The Displacement of Subjectivity by Particularity and Relationality:
A Study of Colin E. Gunton’s Critique of Modernity in His Trinitarian
Theology of Culture

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that autonomous freedom and pluralism are the ethos of modernity and postmodernity respectively. However, Colin E. Gunton observes that totalitarianism and homogeneity are the twins of Western modern culture. How does a culture that emphasizes freedom and plurality become the very opposite? This dissertation thus has two purposes. The first purpose is to explore the answer to this question through an examination of Gunton’s theological analysis of the cultural problems. The second purpose is to evaluate how Gunton deals with the problems of modern culture from the perspective of Trinitarian theology.

In view of the foregoing two purposes, this dissertation is divided into two parts. Part one consists of a detailed examination of Gunton’s analysis of modern cultural problems. It explores the idea that ‘rational subjectivity’ as a key concept is perceived by Gunton as a significant root of both ontological and epistemological problems of modernity. Furthermore, Gunton argues that certain trends of subjectivism are brought into postmodernism. As ‘subjectivity’ dominates in modern culture, the consequence is an inadequate understanding and practice of particularity and relationality.

Part two expounds and evaluates Gunton’s development of a Trinitarian theology of culture as a foundation for an adequate ontological and epistemological understanding of relationality and particularity.

Ontologically, Gunton argues that an adequate understanding of relationality and particularity cannot be attained unless the following three conditions are satisfied. First, the movement of Trinitarian speculation in the immanent Trinity starts from the threeness to the oneness. Second, the immanent-economic distinction is maintained. Third, a theology of Christological and pneumatological mediation is proposed. Basically, Gunton’s arguments are supported, except for the second condition. The objection is based on the reason that the second condition becomes a hindrance instead of an enabler for an adequate understanding of relationality and particularity. In order to resolve such a pitfall, it is proposed that the economic Trinity has a retroactive effect on the immanent Trinity, rather than insisting on the immanent-economic distinction.

Epistemologically, Gunton points out that the loss of particularity and relationality is based on modern subjectivism’s inappropriate understanding of the relation between being and knowing, as well as between the knower and the known. Hence, this thesis also examines how Gunton establishes a hermeneutics of relation in knowing by means of the theory of personal knowledge and the theology of mediated revelation, in order to handle the epistemological problems in modernity.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION i
ABSTRACT ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS v
ABBREVIATIONS xiv
INTRODUCTION 1

PART ONE

1 CULTURE AND THEOLOGY: DEFINITION AND METHODOLOGY 3
   I A Brief Definition of Culture 3
   II. Relation between Theology and Culture 6
       A. Theology as Totality of Culture – Paul Tillich’s View 7
       B. A Dialectical and Analogical Relation between Theology and Human Culture – Karl Barth’s View 10
       C. Continuity within Discontinuity between Theology and Culture – Gunton’s View 14
   III. Gunton’s Methodology of Theology of Culture 18
       A. Language as the Way to Being in Personal Dialogue 18
       B. Theology of Culture as Personal Knowledge 21
       C. Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Culture 26

2 THE ONTOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF MODERN CULTURE – THE ELEVATION OF HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY 29
   I. Modern Culture as a Culture of Homogeneity and Totalitarian 29
Servitude

