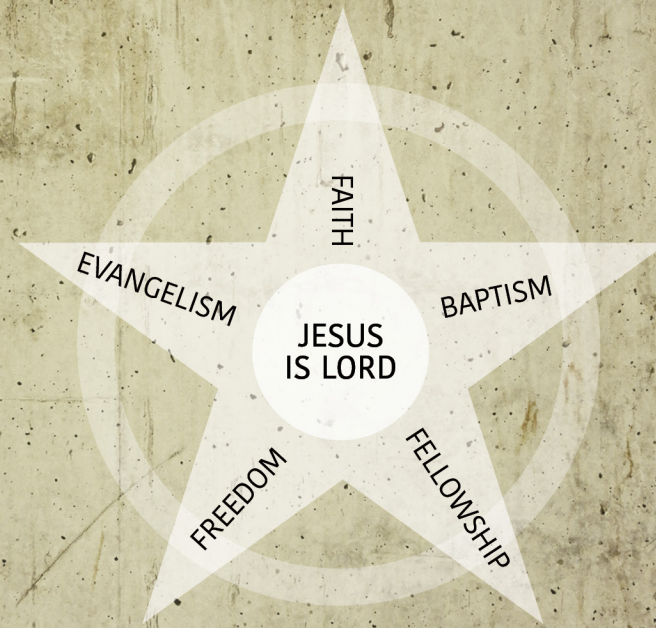


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## 25 Years On: The Theological Turn at King's College London and the Renewal of Evangelical Baptist Theology in the UK

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Without wishing to dismiss in any way the important contributions of the other Baptist colleges, in the second half of the twentieth century, the self-consciously evangelical tradition amongst English Baptists in particular<sup>1</sup> was shaped by Spurgeon's College, and by the steady flow of accredited Baptist ministers who came through what was then London Bible College, and is now the London School of Theology. There is no doubt that there was a change, not uncontested, in this tradition, over the half-century.<sup>2</sup> I suppose that in various ways I am both a product of, and a late contributor to, that change, and offer reflections here on one significant contributor to it, the Research Institute in Systematic Theology ('RIST') at King's College, London, which began in

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection remains true, I think, but in more complex ways, for Wales and Scotland. Wales through the influence of BUGB churches, although the BUW has perhaps been more traditionally evangelical in recent decades, and Scotland through both the exchange of leaders (for example, Andrew Rollinson, coming from Spurgeon's to a denominational role and two significant pastorates in Scotland, or Lisa Holmes, now on the BUS national team, and trained first at LBC (as was) and then at Spurgeon's), and through the influence of English/Welsh writers and speakers on natively Scots Baptists.

<sup>2</sup> Anecdotally, I recall David Harper, then Area Superintendent of the Eastern Area of BUGB and chair of Spurgeon's College Council, comment (it would have been about 1997) on how pleased he was to see the change in the culture of Spurgeon's from his own days as a student when, as he memorably put it, the college was devoted to defending 'the credibility of Genesis and the edibility of Jonah'.

1988, and lasted in recognisable form until 2005, when, after Colin Gunton's death, Murray Rae and I both left King's, and there was a wholesale change of faculty in systematic theology. Here, in the spirit of 25th anniversaries, I want to offer some reminiscences, and then to try to analyse what was driving the 'theological turn' at KCL in the 1990s, and how that affected British Baptist theology.<sup>3</sup>

Andy Goodliff has identified two theological traditions in late twentieth century British Baptist life. One took its inspiration from Leonard Champion's 1979 Baptist Historical Society lecture—'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life';<sup>4</sup> the other he identifies to some extent with Mainstream, and so with the renewal of evangelicalism in the UK associated with Clive Calver's leadership of the Evangelical Alliance and the rise of Spring Harvest.<sup>5</sup> There is not a simple relationship of Goodliff's second stream with the renewal of Baptist evangelical theology that RIST contributed to, but at least some of the same leaders are involved, and it is striking how Spurgeon's College, in particular, became almost solely staffed in theological areas by KCL graduates.

Goodliff identifies Nigel Wright as the key theologian in this stream;<sup>6</sup> Wright did his doctoral work at King's under the supervision of Colin Gunton, gaining his doctorate in 1994;<sup>7</sup> John Colwell similarly studied under Colin Gunton, being

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<sup>3</sup> I am following up here a comment I made in my *Baptist Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 58.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Champion, 'Evangelical Calvinism and the Structures of Baptist Church Life', *Baptist Quarterly* 28 (1980), 196-208.

<sup>5</sup> Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A Study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021), 24-44, 71-78.

<sup>6</sup> Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, 37-41.

<sup>7</sup> Published as *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000).

awarded his doctorate in 1985.<sup>8</sup> Graham Watts studied under Alan Torrance for his doctorate, awarded in 1998,<sup>9</sup> and was involved in Spurgeon's life in various ways even before he took a faculty role on Colwell's retirement. Peter Stevenson's KCL doctorate, also supervised by Alan Torrance and then Murray Rae, on John McLeod Campbell was awarded 2001.<sup>10</sup> Wright, Colwell, and Stevenson were all teaching at Spurgeon's, and so those who came through that college, like the present writer, were inducted into the KCL school;<sup>11</sup> the same was true of students at London Bible College (now London School of Theology): Graham McFarlane, for example, also studied under Gunton, being awarded his PhD in 1990. I myself taught at Spurgeon's whilst working on my PhD, 1996-1999,<sup>12</sup> and remained involved at various levels, including being effectively 'first reserve' for any needed cover teaching in doctrine, until relocating to Scotland in 2005. I studied under Wright and Colwell, and later taught alongside them, and also Stevenson and Watts; to the extent that there was a 'KCL RIST' way of conceiving theology, it was so dominant as to be unchallenged in Spurgeon's between, say, 1990 and 2007.<sup>13</sup> This may well not have been a good thing

