations to the Father; the Son is the Father's Word made flesh, 'the mediator of creation and salvation', and the Spirit is the Father's perfecting and particularising of the Son's work.

Whether or not Gunton's analysis of the *function* of the person of the Spirit within the Godhead is correct, (though it seems scripturally sound), what can be deduced about the identity of the Spirit? Gunton argues that with an adequate understanding of function of the Spirit in the economy 'there can be a legitimate attempt to identify the Spirit both as a trinitarian person and in relation to the other persons of the Godhead'.³⁸ In other words, the Spirit can be thought of in eternity that which he is in the economy; the perfecting person of the Trinity. But what

³³ Gunton, *Theologians*, 123.

³⁴ Gunton, *Father*, 80.

³⁵ Gunton, *Theologians*, 126. Gunton sights Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Calvin in support of his view, and Pannenberg in support of his critique of Augustinianism. Gunton, *Theologians*, 114 and Gunton, *Father*, 81.

³⁶ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "Life-Giving Spirit": Probing the Centre of Paul's Pneumatology' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/4 (1998): 585.

³⁷ Gunton, *Father*, 120.

³⁸ Gunton, *Theologians*, 112.

exactly does that mean?

To explain what Gunton means, it's worth seeing how similar and yet different Gunton's view of the Spirit's identity and function is to Robert Jenson. Jenson also grapples with the idea that the Spirit of God is the eschatological Spirit, and coins the title for the Spirit as 'the Power of the future'.³⁹ Indeed Jenson sees the Spirit as the 'liberating' of the Father and the Son, and concludes that 'The Spirit is God as his own future'.⁴⁰ Gunton's critique of such a position might be obvious by this point.

I do not like that because of its tendency to substitute an abstraction—the future—for a concrete: community with other persons. Once we say, however, that genuine freedom is the gift of the Spirit, the whole game changes. The Spirit is, on such an account, a person, inseparably related to the other persons of the Trinity.⁴¹

Gunton's critique is to question whether Jenson's concept of the eschatological Spirit allows for real otherness. However, it could be argued that Gunton jumps the gun on his colleague, since Jenson does give the person of the Spirit a real role, and therefore personhood, in the Spirit's activity of predestination.⁴² Since for Jenson, the Father and the Son are seemingly waiting with anticipation for what the Spirit will accomplish.⁴³

Despite this, Gunton provides his own interpretation of what it means for the eternal Spirit to be *perfecting*; that is, the Spirit is the *otherness* of God, or the *outwardness* of God.

First, there is an eternal communion of love that we call the triune God. The Spirit perfects the divine communion by being the dynamic of the Father's and the Son's being who they distinctly are. God's being is, therefore, perfect in itself, but, second, is at the same time of such a kind that its very character provides the basis of God's movement out into the world to create, redeem, and to perfect.⁴⁴

Here, Gunton himself notes the distance he sits from Augustinianism's trend to

39 Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*. (2 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 138.

40 Jenson, Robert W. 'Second Thoughts about Theologies of Hope'. *The Evangelical Quarterly* 72/4 (2000): 343.

Jenson, Robert W. 'The Hidden and Triune God'. *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2/1 (2000): 12.

41 Gunton, *Immanence*, 25.

42 Braaten and Jenson, *Dogmatics*, 2:138.

43 Braaten and Jenson, *Dogmatics*, 1:556; 2:139.

44 Gunton, *Father*, 86.

'think of God as a kind of self-enclosed circle'.⁴⁵ Rather, Gunton says that the Trinity is 'not a closed circle, but a self-sufficient community of love freely opened outwards to embrace the other'.⁴⁶ Again, this is not just the Spirit's function, but the Spirit's *being* and *distinctiveness* within the Trinity.⁴⁷

Such a position is difficult to summarise, since it is still very similar to Jenson's view of the Spirit as the Future of God. Therefore, similarly to Gunton's critique of Jenson, Gunton could be questioned about the real *persona* of the Spirit, since he never makes it explicit. It could be inferred, and only inferred, that the person of the Spirit is seen as a *will* (within the Godhead) to be *outward*. In that sense, it is hard not to conclude that, though the first two persons of the Trinity love each other, the third person of the Trinity loves that which is not God – and that seems to necessitate creation for God God's being. Gunton raises this concern himself, and steps very near it;

Yet if God's love is essentially self-satisfied rather than self-sufficient, an inward-turning circle, there is to be found within it no reason at all for God's creating and redeeming but arbitrary will.⁴⁸

Therefore the person of the Spirit is presented as the *will* within God to seek those outside himself. For Gunton, this does not mean that God *needs* others, just that within himself, he is *inclined* towards others, in the person of the Spirit.