A. The Paradox of Choice and Homogeneity in Consumer Culture 30

B. The Paradox of the Conquest of Time and the Tyranny of Time 31

C. The Paradox of Freedom and Totalitarianism in Socio-Political Culture 32

II. Metaphysics of Subjectivity – Erosion of Alterity, Particularity and Relationality 35

A. The Function of Human Rationality in the Completion of Immanentism 35

1. Immanentism and the Disenchantment of the World in the Ancient Greek World 36

2. Immanentism in Hegel’s Divinization of Human Reason 38

B. Rational Subjectivity in the Process of Inwardness and the Displacement of God 40

1. Descartes’ Rational Subjectivity in the Process of the Displacement of God 41

2. Kant’s Transcendental Subject in the Process of the Displacement of God 42

C. Rational Subjectivity, Instrumental Manipulation and Utilitarian Self 43

D. Rational Subjectivity in the Process of Disengagement 47

1. Plato’s Rational Ontology – A Philosophy of Engagement or Disengagement? 48

2. The Cartesian Self as a Disengaged Rational Subject 50
3 The Leibnizian Monadological Self and Disengagement

4. Kant's Transcendental Subject and Disengagement

E Rational Subjectivity, Projected Temporality and A-temporal Abstract Self

F Conclusion -- Rational Subjectivity and Modern Individualism

III. The Rootless Will and the Postmodern Relativism

A. The Postmodern Relativism as an Arbitrary Subjectivism

B. Arbitrary Subjectivism and the Rootless Arbitrary Will

IV. Conclusion -- An Overall Ontological Assessment of Modernity

3 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF MODERN CULTURE

I. Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology Possessed by Individual

II. Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology of Spatial Distance

A. Words and the World -- Mirror of Nature

B. The Problem of Epistemological Alienation

III. Modern Epistemology as Foundationalism

A. Foundation as the Bridge of Spatial Distance

B. False Foundation

IV. Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology of Intellectual Hegemony

V. Postmodern Non-foundationalism as New Form of Intellectual Intolerance
A. Non-foundationism as a Form of Relativism 74
B. Non-foundationism as a Form of Intellectual Closedness and Intolerance 75
   1. Non-foundationism and Incommensurability 75
   2. Postmodern Emotivism and Intellectual Intolerance 77
VI. Postmodern Emotivism as Epistemologically Arbitrary 79
   Subjectivism

4 THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE PROBLEMS OF MODERNITY 82
I. Introduction 82
II. The Doctrine of God 82
   A. Origen's Concept of God and Logos-Christology 83
   B. Augustine's Doctrine of the Trinity 84
      1. The Trinitarian Analogies, Modern Individualism and Intellectualism 84
      2. Inadequate Understanding of Divine Distinction and Relation 85
      3. Inadequate Understanding of Incarnation and Materiality 89
      4. The Third Person of the Trinity and the Inadequate Understanding of Particularity 90
   C. Aquinas' God as an Absolutely Simple Unity 91
III. The Doctrine of Creation 93
   A. Dual Creation and Cosmological Dualism 93
      1. Augustine's Doctrine of Dual Creation as the Root 95
of Modern Homogeneity

2. Augustine's Concept of Time in the Doctrine of Creation as the Root of Modern Homogeneity and Subjectivism of Temporality

B. *Imago Dei*, Discontinuity between Human and Non-human Creation, and Instrumental Domination

C. *Imago Dei* and Rational Subjectivism
   1. Plato's Rationalism
   2. Plotinus' Rational Individualism
   3. Augustine's Doctrine of *Imago Dei* and Rational Subjectivism

IV. Conclusion and Evaluation
   A. Theology as Metaphysics of Transcendence
   B. Theology as Metaphysics of Subjectivity

PART TWO

5 A TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY OF RELATION -- FROM ONE TO THREE OR FROM THREE TO ONE

I. Introduction

II. From One to Three -- Karl Barth's Modes of Divine Revelation
   A. Ontology without Metaphysics of Transcendence -- Being in Becoming
   B. Is Barth's Trinity an Ontology without Metaphysics of Subjectivity?
      1. The Emphasis of the Oneness and Unity of God
2. Divine Subjectivity – Divine Freedom and Divine Love 117

III. From Three to One -- Cappadocian Fathers’ Being in Communion 122
   A. The Relationship among Prosopon (or Persona), Ousia and Hypostasis 122
   B. Divine Particularity 124
   C. Divine Perichoresis 128

IV. Gunton’s Concept of Person – Freedom, Otherness, Particularity and Relationality 130
   A. Person as Relation or Person has Relation? 131
   B. Ontology of Substantiality – Otherness and Particularity 133
   C. Person as Being-Free-in-Relation 139

