

Gunton – Augustine, the Trinity and the West

Write a critical analysis of one of the Readings selected from Readings 1 to 10

There is no doubt that Augustine was one of the great fathers of the Christian church.

However, in “Augustine, the Trinity and the theological crisis of the West”, Gunton raises several problems with Augustine’s approach to God. He claims that modern day agnosticism, prevalent in the West, can be attributed to Augustine’s writings on the Trinity. Gunton argues that Augustine presents an unknown and impersonal God. This essay will not examine how accurate Gunton’s assessment of Augustine is¹, instead it will focus on Gunton’s analysis of Augustine’s methodology along with my reactions to this.

Gunton argues that our modern Western scepticism about knowing God is not grounded in Kant but instead is related to our theological heritage that contains an unknowable God. This has much to do with Augustine and his treatment of the Trinity (pp. 30-31). This argument may sound counter intuitive as Augustine wrote a classic treatise on the Trinity (p. 31), but Gunton sets out examples in which Augustine deviated from the Cappadocian Fathers, presenting a God who is impersonal and removed from the material world. This deviation also flattened out the distinction of persons within the Trinity. Gunton argues that this Augustinian presentation of God sets the trajectory for modern agnosticism with the unknowability of God.

In his context, Augustine was battling Arianism and so stressed the deity in the Incarnation.

Gunton saw this as an overemphasis that lead to Augustine having a negative view of the material world and an underemphasise on God’s direct involvement with the world (p. 34).

Gunton uses Augustine’s use of the Word, theophanies in the Old Testament and a general anti-material view of the world as examples of this. When expanding on the Word, Augustine

¹ See Ormator, N (2003) *Augustine and the Trinity: Whose Crisis?* and Green, B (2007) *The Protomodern Augustine? Colin Gunton and the Failure of Augustine* for objections to Gunton’s presentation of Augustine.

moved into abstract concepts not grounding the second member of the Trinity in a concert person of the Son. This methodology shows that Augustine favoured the mind as a means to understanding the inner Trinity and not God's own self disclosed revelation in historic events such as salvation (p. 43). Augustine believed theophanies in the Old Testament were conducted by angels and not the second person of the Trinity. This mediation of angels between the created order and God has two negative outcomes. It increased the gap between man and God and therefore increased the gap between what man can learn about God as He is one step removed from creation (p. 35). Secondly, the trait of mediation between God and the world via the Son is removed, reducing the distinction between the persons (p. 35). Gunton also states that Augustine's rejection of the material world to explain theology leads to an underemphasises of God's revelation in history including what can be learned about the economic Trinity and the Incarnation. This can be seen in his non-material analogies for the Trinity (p. 37).

Gunton points out that Augustine used analogies to explain the Trinity that were not based on Scripture but on the philosophy of the day. Augustine's main analogy to explain the Trinity was mind, understanding and will (p. 45). This analogy has many problems, such as the lack of personal characteristics between these three elements and the arbitrary nature of the Spirit being called the will, which could perhaps be better assigned to the Father. Overall this analogy turns God into a kind of supermind (p. 44).

Gunton argues that Augustine considered the Spirit to be abstract and an impersonal force. This view is based on Augustine's description of the Spirit as being both the love that unites the Father with the Son as well as a gift. This latter name is curious as in the New Testament it is the Son that is called a gift, not the Spirit (p. 49). Instead of Biblical reasons for calling the Spirit a gift, Augustine reasoned that it is the Holy Spirit who unites the Father and the Son and also helps man dwell in God and vice versa (pp. 49-50) and therefore should be

considered to be a gift. Again the Holy Spirit is not treated as a person. Gunton argues that Augustine failed to include the Spirit's role in salvation history, including the resurrection (p. 51). The Spirit is not defined very well as a person and is not given equal weight in the Trinity.

Gunton also argues that Augustine did not follow the tradition of the Cappadocians and the distinction they made between 'substance' and 'being' in the Trinity. This could possibly be because Augustine did not understand the nuance of their argument (p. 40). Augustine redefines the Trinity stating that a person is defined by their relations and not a concert particular that is in relation to one another (p. 40). This definition of a person being defined by their relations means that it is harder to make claims of a particular person in the Trinity since they are all in relation to each other and lack a distinguishable identity (p. 42). What we can know about God and His persons becomes harder.