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<sup>8</sup> Published as *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1989; Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Published as *Revelation and the Spirit: A Comparative Study of the Relationship between the Doctrine of the Revelation and Pneumatology of the Theology of Eberhard Jüngel and Wolfhart Pannenberg* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Published as *God in Our Nature: The Incarnational Theology of John McLeod Campbell* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

<sup>11</sup> We might also note another Spurgeon's link in Paul Goodliff, who trained at Spurgeon's, and would do an MTh with Gunton, 1990-1992. Gunton would write the Foreword to Goodliff's book *Care in a Confused Climate* (London: DLT, 1998). For a number of years Goodliff was a Research Associate Fellow at the College.

<sup>12</sup> Published as *God of Grace, God of Glory: An Account of the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> One other link that demonstrates the relationship between Gunton and Spurgeon's was that following Gunton's death in 2003, in 2007 Spurgeon's held a day conference on the theology of

in some respects, but it was a reality. I turn, then, to exploring the culture and commitments of the KCL Research Institute in Systematic Theology.

### **Theology at King's in the 1990s**

Tuesday was postgraduate day at King's College London, at least for the theologians. Taking advantage of location and transport links, people would come from various distances and gather mid-morning in Seminar Room 2E for the RIST (Research Institute in Systematic Theology) seminar. Lunch together would follow for most, generally in what was effectively a student cafeteria, and then in the afternoon one of the PGT modules would happen, again, generally, in Room 2E—it would be Revelation and Reason, always, in the first semester; something else in the second. PGR students would take advantage of being in central London to visit libraries—King's own library, the University of London collection, perhaps for some the Dr Williams Library or the Evangelical Library—and of course the British Library, which surely still has a claim to be the best library in the world.

Seminar Room 2E was long, but narrow, with a low ceiling. A bunch of standard-issue MDF tables pushed together into a narrow conference space—two seats at each end, maybe eight or ten down each side—the seats were equally-standard issue plastic chairs, and more chairs lined the walls. It was in one of several town-houses on Surrey St that the College had purchased over the years and knocked together into what was rather grandly called 'The Chesham Building'. Access was a nightmare—Surrey St slopes up from the Embankment to the Strand, so none of the previously-separate buildings had matching floor levels, or corridors that met each other, and so odd little flights of three or four steps and sudden corners were a feature of every route. This was where we lived, back

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Gunton, with Colwell, myself, and also Robert Jenson and Douglas Knight speaking. See Lincoln Harvery (ed.), *The Theology of Colin Gunton* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

then (Theology and Religious Studies has done better since at King's).

King's had nicer spaces—the centre of the original building was symbolically the Great Hall on the ground floor, and above it the chapel—the former the sort of grand space you would expect from a Victorian monument to the establishment, the latter if anything even grander, in an 1840s Anglican style that hovered somewhere between supreme self-confidence and the sort of aggressive self-assertion that is used to mask despair. RIST ran a series of conferences that happened in those better spaces, and would end round a large table in the basement of an Italian restaurant, almost next door, with a waiter who had a trick of pretending to break your credit card, and Colin Gunton refusing to let anyone else see the prices on the wine list, but insisting on buying several bottles of Barolo for us all to share. Several times a year there would be a day-conference, generally on a Friday, that would happen in some middle space—a large and nicely-furnished room that however was in the second sub-basement, perhaps. The week-by-week life of the Institute, however, happened in Room 2E.

I first experienced that life as a new doctoral student in September 1996, it would be Colin Gunton in the right-hand chair at the head of the table, that week's speaker to his left. Alan Torrance would be to the left of the speaker, the first of the side seats, and Douglas Farrow facing him. Brian Horne would be further down the table, as would at least some of Graham Stanton, Francis Watson, Douglas Campbell, or Eddie Adams from New Testament; Paul Helm and Martin Stone, philosophers of religion, were both regular attenders also. Michael Banner, once he had arrived at King's, was there. John Zizioulas had some sort of a deal bringing him to KCL for six weeks each year, and he would be there when around, of course. London being London, and Colin being Colin, others might be passing through, invited to stay with the Guntons, and present at the seminar. Then there would be the students—twenty or thirty of us, I guess.

I remained around that table on Tuesdays until moving to St Andrews in 2005. The staff changed—Alan Torrance left in 1999, and Murray Rae took his job; I took Doug Farrow's when he moved home to Canada. Michael Banner took the ethics chair. Colin died in 2003, and for a year Murray and I shared the task of chairing the sessions, before Oliver Davies arrived to take the chair and we both moved on.

### **Contra Wiles: A Context for Gunton's Thought**

I start with this colour because, at the time, I think the self-narration of most of us involved in the RIST would have been as a consciously counter-cultural community. The community bit is easy to understand—but achieving it in a commuter university like King's took significant work, which Colin Gunton in particular gave himself to in all sorts of ways—the 'counter-cultural' bit is harder, but is again down to Gunton, who for most of his life felt he was an outsider—he would reflect on being in two deeply Anglican establishments, Oxford and then King's, as a convinced Dissenter. I cannot speak for the other Baptists noted above, but I discovered a significant set of shared concerns with Colin, growing from our shared congregationalist beliefs. Oxford mattered to Colin and the fact that he was excluded from taking any of the established chairs there (which until very recently—some years after his death—were reserved for Anglican clerics) was, I think, a lasting hurt, although not one he spoke about. In 1992, he was the first non-Anglican to give the Bampton lectures,<sup>14</sup> an invitation which required a change in the rules; I know a little of the, frankly ridiculous, arguments made to oppose this, and I suspect he knew a lot more. (Paul Fiddes was the second nonconformist Bampton lecturer, in 2005.)

