

Review Article

Doctrine of Creation, Creation of Doctrine (or, Natural Theology in the Island)

The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study. By Colin E. Gunton. Edinburgh Studies in Constructive Theology. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998. x + 246 pp. \$25.00 (paper).

The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion. By Alister E. McGrath. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998. 256 pp. \$27.95 (paper).

Truth and the Reality of God: An Essay in Natural Theology. By Ian Markham. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd., 1998. x + 145 pp. \$37.95 (cloth).

Theology in the British Isles has been of considerable interest to American theologians lately, and rightfully so. In response to this interest, a series of articles by David Ford introducing the varieties of British theology recently appeared in the *Christian Century* (April 5, 12, and 19–26, 2000). Ford suggests that British theology still shows the effects of the “trauma” it faced in the middle decades of the twentieth century, its bruising encounters with dominant currents of analytic and positivist philosophy which were deeply hostile to it.

Whether one subscribes to the “trauma” thesis or not, Ford has rightly put his finger on a matter that always repays careful study: the way theologians relate (explicitly or implicitly) Christian teaching on the one hand, and scientific or philosophical culture on the other. The three recent books from Britain reviewed here provide a tempting opportunity for such study, especially because they come from very different theologians. Gunton is a well-known dogmatician of a distinctly Barthian cast, McGrath a moderate evangelical who leans toward historical theology, and Markham represents the kind of “liberalism” oriented toward religious studies characteristic of the Liverpool Statement (on the latter, see Gareth Jones, “After Kant: The Liverpool Statement,” *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, No. 3 [1998]). I begin

with some remarks about each book in turn, then conclude with a few reflections on all three with this particular question in mind.

Colin Gunton's *The Triune Creator* is subtitled "A Historical and Systematic Study," but the historical aspect is, in a way, dominated by the systematic. The historical development of various theological positions on creation is dealt with critically; Gunton's primary concern is not interpretive so much as evaluative. In the course of the historical survey a great deal of the tradition comes in for some pretty rough handling. Indeed, "development" is perhaps not the right word to use in light of Gunton's schema of doctrinal history. The reader quickly learns that Gunton views this terrain as a struggle between the true or "orthodox" doctrine of creation, codified in the Bible and first adequately theorized by Irenaeus, and a series of misunderstandings and distortions of the doctrine which largely characterizes theological history from the Fathers on.

In the initial chapter Gunton emphasizes his treatment of creation as distinctively Christian, not a generic religious or philosophical problem. Any truly Christian concept of creation must be seen as "creedal" in nature (i.e., a response in faith to divine revelation), it must encompass the notion of creation "from nothing," and most importantly it must be integrated with the triune nature of the Christian God (pp. 8-9). The centrality of these emphases to Gunton's treatment is encapsulated in his continual stress on the irreducibly "personal" nature of God's relation to the created world. And the primary fault of so much theological thinking as viewed from this perspective is its failure to recognize this, and its concomitant tendency to fall back into what Gunton refers to as a "Greek" ontology.

The opposition between a "biblical" and a "hellenic" ontology is set up in the second chapter; the remaining chapters criticize doctrinal positions on creation in light of their adherence to the former (the model of a personal creator standing in free relationship to an ontologically distinct creation) and avoidance of the latter (the model of a "self-creating world," a monistic cosmos whose principles of order and change are purely internal). This evaluative opposition is wielded in conjunction with another, related one, which finds its historical paradigm in the encounter between Irenaeus and his gnostic opponents. Irenaeus is praised for his positive evaluation of the material world, his setting of creation within a developmental-eschatological framework, and his stress on the Trinitarian shape of God's interactions with the creation. Indeed, Irenaeus's notion of the Son and the Spirit as the Father's "two hands" in creation is celebrated by the author as a crucial insight, although his own treatment of the motif is not well developed.