6 A TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY OF RELATION -- 143

THE RELATION BETWEEN CREATOR AND CREATURES 143

I. Introduction 143

II. The Purposes of Immanent-Economic Distinction 144
   A. Immanent-Economic Distinction and Divine Freedom 144
   B. Immanent-Economic Distinction and Ontological Particularity 145

III. Revelation and the Economic Trinity -- The Difference between Barth and Gunton 146
   A. Barth’s Understanding of Revelation 146
   B. Gunton’s Understanding of Revelation 148

IV. A Theology of Christological and Pneumatological Mediation -- A Doctrine of Creation in a Trinitarian Base 151
   A. Christ as Mediator in Creation-Redemption Connection 151
B. Christ as Mediator in Spatio-Temporal Co-presence: 155

Continuity within Discontinuity in God-World Relation

1. ‘Christology from Above’ versus ‘Christology from Below’ – Dualism and Duality 155

2. Christology of Co-presence in Space 158

3. Christology of Co-presence in Time 159

4. Neo-Platonic Emanationism and Determinism 163

5. The Doctrine of Creation Out of Nothing and the World’s Contingency 165

C. Christ as Mediator in Horizontal Relation: Jesus’ 168

Relation with the Rest of Creation

D. Christ as Mediator in Ethics of Sacrifice: The Re-forming of the True Image in Christ 172

E. Holy Spirit as Mediator for Relationality and Particularity 175

F. Holy Spirit as the Eschatological Perfecting Cause 179

V. Conclusion 180

7 A HERMENEUTICS OF RELATION IN KNOWING 181

I. Recapitulation – The Epistemological Problems of Western Modern Culture 181

II. Personal Knowledge – A Hermeneutics of Relation in Knowing 182

A. The Ontological Relation between Being and Knowing 182

B. Mirroring and Indwelling – The Relation between Words and the World 184

C. Commitment in Personal Knowledge -- Faith Seeking 188

Understanding
D. Personal Knowledge and Contingent Rationality 192
   1. Human Finitude and Contingent Rationality 193
   2. Historicity and Contingent Rationality 197
E. Personal Knowledge and Tradition 198
   1. The Voice of Tradition in Understanding 199
   2. Tradition as a Form of Personal Relation 200

III. Mediated Revelation – A Hermeneutics of Relation in Knowing 202
   A. The Starting Point of Epistemology – The Other of Language or the Language of Other? 202
   B. Attitude towards Natural Theology and Noetic Absoluteness 204
   C. The Distinction between Mediated General Revelation and Natural Theology 206
   D. The Problem of Immediacy 208
   E. The Revelatory Character of Knowledge in Mediated General Revelation 210
   F. Theology of Nature and the Revelation of God 213
   G. Mediated Revelation of Truth as Personal Relation in a Trinitarian Base 216

IV. Conclusion 220

8 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF CULTURE 222
   I. Back to the Beginning – The Nature of Culture 222
   II. Some Ambiguities of Gunton’s Conception of Postmodern 223
Subjectivism

A. Heraclitus or Protagoras? 223

B. What Does Postmodern Subjectivism Mean? 225
   1. Postmodern Relativism – Making Reference to the 225
      Emotive Self or to the Other of Language?
   2. Postmodern Relativism and Deconstruction of 230
      Substantiality

III. Contribution to a Trinitarian Theology of Modernity 231
   A. Dualism in Metaphysics of Transcendence and 232
      Metaphysics of Subjectivity
   B. A Solution for the Metaphysics of Subjectivity 232

IV. Immanent-Economic Distinction or Immanent-Economic 233
    Reciprocal Relation?
   A. Problems of the Immanent-Economic Distinction 233
   B. Gunton’s Inadequate Solution 236
   C. Immanent-Economic Reciprocal Relation 238
      1. Does God Necessarily Create the World? 238
      2. How Can Divine Transcendence and God-World 240
         Ontological Distinction Be Maintained?
   D. Conclusion 243

V. Contribution on Hermeneutics of Relation: Knowing and 244
   Being

VI. Conclusion: Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Culture 244

BIBLIOGRAPHY 249

CURRICULUM VITAE 263