At King's this sense of outsidership became tied up with a self-consciously daring approach to renewing the discipline of

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<sup>14</sup> Published as *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

systematic theology. Colin encouraged us to feel that doing theology the way we were doing it at King's was somehow subversive—as we shall see, it certainly was when RIST began, in 1988, but arguably we kept that self-narration going longer than was necessary. I think for Colin himself something important changed when John Webster took the Lady Margaret Chair in Oxford and immediately contacted him saying he wanted to be a part of what we were doing—as I noted before, Oxford mattered to him, and so this was the vindication of his programme that he was able to trust. That said, it is worth exploring the earlier good reasons for the sense of outsidership.

The 1990 Bampton lectures, immediately preceding Gunton's, were given by Alister McGrath, and were entitled 'The Genesis of Doctrine: a Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism'.<sup>15</sup> 'Doctrinal criticism' is not a concept that has lasted; the phrase was coined, I think, by G.F. Woods, and was made popular by Maurice Wiles, who held the Regius Chair in Oxford for over two decades and chaired the Church of England's Doctrinal Commission. (It is worth noting that both Woods and Wiles had held the chair in Christian doctrine at King's College London that Colin Gunton was later to occupy.<sup>16</sup>) Wiles's significance at the time might be gauged by how often he was attacked: Fergus Kerr published a paper entitled 'Surviving Wiles'; Stuart Hall—the patologist, not the founder of cultural studies—offered us the rather wonderfully titled 'Exploratory Wiles: Or, How to Beat About the Burning Bush'.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of doctrinal criticism was fairly simple: the sort of historical criticism that had for a century been applied to the

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<sup>15</sup> Published as Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> Woods from 1965-67 and Wiles from 1967-70.

<sup>17</sup> Fergus Kerr, 'Surviving Wiles: From Dogmatic Theology to Doctrinal Criticism' *New Blackfriars* 57 (1976), 388-92; Stuart G. Hall, 'Exploratory Wiles: Or, How to Beat About the Burning Bush', *King's Theological Review* II (1979), 38-42.



study of the Scriptures ought to be applied also to the study of the history of doctrine—for Wiles, trained as a classical English patrologist, this meant we needed to look hard at the conciliar doctrines of Trinity and Christology, and recognise that they are historically-contingent products of murky and often disreputable politics. There are several things to say about this:

First, I don't suppose it comes as a surprise to many contemporary readers. We have benefitted over the past two decades from a true renaissance in patristics, perhaps particularly in the English-speaking world. Lewis Ayres; Michel Barnes; Morwenna Ludlow; Rowan Williams—the list could go on for some time. Because of their labours, we know this history, and know it well. I simply do not know the extent to which this generation were inspired by Wiles's programme, but it is noticeable that their carrying out of the historical work Wiles demanded has generally led them to affirm, rather than deny, the viability of traditional doctrines. Wiles's *JTS* review of Ayres's book on Nicaea suggests that he was, shall we say, less than happy with this.<sup>18</sup>

Second, it is worth looking carefully at Wiles's criticism in that review. He is appreciative of Ayres's historical work, and sees it as an important 'step in the right direction', despite some minor quibbles over terminology and the like; he is insistent, however, that it is only a step: 'plenty more detailed work on ecclesiastical links, personal ties, and political influences ... will be needed.' He is more critical of Ayres's identification of a proper attentiveness to mystery as the core of pro-Nicene theologies post-360, which he presents as a strictly historical matter; I am not sure the history is on his side here, given Eunomius's insistence on the univocity of theological language, and the centrality of writings *contra Eunomiam* to the Cappadocian development and triumph, but when patrologists of the status of Wiles and Ayres disagree, I

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<sup>18</sup> Maurice Wiles, 'Review of Lewis Ayres's *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 56 (2005), 670-75.

am certainly not competent to rule. He is most critical, however, of the final chapter of Ayres's book, where he turns to consider then-contemporary trinitarian theology, and to critique the claims made by social trinitarians that their novel doctrine was in any way a recovery of the Cappadocians.

Wiles agrees with Ayres's critical work here, but is troubled by his positive reconstruction. Ayres ends with a reflection, perhaps inspired by Fergus Kerr's response to Wiles (cited above), on the possibilities of doing good history under the authority of the magisterium. Faith demands that we believe in some sense in the providential preservation of the truth, and of the Church, and that we seek to see the guiding hand of the Spirit in the narratives of history—perhaps particularly in the fourth century, when the Christian doctrine of God was being determined. It is in principle impossible to discern these realities adequately before the eschaton, however, and so the Christian historian knows that she is unable to prove the truth which she confesses, but must strive to fail as adequately as she can. Ayres responds directly to Wiles's earlier work at the end of the book, suggesting that, fundamentally, their disagreement is over the nature and function of Scripture; in his review Wiles concurs with this, but comments that his 'own reading of Scripture in the light of modern biblical scholarship' leads him to continue to regard his own rejection of any claim of unified doctrinal teachings in the canon, or of any claim about the inevitability of the doctrinal development that led to Nicaea, as sound.