These basic oppositions become the interpretive grid for the author's tour of doctrinal history. Beginning with Augustine (who is too "rationalist" [!] as a biblical interpreter, p. 93), although already adumbrated in earlier figures like Origen, a decline sets in which is confirmed during the scholastic

period and becomes disastrous with the rise of modern science and philosophical responses to it, especially as symbolized by Kant. At each point on this downward curve, Gunton strives to show how failing to keep Trinitarian thinking central to the idea of creation consistently leads to crucial aspects of the idea being lost or underplayed (p. 53, cf. p. 102). The reformers are perhaps given too much credit by the author for overcoming the marginalization of the Trinity in their conceptions of creation (p. 147), but at any rate their efforts were largely in vain: we are ominously informed that “darkness tends to return in the nineteenth century. . .” (p. 156).

The author understands none of this to be very original, of course. His deep indebtedness to Karl Barth is acknowledged in this book, and has been characteristic of his work from the publication of his dissertation on Barth and Hartshorne (*Becoming and Being* [Oxford, 1978]). It would not be stretching things too far to say that for Gunton just about every major theological figure between Irenaeus and Barth fails the central test of making the trinity “constitutive” for the doctrine of creation (cf. p. 121, footnote 8). Despite this influence, the sensitivity and empathy characteristic of Barth as a historical theologian are not much on display in this book. And while Gunton’s own constructive discussions in the last three chapters have some suggestive moments, they tend to be sketchy and derivative (in its essentials chapter 9 is virtually a gloss on Barth’s great treatment of the *imago dei*). There is much of interest here, for example the notion of the Holy Spirit as the “one who gives the world space to become within” the “structure” given by the Son (p. 192), but further development is called for.

It is difficult to render a final judgment on a book like this, as it is designed to cover so much (perhaps too much) ground. It is informative and by no means poorly written; the breadth, if not the depth, of its historical range is welcome. My doubts remain, however, as to the usefulness of this volume. One wonders whether the author’s engagement with so vast a range of sources is really informed and nuanced enough to justify his brusque judgments. There is evidence of haste and superficiality in some of these encounters, but more troubling is the overall rhetorical tone, which suggests that the author approaches every figure or problem associated with the doctrine of creation in possession of the unique “orthodox” perspective from which it can be evaluated or dismissed. He is much too given to sweeping, but empty, gestures like this: “An over-anxious obsession with ecology, animal rights and the rest parallels the modern human refusal to face the fact of death” (p. 230). Not Gunton at his best, to be sure, but the presence of too many pronouncements of this sort (including a number of judgments utterly lacking in nuance concerning the relation of theology to natural science) mars the constructive theological potential of the book.

Alister McGrath’s plea for “mutual respect and tolerance” in the discussion between science and religion, accompanied by the overall mildness and

reserve of his rhetoric, comes as a refreshing change after Gunton's truculence. The unwieldy title of his book, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion*, must be taken literally as a marker of its strictly limited ambitions. Far from being an exhaustive treatment of the relations between science and religion, it explores and defends the bases of constructive dialogue as a prolegomenon to a series of volumes to come (pp. 1, 8). The author highlights what he sees as the contemporary "convergences" between the intellectual worlds of science and theology (limiting himself to the Christian religion); it is vital to take advantage of the current atmosphere of openness, so different from the "warfare" image propagated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Three broad areas of potential encounter between science and religion effectively structure the book: the intelligibility and explicability of the natural world, the question of the reality of that world (its epistemological and ontological independence of the knowing subject), and finally the problem of the relation of theoretical constructs and linguistic models to that reality. To an even greater degree than Gunton's book, this work eschews constructive creativity for the digestion and synthesis of the work of others, the latter being the preferred mode of McGrath (his bibliographies are usually staggering in length, and the one for the current book is no exception). In each of the three areas he follows a similar method: locating those broad trends within theology and natural science which seem most promising as points of dialogue owing to perceived similarities of presupposition or procedure. To do this he must be highly selective, of course. In theology he privileges a broadly evangelical and traditionalist approach, with much stress on revelation; the favored philosophical perspective on natural science, in turn, is critical realism (p. 155). Within these bounds, he explores a series of episodes or cases that collectively indicate "convergence," a fundamental but often unnoticed overlapping or similarity of thought between the Christian theologian and the natural scientist.

