

THE SPIRIT AND SONSHIP

DEVELOPING COLIN GUNTON'S THEOLOGY OF PARTICULARITY¹

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One of the most enduring themes in the theology of the late Professor Colin Gunton was the importance of the particular—what makes something or someone one thing and not another. Gunton interpreted contemporary thought and practice as either homogenising individuals and things within a social group or going to the other extreme of isolating them from each other. Instead, Gunton proposed that particularity be understood as the eschatological perfecting work of the Spirit in the context of mutually constitutive relationships. That is, persons and things are who and what they are by virtue of their relations with God in the first instance and everyone and everything else in the second. Furthermore, the Spirit previews in the human career of the man Jesus Christ the particularising of everyone and everything in the economy of salvation. This dissertation follows Professor John Webster's general critique of Gunton's work in order to explore, appraise and develop his theology of particularity.

Webster identified a lack of exegetical description as a characteristic of Gunton's writings. Gunton himself was critical of theologies that failed to align sufficiently a description of the being of God with Scripture's configuration of the economy of grace. Therefore, the present dissertation explores Gunton's exegetical description of particularity and concludes that, on this issue, Webster's analysis is accurate. For this reason a theological interpretation of the Luke-Acts narrative is offered as a development of Gunton's proposals. Building on Hans Frei's categories for identity description, the reading of Luke-Acts portrays the Spirit as the chief collaborator in the formation of the identity of Messiah Jesus as Son of David and Son of God. This description then serves as a foundation for a theology of particularity

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centred on God's redemptive actions by the Spirit in and through Jesus as the Son of God and as his Messiah.

Webster also perceived in Gunton's thought a tendency to draw out corollaries from insufficiently argued presuppositions. To investigate this claim a theological conversation has been created between Gunton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Gunton presupposed a Spirit Christology in his account of particularity. The conversation tests this presupposition in three loci of Bonhoeffer's specifically Christocentric theology—revelation, social ontology and sociality. The portrait of Bonhoeffer's theology is established largely, though not exclusively, via attention to his major academic works, highlighting the ongoing role of Heidegger as philosophical and theological antagonist. While the comparison between Gunton and Bonhoeffer draws attention to areas where the two discourses could critique and complement each other, overall Gunton's choice of Trinitarian formularies is vindicated.

In-depth critical engagements with Gunton's theology are only now beginning to emerge. This thesis, therefore, breaks new ground in the scriptural development of Gunton's theological proposals. It is the contention of this dissertation that Gunton's theology of particularity is enriched and clarified when the Spirit's perfecting work is described as locating, enabling, opening and preserving Sonship. That is, the particularity of anyone is perfected as the Spirit establishes for her, through the Messiah, a filial relationship with the Father. The Spirit locates the person at a certain point in time and space within the scope of God's plans to save a people for himself. The filial status of the relationship is dependent upon the opening of the relational dynamic between the Father and his Messiah by the Spirit. It is the perfecting work of the Spirit to enable a person to relate to God as Father through and with the Messiah. Finally, the Spirit preserves the particular relations of the Messiah to the Father with the inclusion of the Messiah's 'siblings'.