Third, then, we need to come back to what Wiles called 'modern biblical scholarship'. Wiles's own training was perhaps at the apogee (in England; it had come earlier in Germany) of a recognisably 'modern' self-confidence amongst biblical critics; phrases such as 'the assured results of recent scholarship' are used a lot less in Biblical studies now than they were in the 1930s—consider, for representative example, C.H. Dodd's calm assurance in his 1936 inaugural lecture from the Norris-Hulse chair in Cambridge: reviewing the work of the discipline to 1900, he comments '[t]he Synoptic Problem was, in principle, solved, the Pauline

Corpus, within limits, fixed, and the general succession of the New Testament literature determined on lines which all subsequent study assumes as a basis ... The major problems had in a measure been solved.<sup>19</sup> This was not even something Dodd was arguing for; it was a claim he assumed his audience would recognise and assent to. Further, Dodd similarly outlines a detailed methodological proposal for the discipline, composed of five successive stages, which he similarly assumes will be recognised by, and uncontroversial to, his audience.

When Wiles imagines a practice of doctrinal criticism, it seems clear that this is the model he wants to emulate. The task should be strictly historical, first of all laying a groundwork of facts—which works bearing Athanasius’s name are authentic? Which are spurious?—and then a set of genealogies and relationships—when did he write *De Incarnatione*? Does it precede the Arian crisis, or is the lack of controversial material somehow artful, and if so why? The task of interpretation follows, but it is again a strictly historical task: we may seek to expound Athanasius’s account of the Father-Son relationship, but any move from what Athanasius thought to what we should think is ruled out. It is when Ayres starts on this work in his final chapter that Wiles feels he has to part company decisively.<sup>20</sup>

Now, as I have indicated, Wiles’s account of Biblical scholarship was already anachronistic in the latter stages of his own career, and I will consider the significance of that

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<sup>19</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Present Task in New Testament Studies: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the Divinity School on Tuesday 2 June 1936* (Cambridge: CUP, 1936), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Wiles made this same point again in reviewing Gunton’s *Yesterday and Today*: ‘[h]e rightly insists that if we are to understand the New Testament documents we must recognise that their picture of Jesus is theological through and through ... [b]ut this important truth is always in danger of slipping over into the much bigger claim, that as Christians we have to share that view.’ Maurice Wiles, ‘Review of Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*’, *New Blackfriars* 65 (1984), 44-5.

later, but this gives a fairly vivid picture of what was being taught as theology in Oxford when Colin Gunton was a student there. In Wiles's hands, doctrinal criticism was just devastating to historic orthodoxy—as early biblical criticism had been in the first half of the nineteenth century; John Macquarrie published an evaluation of Wiles's legacy, and even he suggested that, in rejecting the possibility of any account of incarnation being intelligible or credible, Wiles had gone too far.<sup>21</sup>

Gunton's own doctoral thesis, published as *Becoming and Being*, shows both the influence of this context, and his view of an alternative possibility. The book is subtitled *The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartsborne and Karl Barth*.<sup>22</sup> I assume Barth needs no introduction, but Hartshorne might: he was a leading figure in the process theology movement. Gunton assumes in his thesis, and in the subsequent book, that what the process theologians called 'classical theism'—their lumping together of doctrines of God from Augustine to, say, Edwards—is untenable, and that we therefore need a new way forward. The book, that is, simply assumes that doctrinal criticism has worked, at least on theology proper; an untenable pagan hellenistic idea of deity as stasis must be discarded. Hartshorne provides one route to completely revise the doctrine of God, a route which, because it was far more responsible to (then-)contemporary philosophy (Whitehead's process thought) than to orthodoxy, would have been found amenable by Wiles. Was there another way?

Well, Mansfield, the historically-Congregationalist college in Oxford where Gunton studied, hired a new dean in 1965, a youngish American Lutheran called Robert Jenson. He was working on constructive possibilities for theological renewal, again assuming the success of (something like) doctrinal criticism, but he found inspiration for a more positive new

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<sup>21</sup> John Macquarrie, 'Review Article: The Theological Legacy of Maurice Wiles' *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2006), 597-616.

<sup>22</sup> It was published as *Becoming and Being* in 1978 by Oxford University Press.

theology in Barth, and the developments of Barth offered by an emerging German generation including virtual unknowns (then!) like Moltmann and Pannenberg. *God after God* was his book doing this work.<sup>23</sup> He took Colin on as a doctoral student, and I suppose that he pointed Colin to the possibilities of Barth.

Jenson moved back to the USA in 1968, and Colin finished his DPhil under the supervision of Macquarrie, but it was Jenson's vision of a reconstructed theology that was more, not less, attentive to the gospel narrative that inspired Colin, and his relationship with Jenson was the one that lasted. Colin took a lectureship in philosophy at King's two years into his doctoral work in 1969, which delayed, inevitably, the completion of the DPhil till 1973. He was eleven years in the philosophy department at King's before moving to Theology and Religious Studies.

His first book after the publication of his doctorate was *Yesterday and Today: A Study in Continuities in Christology*.<sup>24</sup> Read against the context of doctrinal criticism, two features stand out. The first is the continued acceptance that doctrinal criticism had been successful in certain ways: Gunton does not want to 'reverse' the development of thought, but to 'take it further'; indeed, '[o]nly by deepening the possibilities inherent in Christology for our understanding of God can theology be truly radical'—the echoes of Barth, and indeed of what Jenson found in Barth, are clear.<sup>25</sup> The second is a further stage of pushing back—the most famous quotation from the book, and indeed the preliminary statement of the

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<sup>23</sup> R.W. Jenson, *God After God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969).