The purpose of discovering such convergences is merely to show that the grounds for continued dialogue exist; McGrath seldom draws constructive conclusions for theology from his explorations. The overall tone is optimistic. Indeed, so harmonious is the relation between science and theology as presented here, so concerned is McGrath to portray them as equals with their own inviolable legitimacy, that it is difficult to see how traditional Christian thought is ever really challenged by scientific conclusions in the first place. Setting aside a few unfortunate "misunderstandings," it comes out of most encounters with science pretty much intact. It is hard not to think that some tough questions about the nature and limits of theology and the history of doctrine are being dodged here.

Bearing its limitations in mind, the reader will be treated to a wide-ranging and well-informed series of topics in contemporary science and phi-

losophy of science. As noted, the author's reading in both areas is very broad. McGrath's scientific background (he has a doctorate in molecular biology) shows in the ease with which he handles difficult concepts and controversies. He is fond of drawing analogies between theological positions and scientific theories. These range from intriguing (e.g., using Bohr's principle of complementarity to model the duality of the hypostatic union, pp. 193–195) to unconvincing (comparing the delayed empirical confirmation of general relativity to the awaited "eschatological" confirmation of theological doctrine, p. 138). Regrettably, many of these comparisons come across as flat-footed. Is it really possible to compare without further ado evolutionary theory (with its manifold opportunities for empirical testing) with "theism" as two instances of "inference to the best explanation" (p. 135)? Or how useful is it to speak of a "revelational method" alongside an "experimental method" (p. 111)?

McGrath shows that he is aware of the great differences between the data dealt with in scientific theory and the complex of historical testimony and religious experience with which theology must deal (p. 201), but at times his zeal to emphasize the "overlap" between science and Christian theology causes him to forget his own strictures. He cites a wry comment by Janet Martin Soskice, criticizing the vagueness implicit in defenses of the use of models in theology that take this form: "Religion need not be ashamed of its reliance on models if science proceeds in the same way" (p. 168). Such comparisons ("Science does it too!") will not take us very far until we grasp the distinctiveness of theological discourse and the way its use of models differs from that of scientific theory. When a defense of the baroque complexities of Trinitarian theology takes the form of pointing out that quantum mechanics is difficult as well (p. 88), we might be tempted to wonder whether apologetic considerations are driving McGrath to float some very slender analogies indeed.

In spite of these difficulties, and in the face of some occasionally blurry historical-theological summaries (I would point out, for example, p. 104 or p. 125) which are probably due to the high rate of speed at which the author evidently writes (some fourteen books in the last ten years), this book could see useful service as a basic text, even if it is better at indicating some possibilities of dialogue between science and religion than actualizing them.

To use a distinction that is inevitable but of only limited usefulness, McGrath is a "conservative" when it comes to traditional Christian positions, whereas our last author is known to be more "liberal." And yet there is a great deal that unites McGrath and Ian Markham, author of *Truth and the Reality of God*. Like McGrath, Markham wants to encourage dialogue between analytic philosophers (and, presumably, scientists) and theologians (p. 3). Also like McGrath, Markham is convinced that a critical realist epistemology and an overall sense of the world's intelligibility are inextricably linked to belief in God (pp. 4–5). Both clearly want to restore some kind of important role to "natural theology," although there are ambiguities surrounding the use of this

term, to which we will return. At any rate, Markham understands his book to be an exercise in natural theology, an attempt to use reason to “explicate and clarify the religious world-perspective” (more accurately, a *theistic* world-perspective) (p. 23).