In regard to the substance of God, Gunton thinks Augustine also deviated from those before him. Instead of the Son and the Spirit deriving their godhood from the Father, Augustine believed they received their existence from the Father, not their godliness (p. 54). This poses a problem in that there seems to be a 'godhood' substance that is the foundation for the persons being God and this substance would be impersonal (p. 54). This could lead to modalism and raises issues over what the Spirit really reveals about the Father if there really is a divine substance 'behind' Him. The Cappadocians saw that God reveals Himself *as he is* (emphasis in original) (p. 54), whereas Augustine set up the possibility of an unknown God.

In summary, Gunton's presentation of Augustine is that he showed a God who is an impersonal mind, removed from the material world making it hard for people to understand who God is.

I agree that today there is a scepticism about knowing God, however I am not convinced that today's scepticism stems from Augustine's trajectory. I think that Kant and the Enlightenment are significant in the development of today's thinking. Sceptics today are on the other side of the Enlightenment and may not be certain that a God is unknowable since they could find an experience to prove Him/Her/It.

I was surprised at Gunton's assessment that Augustine's writing was inaccurate on the Trinity. I had assumed that what Augustine laid down in his treatise on the Trinity was *the* standard of orthodoxy and any deviation from that was considered heresy. The Cappadocians are considered more orthodox and the main issue with Augustine is that he deviated from them. Gunton is careful at the end of his essay to make sure he is clear that Augustine is not on the outside of orthodoxy, and that the real issue is the possible trajectory of what Augustine writes (p. 55).

I think Gunton puts too much blame on the shoulders of Augustine for our present state. Since Augustine we have experienced the Reformation which had a significant impact on the materialism and post-modernism that we have today. The reformers questioned the established religion and its teaching. They did stress that we can know God through the Scriptures, but they removed all forms of mysticism like the worship of the saints and transubstantiation. Zwingli "sharply distinguished the material from the spiritual" (Chadwick, 1990, p. 79) reducing the Eucharist to simply be a remembrance event with no spiritual presence of God. The introduction of modern science by the church and the exultation of humanity's reason as being absolute, set the stage for a material/spiritual dichotomy. This cannot be simply accredited to Augustine's presentation of a God who was an impersonal supermind.

As noted, Augustine was dealing with different issues to the Cappadocians, he was arguing against Arianism, which naturally will lead to an overemphasis of Jesus' deity, at the expense of His humanness. That was because that was the issue of his day. Today most people would still assume that Jesus was a real man, but outside of Christianity, not many would believe He was also God. In this way, Augustine might help us to argue against the notion that Jesus was only a created man. But Augustine's method as laid out in Gunton's essay, demonstrates he went about it the wrong way, relying too much on his own understanding and reason and not enough on God's own revelation in this world.

The Cappadocians in the past and Rahner in the present help us go back to the living God as revealed through Scripture. They see the Trinity not as a problem to be solved but a God who is knowable and reveals Himself to us in the Scriptures (Rahner, 1974, p. 85; Gunton, 2003, p. 54). We need to recognise both the limits of our mind and the limits of what was revealed to us in history and Scripture.

Gunton presents Augustine's method of understanding God as limited because it was grounded in the philosophy of the day and not on God's own revelation of Himself in history. The best way to understand God is to trust His revelation of Himself as being an accurate presentation of how He really is. Blurring the distinction of the persons in the Trinity and having God removed from the material world does present a remote God who is hard for anyone to understand. The Cappadocians as well as Rahner, who approached God based on the economic Trinity, provide better methods for understanding God as they increase His presence with humanity, present a God who interacts in history, and also understand the limitation of human speculation, which post-enlightened society is starting to embrace.

Works Cited

Chadwick, O. (1990). *The Reformation*. London: Penguin Books.

Gunton, C. E. (2003). Augustine, the Trinity and the theological crisis of the West. In C. E. Gunton, *The promise of Trinitarian theology* (3rd ed., pp. 30-55). Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

Rhaner, K. (1974). Remarks on the dogmatic treatise 'de trinitate'. In *Theological investigations* (pp. 77-102). New York: Crossroad.