<sup>24</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Yesterday and Today: A Study in Continuities in Christology* (London: DLT, 1983; SPCK 1997); page references below are to the second edition.

<sup>25</sup> Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 8.

book's central thesis, is about needing to say the same things in at least some of the same words as the Fathers.<sup>26</sup>

Gunton embarked on a programme of retrieval, looking for neglected figures in the tradition who offered alternatives that avoided the errors he still believed doctrinal criticism had identified. Owen and Irving offered possibilities for Christology; Andrew Walker introduced him to Coleridge, who offered a way of reading the Trinity as a useful and generative doctrine. The conclusions of the doctrinal critics were to be accepted; the inherited theological consensus was indeed untenable; but reconstruction would come from more authentic, if neglected, strands of the tradition.

In the mid-1980s, the British Council of Churches set up a doctrinal commission looking at what they termed 'the forgotten Trinity'; Gunton was the URC representative, and there he met, I think for the first time, a Greek cleric and theologian who had recently taken a post in New College, Edinburgh, John Zizioulas. It is not difficult, given the analysis above, to see why Gunton was simply captivated by Zizioulas's account of a remarkably generative Cappadocian trinitarianism that had been lost—if Zizioulas was right, then what doctrinal criticism had successfully demolished was a Western, Augustinian, distortion of Christian doctrine; reconstruction and renewal could indeed come through reaching into a more authentic tradition of Cappadocian trinitarianism.

I have attempted to show how reading Gunton's theological programme as a response to doctrinal criticism, as exemplified by the work of Maurice Wiles; this might seem surprising given how infrequently Gunton refers to either the

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<sup>26</sup> 'The argument of this book is ... that it is very difficult to maintain a real continuity with earlier ages unless we can *at least in some ways* affirm their words as our words...' Gunton, *Yesterday and Today*, 5; emphasis original. This thesis is explicitly framed as a response to doctrinal criticism, referenced on the previous page.

programme or to Wiles himself.<sup>27</sup> I note, first, that Gunton does not spend much time disagreeing with any of his contemporaries in his published work, and so this observation should not carry too much weight. Second, there is one paragraph-length treatment of Wiles in *The Barth Lectures*, a posthumous transcript of one of Gunton's lecture courses at King's. There, Wiles is dismissed and one who misunderstood the Fathers and, following Schleiermacher, recast Christology in particular in fundamentally untheological terms, with Jesus as nothing more than the ideal human being.<sup>28</sup> Third, I have noted above that *Yesterday and Today* is presented as a response to doctrinal criticism, even if it gives little space to discussing the movement. Fourth, and most significantly, I have suggested that several aspects of Gunton's research trajectory—from his choice of PhD subject, through his fascination with marginal figures, to his wholehearted embrace of Zizioulas's account of the Cappadocians—can all be explained, at least in part, as ways of responding to this theological movement, which was dominant in the Oxford of his youth. For Gunton, to do constructive Christian theology in dialogue with the tradition was an ongoing act of rebellion, almost—even if he never quite lost the sense that doctrinal criticism had succeeded, and so that some sort of reconstruction was necessary.

#### **Gunton and Schwöbel: The Intellectual Basis of RIST**

Christoph Schwöbel arrived at King's in 1986, and in 1988 he and Colin founded the RIST together, with Christoph offering the original idea and taking the lead to begin with. Schwöbel's doctoral work had been on Martin Rade; his

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<sup>27</sup> Gunton refers to Wiles once in passing in the first edition of *Becoming and Being* (and twice more in the added 'Epilogue' in the second edition; there is one reference in *Yesterday and Today*; and perhaps three or four others across the rest of his works.

<sup>28</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Barth Lectures* edited by Paul H. Brazier (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 188-9. Recent scholarship on Schleiermacher would dispute this characterisation of his Christology, it should be noted.

second book, a collection of essays, but with a much stronger connecting theme than is usual in such collections, was *God: Action and Revelation*, published in 1992;<sup>29</sup> it showed a commitment to the doctrine of the trinity as the organising principle of theology, and Christoph's ongoing interest in relationality as a key theme. This was close enough, but also different enough, to what Gunton was getting from Zizioulas that their dialogue was rich and generative. The themes of the first RIST publications—personhood and then trinity—were unsurprising, and set a context, a basic theological methodology, that, along with Gunton and Schwöbel's shared debt to Barth, would be characteristic of RIST throughout its life.

The younger generation who came in—Alan Torrance; Michael Banner; Murray Rae; Douglas Farrow; me, to just name people on faculty—were not trained in doctrinal criticism, and so perhaps did not have any personal sense of rebellion, but, as I noted above, there was an ongoing sense of challenging norms. I was taught doctrine at Spurgeon's by two of Gunton's earlier doctoral students, Nigel Wright and John Colwell, and so it never occurred to me to doubt, let alone to defend, the thought that Coleridge—the subject of my Masters' dissertation—and Edwards—the subject of my PhD—might be interesting and useful dialogue partners. Even John Webster, half a generation younger than Gunton, and fighting some of the same battles, was committed more to retrieval than to reconstruction: he assumed that the basic theological problem was that an intellectually-serious and still-credible tradition had been lost, not that the broad Christian (or Western) tradition had simply gone wrong.

Barth held these two approaches in careful tension, which may be why so many in this history found him so generative. On the one hand, he was not only committed to dialogue with the tradition, but frankly confessed in his introduction to Heppes's compendium that he did not know how to

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<sup>29</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992).



appropriate Scripture without first travelling back through the tradition to it.<sup>30</sup> On the other, he saw a fatal error that needed correction, essentially in a doctrine of God that did not pay enough attention to the person of Jesus Christ.