Unlike the two previous authors, Markham in this book is pursuing a single, concentrated argument in some detail. The enormous scope of the argument itself, however, still gives the book the feel of a broad proposal, with many details and subordinate arguments remaining to be worked out. Roughly, Markham seeks to demonstrate three things: (1) that a notion of “traditioned-rationality” such as that of Alasdair MacIntyre—one which avoids the opposed extremes of utter relativism and universal rationality—implicitly relies on a critically realist epistemology; (2) that a critically realist epistemology, which posits a shared reality as the ultimate arbiter of the truth and meaningfulness of our linguistic utterances, implies the real intelligibility of the universe; and (3) that to avoid an infinite regress of contingent explanations, the intelligibility of the universe must be rooted in a “self-explanatory” ultimate, i.e., God (cf. the differently phrased summary of argumentative steps on p. 91).

In short, God must be invoked as the only explanation of that symmetry between the logic of our languages and the logic of our shared world that is posited by critical realism. And critical realism must be invoked as the only explanation of the logic of language which makes sense of our ability continually to transcend our linguistic world toward a common, real world (the growth of knowledge) and toward the linguistic worlds of others (the possibility of translation). On this point, both Aquinas and Nietzsche agree: God is the protector of rationality (p. 115).

What are we to make of this argument? The interpretive difficulties inherent in a project like this are easy to enumerate, of course. As with most philosophical arguments, the reader is dropped *in medias res*, into the midst of a series of conversations with other figures (D. Z. Phillips, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Milbank, Peter Winch, etc.) with whom he or she may not be familiar. Aware of this difficulty, Markham strives helpfully to keep jargon to a minimum and to simplify the exposition of his argument. However, on occasion this leads him to fall into crude historical summaries or unfair abridgements, even caricatures, of his opponents’ positions. I am not sure whether the discussions of Rorty, Quine and Davidson in the third chapter, for example, really do justice to the subtlety of their positions. But perhaps this is carping. What of the substance of the argument itself?

This is no place to engage the moves in detail. If I were to probe specific weak points in the reasoning, I might begin by examining more deeply the logical controversies surrounding appeals to the principle of sufficient reason, or those connected with the supposed dangers of infinite regress. A certain literature has been devoted to these matters, but Markham’s argument

does not allude to it. More generally, revamped cosmological arguments such as this one still seem vulnerable, in my opinion, to some of Hume's arguments. Surprisingly, given several allusions to Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Markham gives very little weight to Hume's point that when striving to anchor the meaningfulness of the world ontologically, one can always stop with the structure of the cosmos itself. After all, is not the existence of a divine person just as much a "brute fact" as the existence of an intelligible universe? If the former is more "self-explanatory" than the latter, it may only be because of definitional *fiat*. Besides, it is never obvious that the "theos" arrived at after a chain of inferences should be or can be equated with the God of religious worship. I do not doubt that Markham has resources to counter these queries, but he barely touches on them here.

None of this should be taken to mean that I disagree with the basic point that the event of meaning, which occurs in the encounter between language and the world, should be brought by Christian believers into close connection with the way God is conceived. As is usually the case, arguments for God's existence can be illuminating in a way that does not depend on how convincing they are. Nor is this kind of argument "from truth to God" isolated; Markham locates it in a history stretching back to Augustine. One might also relate it in substance, if not in style, to some more contemporary thinkers who have linked God to the phenomenon of aesthetic meaning (von Balthasar or George Steiner) or to the hermeneutic "event" (Ebeling or Robert Scharlemann). Grounding truth in God (and the corresponding drive to connect the "death of God" with the loss of stable meaning) puts Markham in some various and surprising company.

Owing to Markham's ambitions and the limitations of the format (revisions of the Boundy Lectures at Exeter), the reader is in for a fairly breathless 130 pages. Virtually every sentence will open onto controversial ground. But there is something bracing about the way Markham goes about his business, a no-nonsense "rolling up of the sleeves" approach to a renewed natural theology. Instead of arguing about its possibility or utility in the abstract, Markham simply gets started doing it. Even those dubious about the entire project might find themselves intrigued and informed by this energetic little book.

