

## DOCTORAL THESIS

# The displacement of subjectivity by particularity and relationality: a study of Colin E. Gunton's critique of modernity in his trinitarian theology of culture

Chiu, Shung Ming

*Date of Award:*  
2001

[Link to publication](#)

### General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent URL assigned to the publication

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

**CHIU Shung Ming**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**November 2001**

**Hong Kong Baptist University**

## 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	52
4.	Kant's Transcendental Subject and Disengagement	53
E	Rational Subjectivity, Projected Temporality and A-temporal Abstract Self	54
F	Conclusion -- Rational Subjectivity and Modern Individualism	57
III.	The Rootless Will and the Postmodern Relativism	59
A.	The Postmodern Relativism as an Arbitrary Subjectivism	59
B.	Arbitrary Subjectivism and the Rootless Arbitrary Will	59
IV.	Conclusion -- An Overall Ontological Assessment of Modernity	62
3	THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF MODERN CULTURE	64
I.	Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology Possessed by Individual	64
II.	Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology of Spatial Distance	65
A.	Words and the World -- Mirror of Nature	65
B.	The Problem of Epistemological Alienation	67
III.	Modern Epistemology as Foundationalism	71
A.	Foundation as the Bridge of Spatial Distance	71
B.	False Foundation	71
IV.	Modern Epistemology as an Epistemology of Intellectual Hegemony	73
V.	Postmodern Non-foundationalism as New Form of Intellectual Intolerance	74

A.	Non-foundationalism as a Form of Relativism	74
B.	Non-foundationalism as a Form of Intellectual Closedness and Intolerance	75
1.	Non-foundationalism and Incommensurability	75
2.	Postmodern Emotivism and Intellectual Intolerance	77
VI.	Postmodern Emotivism as Epistemologically Arbitrary Subjectivism	79
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	96
B.	<i>Imago Dei</i> , Discontinuity between Human and Non-human Creation, and Instrumental Domination	98
C.	<i>Imago Dei</i> and Rational Subjectivism	100
1.	Plato's Rationalism	101
2.	Plotinus' Rational Individualism	102
3.	Augustine's Doctrine of <i>Imago Dei</i> and Rational Subjectivism	103
IV.	Conclusion and Evaluation	106
A.	Theology as Metaphysics of Transcendence	106
B.	Theology as Metaphysics of Subjectivity	108

## PART TWO

5	A TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY OF RELATION -- FROM ONE TO THREE OR FROM THREE TO ONE	110
I.	Introduction	110
II.	From One to Three -- Karl Barth's Modes of Divine Revelation	111
A.	Ontology without Metaphysics of Transcendence -- Being in Becoming	111
B.	Is Barth's Trinity an Ontology without Metaphysics of Subjectivity?	112
1.	The Emphasis of the Oneness and Unity of God	113



2.	Divine Subjectivity – Divine Freedom and Divine Love	117
III.	From Three to One -- Cappadocian Fathers' Being in Communion	122
A.	The Relationship among <i>Prosopon</i> (or <i>Persona</i> ), <i>Ousia</i> and <i>Hypostasis</i>	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	
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 –	151
	A Doctrine of Creation in a Trinitarian Base	
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’ Relation with the Rest of Creation	168
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 Understanding	188

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 Emotive Self or to the Other of Language?	225
2. Postmodern Relativism and Deconstruction of Substantiality	230
III. Contribution to a Trinitarian Theology of Modernity	231
A. Dualism in Metaphysics of Transcendence and Metaphysics of Subjectivity	232
B. A Solution for the Metaphysics of Subjectivity	232
IV. Immanent-Economic Distinction or Immanent-Economic Reciprocal Relation?	233
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 Ontological Distinction Be Maintained?	240
D. Conclusion	243
V. Contribution on Hermeneutics of Relation: Knowing and Being	244
VI. Conclusion: Towards a Trinitarian Theology of Culture	244
BIBLIOGRAPHY	249
CURRICULUM VITAE	263