Webster's own journey to the project of theological retrieval of course came through engaging with post-liberalism and the Yale School. That was not a big part of the King's project—we waved at Lindbeck when we talked method, and name-checked Frei when appropriate, but Cambridge was the place where they were studied in the UK in the 1990s. There was, however, a significant shared move, the problematisation of the Enlightenment. There was no question at RIST throughout its life that the Enlightenment was a problem to be overcome, not a triumph to be celebrated (another of Colin's early books was entitled *Enlightenment and Alienation*<sup>31</sup>). This was perhaps bequeathed by Jenson, who wrote a book on Edwards before that was fashionable because 'Edwards knew what to make of the great eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and America and its church are the nation and the church the Enlightenment made.'<sup>32</sup> If criticism of the Enlightenment has become common, not least because of the present pervasiveness of feminist and postcolonial approaches across the humanities, we need to remember that it was once not so universal.

Post-liberalism, as the name makes clear, begins with the experienced failure of liberalism. The core of the liberal project, in theology at least, might be understood as confidence in the individual scholar's judgement: I throw off the shackles of tradition, and communal norms, to pursue my own intellectual project, and thus I find truth. This is

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<sup>30</sup> Karl Barth, 'Introduction' in Heinrich Hepppe (tr. G.T. Thomson), *Reformed Dogmatics: Set out and illustrated from the sources* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950).

<sup>31</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1985).

<sup>32</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), 3.

classically Enlightened of course—we only need to think of the resonant descriptions: ‘a prejudice against prejudice’; ‘sapere aude!’—and so post-liberalism is similarly a rejection of ‘the Enlightenment project’ (to use a very King’s phrase that is not without its own problems) as self-evidently good. The post-liberal response was to replace the judgement of the individual with the judgement of the community. The precise community that was to be trusted was, to be honest, generally ill-defined by the key post-liberal thinkers. Lindbeck’s commitment to ecumenism suggested it was the whole Church of Jesus Christ, but—as far as I know, and I am certainly not an expert—he never really specified the limits of this; Mormons, in or out? Self-proclaimed Arians, like Wiles? And so on. Hauerwas implied, in his focus on the performance of liturgy, that the local congregation was the decisive community, but if liturgy is authorised beyond the local congregation, this also becomes difficult. Generally there is an appeal to ‘the Christian tradition’ which remains rather ill-defined.

I am very happy to be told that it is because I share his denominational affiliation, but, for me, the best account of a post-liberal theology is Curtis Freeman’s *Contesting Catholicity*.<sup>33</sup> It is convincing because it is agonistic. Freeman explores the problem of finding security in the ecclesial tradition when, as a Baptist, his key ecclesial identity is a principled dissent against aspects of the tradition. Colin Gunton neither wrote nor, in my hearing at least, said anything indicating this same self-awareness, but I think there is something here that might be useful for understanding the development of his thought. If Zizioulas is right, then the Western tradition—Anglicanism included—has gone wrong, and we can make an appeal to a true, if marginalised, tradition: the Cappadocians, eclipsed by Augustine; the English Dissenters, exemplified by Owen and Irving; the odd eccentric genius like Coleridge; Barth as a church father come late in time, recalling us from the errors that had crept in to

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<sup>33</sup> Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

(something close to) the truth. If Zizioulas is right in his account of the history, then this appeal need not be agonistic, as Freeman's is, but might rather be a celebratory, if countercultural, recovery of a marginalised alternative tradition.<sup>34</sup>

That said, the crucial post-liberal turn, to locating authority, which can no longer believably reside in the brilliance of the individual scholar, in the ecclesial community and its tradition of interpretation, is one we grasped forcefully at King's, in a very particular and concrete way. It occurs to me now that many of those truly committed to the project were deeply invested in the life of a particular congregation. Gunton was associate pastor of Brentwood URC for almost all of his teaching career; Murray Rae was in pastorate whilst teaching at King's; Marlene Schhwöbel, Christoph's first wife, was pastor of their local (URC) congregation whilst they were in England; in other cases I am relying on thicker description, drawn from memory, but it was there, not universally, but generally, in those who were really committed to the project. Colin's own congregationalism—and Christoph and Marlene's involvement in a URC congregation of their own—meant that the local gathering was emphasised, but that was by no means exclusive—John Zizioulas was bishop of a Christian community that no longer existed; Jenson was committed far more to a vision of Lutheranism than to a particular local expression of it; and so on.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Readers of my own work will know that I find Zizioulas's account of the history to be unconvincing (see particularly *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012); as a result, I share Freeman's sense that any authentically-Baptist programme of retrieval will be troubled and difficult.

<sup>35</sup> Anecdotally, I remember chatting to Jenson and his wife Blanche one Monday at a conference in London, after we had been at the same seminar in Scotland the previous Friday. Asking about their weekend, I was told (by Blanche, of course: Jens was famously taciturn) that they had worshipped at a Lutheran church in London that was their favourite local church in the world, because of its commitment to the continuation of various seventeenth-century Lutheran traditions.

This ecclesial commitment felt counter-cultural even when I joined the staff at King's. The Ninian Smart style of religious studies, where the researcher stands outside the community being researched and observes them dispassionately, was assumed by perhaps half or more of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies—interestingly, including many of the Biblical Studies staff, but not including some of those who taught other world religions, who saw that we Christian theologians were teaching as insiders to the tradition we taught and very much wanted to do the same. I recall being at King's the first time what is now called 'Impact'—then it was 'Knowledge Transfer'—came onto the institution's radar; about ten of us, who had been quietly sneaking off to offer our expertise to our various religious communities, were suddenly able to claim that same work as a valuable contribution to the department.