Having glanced briefly at the very different goals, strengths and weaknesses of these three books, I now turn to the special considerations noted at the beginning of the essay. All three could be said to operate in the intellectual zone of encounter between Christian doctrinal utterances and propositions about the world as articulated in scientific theory (or philosophy informed by such theory). But reading them together left me with the impression that in all three precisely this zone of encounter is curiously undertheorized from a theological perspective.

The reason for this seems to be a lack of explicit attention to the way in

which faithful Christian discourse is formulated and functions. In a typically subtle and enlightening essay (in *The Making and Remaking of Christian Doctrine*, Oxford, 1993) Rowan Williams warns us against the danger of trying to determine the truth of traditional theological positions “in ways which are actually inattentive to the concrete history and operation of doctrinal formulation” (p. 260). I would suggest that all three of the reviewed authors have undermined the usefulness of their books through insufficient discussion of, or questionable presuppositions about, the nature of Christian doctrine itself; this in turn makes the expounded relations between doctrine and science or philosophy seem oddly detached and abstract. Perhaps what I am saying can be made clearer by taking a backward glance at each in turn.

With Markham’s book the central question must be the role of natural theology. He begins with a very serious charge: the rejection of natural theology by thinkers like Barth and Milbank represents a “betrayal of the Christian tradition.” Of course, given the various possible definitions of natural theology, something like it can be seen as very common and important in many (though by no means all) traditions of Christian theology. But Markham wants to claim that it has been in some sense “central,” indeed that (as previously quoted) natural theology belongs “at the heart of all good theology” (p. 3). A good case might be made for this if it is agreed that natural theology means something like using rational arguments to “tease out the explanatory power of the Christian tradition” (p. 83). Surely Christian theology should always be involved in the task of reconstructing the world of common experience within itself, answering to the cultural discourse of “reality” from a Christian perspective, and doing so in a disciplined, argumentative way. Such a “natural theology” is simply a more reflective, articulated version of a procedure in which the encultured Christian believer is constantly, even willy-nilly, engaged.

It is more confusing, though, when Markham says that natural theology involves “attempts to establish the reality of God through reason, unaided by revelation” (p. 22). He hastens to add that this is not really supposed to be a “justification” of belief (p. 23), but then what can it mean when he excoriates the “fideism” of most contemporary theology because it means “the decision to ‘believe’ is made on ‘non-rational’ factors” (p. 1)? Does this mean the “decision” to believe should in fact be dependent on “unaided” arguments about God? And would this not imply that natural theology (as the antidote to fideism) is indeed about the “justification” of belief? In short, it is not clear from Markham’s account how the practice of natural theological argumentation is supposed to interact with the doctrinal substance of, say, belief in God as creator (cf. the criticism of Swinburne on p. 13).

If Markham is not very helpful in indicating just how the philosophical reflections of a natural theology are to be integrated into the task of doctrinal reformulation, our other two authors offer a picture of Christian doctrine that threatens to keep it insulated from any transformative encounter with the in-

tellecual world beyond theology. This is signaled by, among other things, the employment with a very free hand of the rhetoric of "orthodoxy" and similar terms, but without any analysis of how they are being used as criteria.

McGrath claims to locate himself within the "grand tradition" of theology (p. 32), but surely such a vague concept can scarcely provide the precision necessary to, for example, dismiss contemporary construals of creation such as process theology as "speculative" and "ephemeral" (p. 46). The judgment may be correct, but in lieu of specific critique it is hard to distinguish it from a mere reflex of traditionalist prejudice. The frequent invocation of revelation is not especially helpful, either; without explicit theological theorization it looks suspiciously like an anodyne, brought in for soothing effect when traditional positions seem threatened. My point is not that the notions of tradition and revelation are incoherent or useless, but rather that as deployed by McGrath they obscure the very complex give-and-take between theological traditions and contemporary (in this case, scientific) culture. What is needed is some notion of theological continuity that offers more than flat assertions that this or that theological model is "permanent and essential" and is "'given,' not chosen" (p. 185).