The Relation

This however brings us back to the second question we must ask of Gunton; having seen what is distinctive about the Spirit compared to the Son, we must inquire what is the relation of the Spirit to the Son?⁴⁹ Again, it should be repeated that Gunton is careful not to separate the works of the Son and the Spirit, but rather to see their distinctiveness.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Gunton, *Father*, 86. See, Gunton, *Theologians*, 126.

⁴⁶ Gunton, *Theologians*, 128. Thus Gunton says defining the Spirit as the gift of God is not wrong, but just inadequate. Gunton, *Theologians*, 110.

⁴⁷ Gunton, *Father*, 86. See Gunton, *Promise*, 165.

⁴⁸ Gunton, *Theologians*, 127-28.

⁴⁹ This appears, in the end to be Gunton's main concern, as it is similarly for Bray. Gunton, *Promise*, 168. Bray, *Procession*, 424.

⁵⁰ Gunton, *Theologians*, 122.

So what does Gunton say about the relation of the Son to the Spirit. Here, his anti filioque sentiments and high view of the Father's monarchy do not stop him from seeing the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son. However he argues that the Spirit is as integral to Jesus as Jesus is to the Spirit; 'the incarnate Son is equally the gift of the Spirit. We have to speak of the Spirit's Jesus as much as of Jesus' Spirit'.⁵¹

Here, Gunton is drawing on Thomas Smail's attempt to define the relations of the Spirit and the Son, and of the Spirit and the Son to the Father.⁵² Smail argues that the Spirit is primarily the Father's Spirit, just as the Son is primarily the Father's Son.⁵³ Therefore he agrees with Gunton's view that the Eastern position on the filioque and the Father's monarchy has more weight.⁵⁴ However, Smail also argues that the Eastern Church 'does not make it clear that the Spirit the Son gives us is the Spirit that he himself has first received from the Father'.⁵⁵ What Smail is suggesting therefore is that the Son is dependent on the Father *through the Spirit* for his being, and similarly the Spirit is dependent on the Father *through the Son* for his being. In other words, the relation between the Son and the Spirit is *through-ness* in that they each constitute the other and both constitute the Father's Father-ness. This is the pinnacle of Gunton's trinitarian theology; that in the trinity there is a 'mutual constitution of Father, Son and Spirit'.⁵⁶ The question must surely be asked then, how the Spirit constitutes the Father and the Son, to which Gunton can answer through his conception of the Spirit as the perfecting outwardness of God...

Similarly, the movement of the Spirit can be argued also to be constitutive of the being of God the Father, in that it is the Spirit who ensures that the love of the Father and Son is not simply mutual love, but moves outward, so that creation and redemption are indeed free acts of God, but acts grounded in his being as love.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Gunton, *Immanence*, 24.

⁵² Gunton, *Promise*, 168-69.

⁵³ Smail, *Trinity*, 71.

⁵⁴ Smail, *Trinity*, 69-70.

⁵⁵ Smail, *Trinity*, 70.

⁵⁶ Gunton, *Promise*, 165.

⁵⁷ Gunton, *Promise*, 165.

Final Observations

Therefore, having critically assessed the particulars of Gunton's pneumatology, some final observations can be made.

Firstly, just as Gunton has suggested that traditional Augustinianism tends to modalism, he is self-aware that social trinitarianism tends to tritheism.⁵⁸ However, he does not appear to take adequate measures to protect himself from this. There is a real question therefore over the oneness of Gunton's triune God.

Secondly, and indeed related, Gunton appears to push the Father so high above his *two hands* that one can question if we know the Father. Presumably Gunton would say that the Father is what he does through his two hands, but this still begs the question of how the one God acts in the Son, Spirit *and* Father. Ultimately, the effects of this are seen in Gunton's reluctance to hold a firm reformed doctrine of predestination, which traditional places the electing of God in the Father, before time. Hence, after all Gunton's work to identify the distinctiveness of the Spirit, we must ask; Are there distinctive actions of the Father compared to his Son and his Spirit, apart from being their source?

Conclusion

Unfortunately this is where Gunton's theological investigation untimely ends. He has set out to define the role, person and relations of the Spirit within the Godhead in the light of perceived errors in traditional Western thought. His conclusion that there must be a mutual constitution of Father, Son and Spirit is explained by the perfecting and outwardness of the Spirit; he is the one through whom the Son is eternally begotten, and the one who wills and perfects the Father and Son's goal of bringing creation to the Father. Therefore, happily for Gunton, in his last book before his death, he concludes,

If the Father is the one from whom the Son is begotten – in the Spirit – and from whom the Spirit proceeds – indeed, through the Son – our inquiries come to an end. There is a final, if mysterious, explanation for the way things are.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Gunton, *Promise*, 167.

⁵⁹ Gunton, *Father*, 56.

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