How unique, at the time, was the academic culture of the RIST? I am not qualified to answer that, as I only knew what we were doing at King's. We were, I reflect, disproportionately training the theology tutors of the various (non-Anglican) ministerial training colleges in the UK, and whilst some of that was no doubt down to geography, our ecclesial orientation must also have been relevant. Beyond the UK, I remember Bruce McCormack saying, I think in conversation after Colin's memorial service, that the number of doctoral students who came to Colin and then took posts in confessional US evangelical institutions was remarkable, and had changed that culture decisively—post-Trump, he may have revised that opinion, but the fact of the placements at least remains true.

Wiles—and several of our senior colleagues at King's in my day—would have deplored that ecclesial orientation, but it seems to me that, in UK academic theology at least, it has won the day. That was certainly not all down to what we did at King's—as I commented earlier, Cambridge was more visibly post-liberal—but my own ecclesiological commitments make me wonder if the KCL RIST focus on

the local congregation was different from, and better than, a generalised commitment to some vague ecclesial identity called 'the church'. The King's way—the Gunton/Schwöbel way—was not to hover at 30 000 feet above the messy reality of congregational life, and to make pronouncements from there, but instead to be in the community on the ground, and to find ways, trusting in the promises of the gospel, to rejoice in it. (I might say on this that, whilst at King's, I was part of a small group of elders that led my own congregation through the process of dismissing our pastor for moral failure; we were not dewey-eyed and idealistic about local church life!)

### **Systematic Theology and 'Modern Biblical Studies': Some methodological reflections**

I have explored the background of what was done at King's, and identified an appeal to tradition, and a commitment to the local church, as key features of what we were doing in RIST. There are two further aspects I want to raise, more briefly. The first is in the idea of specifically 'systematic' theology. This was a lasting concern—it is there in the title of the Institute, and in a short paper Schwöbel wrote around the time of its founding;<sup>36</sup> at a conference on the future of theology and religious studies not long after the founding of RIST, Gunton wondered about the lack of systematic theology in the English tradition in a very worthwhile paper, later published in *SJT*.<sup>37</sup> When Gunton and Webster founded a new journal, they called it the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, with Schwöbel and Jenson, amongst others, on the editorial board, and in the first issue Gunton wrote about what, if anything, was meant in the change from naming

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<sup>36</sup> Christoph Schwöbel, 'Doing Systematic Theology', *King's Theological Review* X (1987), 51-57.

<sup>37</sup> Colin E. Gunton, 'An English Systematic Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46 (1993), 479-96.

modules and posts ‘Systematic Theology’ rather than ‘Christian Doctrine’.<sup>38</sup>

‘Systematic theology’ was a term long-used in Germany, and to a lesser extent in the USA. I suppose that the focus on being systematic was something that Schwöbel, in particular, brought to the project, convincing Gunton and others that one of the missing pieces in reconstructing Christian theology was attention to the complex set of inter-relations between doctrines—and indeed between theological subdisciplines. In his 1987 essay, ‘Doing Systematic Theology’, Schwöbel first argues that systematic theology is ‘the self-explication of Christian faith’—note the silent but demanded ecclesial location—and then lists five criteria for the practice of theology: christocentricity, leading to a Scripture-principle; the historical and communal character of faith, leading to a sustained engagement with tradition; the relevance of faith in each particular context, leading to a need for locally-credible expression; internal coherence; and external coherence.<sup>39</sup> This emphasis on theology as a practice, or as Schwöbel puts it ‘a craft which in some rare cases achieves the quality of an art’,<sup>40</sup> was something sustained—when Colin Gunton, Murray Rae, and I put together a new introductory module, largely methodological in focus, and produced a textbook for it, we called it *The Practice of Theology*.<sup>41</sup>

On this account theology becomes self-reflexive—as we might put it in shorthand, if God did in fact create *ex nihilo*, then theology cannot be dependent on any other discipline or body of knowledge. We can see the effect of this in, for example, the development of John Webster’s work after his return to the UK. Webster’s justly-famous Oxford inaugural,

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<sup>38</sup> Colin E. Gunton, ‘A Rose by Any Other Name? From “Christian Doctrine” to “Systematic Theology”’ *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1 (1999), 4-23.

<sup>39</sup> Schwöbel, ‘Doing Systematic Theology’, 54-56.

<sup>40</sup> Schwöbel, ‘Doing Systematic Theology’, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Colin Gunton, Stephen R. Holmes, and Murray Rae (eds), *The Practice of Theology: A Reader* (London: SCM, 2001).

entitled *Theological Theology*, looks with the benefit of a quarter-century of hindsight to be almost groping in the dark at times for new methodologies that would be responsible to this sort of account of the practice of theology;<sup>42</sup> at one point, for example, he is trying to invent ‘the theological interpretation of Scripture’,<sup>43</sup> but he lacks either the language or the tools to do more than indicate that we need a theologically-responsible practice of reading that we haven’t consciously imagined yet—of course he imagined it more fully than perhaps anyone else some years later in his *Holy Scripture*.<sup>44</sup>

I promised to return to Wiles’s invocation of ‘modern biblical scholarship’, and this is the point to do it, because there is an important sense in which Wiles was right, or rather in which he needs to be shown to have been wrong. In the end, most of what we do as systematic theologians is reading historical texts, and Biblical scholarship, New Testament scholarship in particular, gives us the most complete and exhaustive tradition of reading historical texts that we have—the quantity of scholarship compared to the brevity of the text is simply unparalleled anywhere. If we believe that other texts can be read as the NT is read, then the achievements of NT scholarship should give us a model for what we might hope for in our study of other texts—this is the sense in which I think Wiles was right.