Similar problems arise in Gunton's book. He is quite ready to inform us just when and how past theology was mistaken in opposing this or that scientific position, but offers us no general explanation of how theology can be instructed by science; he is fond of claiming that any real insight science may afford is something theology was already aware of, or at least should have been. The reader will be surprised to learn, for example, that resistance to Darwin had "little to do with Christian doctrines" (p. 185, quoting James Moore)! This typical statement involves the questionable assumption that true "doctrine" is readily distinguishable from the cultural terms in which it is inevitably embodied (and which usually include philosophical and scientific presuppositions). Against this, I would argue that "the Christian tradition" is not so easily identifiable and isolable as an unchanging measure against which any position, theological or scientific, can be declared "orthodox" or "heretical." Perhaps in the end it is possible, but what is lacking here is reflection on how it can be done, and on how delicate an operation it really is.

There is no more telling indication of the crudity into which Gunton keeps falling when portraying relations between "the Christian tradition" and culture than his frequent use of the metaphor of "contamination." Repeatedly, the blame for distortions in the doctrine of creation is laid at the door of a kind of cultural infection by "Greek" thinking, which from the beginning has constantly threatened to "enter the bloodstream" of a pure, "orthodox" doctrine of creation (pp. 79, 83, 167-168, etc.). The picture that emerges of the theological history reminds one of the procrustean schematism of a Harnack at his worst: a gigantomachy between a timeless orthodoxy and an equally timeless gnosticism (cf. p. 227).

There are many problems with such a reading of history, but I wish to focus on the theological issue of how an “orthodox” position on creation, say, is to be identified. How do we know it when we see it? On Gunton’s own reading, the bulk of the Christian tradition has tended not to conceive creation properly—that is, in Trinitarian terms. But he also says that “in the fifth century, the dogmatic shape of Christianity was more or less formed” (p. 74). Is this “shape” normative for all that comes after? If so, in what sense? Elsewhere, he tends to resort to vague references to “the biblical position” as his final court of appeal, but again the reader is left with no sense of how the “correct” doctrine of creation is distilled from scripture. My point here is not to dispute Gunton’s doctrine of creation in itself, but to indicate questions arising from its formulation and use as a criterion. Gunton is evidently aware of the complex interplay of factors and the consequent difficulties involved in making theological judgments (cf. pp. 51–52, p. 104). More attention to these difficulties, and a corresponding delicacy of procedure, would in my opinion have made his survey far more valuable.

To sum up, the problem visible in Markham’s book is that of an isolation of “natural theology” (especially as practiced in the analytical philosophical tradition) from the broader theological construal of Christian doctrine. On the other hand, in McGrath and Gunton it is the insufficiently reflective use of the rhetoric of “orthodoxy” and “the tradition” that threatens to occlude the unavoidable critical decisions that are always being made in appropriating doctrinal language for the present situation. The basis for such decisions must be argued in a more disciplined and transparent fashion. We cannot answer basic questions about the doctrine of creation without reckoning with the creation of doctrine. Nor can an appeal to natural theology help us unless it is rescued from its current insularity with respect to doctrinal theology. Both problems point in different ways to the need for more careful thinking about the critical reappropriation of traditional Church teaching, and to the dangers of insufficient attention to the constant traffic between Christian belief and its cultural embodiments.

These comments are in no way intended to suggest a negative final judgment on these interesting works, but to point to a perennial problem facing theologians on both sides of the Atlantic (and elsewhere, too). Theology “in the island” is some of the most interesting and exciting currently being written. Its ambition and vigor is well represented by books such as these three; they show that British theology has emerged from the “trauma” of its collision with secular culture still troubled by a residual defensiveness, but with renewed confidence.

PAUL DEHART

*Vanderbilt Divinity School
Nashville, Tennessee*