Where was Wiles wrong? Not, I think, in his insistence that, at some really fundamental level, the Scriptures are texts like other texts—they are, and that matters—rather his failure, theologically considered, was to reflect that all text exists only within the economy of God’s creation, and, in the end, all text exists only to serve the gracious purposes of God. Scripture is, like every other text ever written, the product of

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<sup>42</sup> John Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 27 October 1997* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

<sup>43</sup> Webster, *Theological Theology*, 11-14.

<sup>44</sup> John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003). John dedicated this work to Colin Gunton’s memory after his death.

human hearts and minds and hands—this is what we can call the humanity of the text—and to this extent Wiles was right—but Scripture is that within the divine economy, and within that economy, Scripture has a status and purpose accorded to no other text, and in failing to recognise this, Wiles was wrong.

This speaks directly to his criticisms of Ayres, who essentially claims that there is nothing in his historical investigations that leads him to doubt or contradict his Catholic faith. Wiles's response, however, is that in his view there should be—this was the point of his comment about 'modern biblical scholarship' that I quoted above. And it is not trivial; consider, for example, the question of the origin of two of the three standard ecumenical creeds. Legend has the Apostles' Creed being given by divine inspiration to the twelve apostles one line each; in fact we know enough about the evolution of the baptismal creed of the church of Rome that we can say with some certainty that the Apostles' Creed is the form that symbol reached somewhere in the fourth century; again, we have very good textual evidence that the Athanasian Creed owes nothing to Athanasius, instead being a combination of two fifth— or sixth-century Latin documents. Now, neither the ascription of the Apostles' Creed to the apostles, nor that of the Athanasian Creed to Athanasius, is a crucial dogma of the faith, but in principle such a dogma could be disproven by historical investigation—and Wiles essentially claimed, against Ayres, that this is what had happened with NT studies.

Consider again, however, Dodd's confident summary of what nineteenth-century NT studies had achieved: the synoptic problem solved; Pauline authorship determined; dating agreed—no-one in contemporary NT studies would be so confident. The closest to an equivalent claim one might find today would be an admission of a sort of failure: it would not be hard to find a New Testament scholar who would admit that there was little point in new work on, say, the synoptic problem—every bit of available evidence has been examined, re-examined, and re-re-examined, and, absent new evidence



(say, the discovery of a manuscript of the assumed source-text Q), there can be no significant advance on what is, presently, essentially an impasse. The problem is not, however, 'solved': different scholars reconstruct the evidence in different ways, and fail to convince each other.

This is interesting: it is not that there is shared agreement that the evidence is inconclusive—that is certainly a conclusion argued for by some, but others maintain Markan priority, argue for Matthean priority, or even—John Robinson's Bampton lectures—Johannine priority.<sup>45</sup> Such a situation can only be a result of methodologies that, at some level, differ. Behind Dodd's calm assurance of progress lies an assumption that NT scholars all share a presumption of the task and methods of the discipline. Bockmuehl, in something of a lament for the discipline, imagines taking Dodd into a contemporary academic library, and sitting him down with recent volumes of *NT Abstracts*: this would reveal the utter fragmentation of the discipline, which 'no longer enjoys any agreement either about the methods of study or even about the criteria by which one might agree about appropriate methods and criteria.'<sup>46</sup> Postmodernity has arrived with a vengeance!

We need, however, to push even further. The shared agenda of the Biblical scholarship Dodd imagined was based on a very modern conviction, exemplified right at the beginning of its story in Reimarus's *Fragments from Wolfenbüttel Library*: the Biblical texts report many examples of miracles; we know miracles don't happen; so the texts that report them must be falsifications. The task of Biblical scholarship is to give a credible account of how these falsifications came into existence, and of how they became accepted as in some way factual. I am told by colleagues in the field that even this position is starting to crumble: to take the paradigmatic event

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<sup>45</sup> John A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985).

<sup>46</sup> Markus Bockmuehl, "'To be or not to be?': The Possible Futures of New Testament Scholarship" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), 271-306, 273.

of the resurrection of Jesus, I have been told more than once recently that most NT scholars accept that something remarkable must have happened, even if they are not quite prepared (professionally) to assert, with the creed, that 'on the third day, he rose from the dead'.

This gets us back, however, to Schwöbel's account of the systematic nature of theological study, to Gunton's account of the universal claims of theology, and to Webster's groping towards (what would later be called) the theological reading of Scripture. In a properly systematic theology, the possibility of miracles is a theological question, depending on an account of how the triune God has ordered creation. This is not, of course, to assert the possibility of miracles, but it is to locate the question properly, which scholars from Reimarus to Wiles failed to do. I have noted already that philosophers and NT scholars were a regular part of the conversation at the RIST; I think for people like (e.g.) Paul Helm and Francis Watson this re-ordering, this properly theological arrangement of hierarchies of knowledge, was attractive.

What was happening at King's back in the day? It was an attempt to address the seemingly-unavoidable theological problems of the 1960s by being more, not less, faithful to the gospel. In this it involved a complicated relationship with the Christian tradition that I have indicated that I think was misplaced. It was systematic, and because of that consciously interdisciplinary—but insistent on ordering the disciplines theologically. It was exciting—and if we often over-reached, which (in my judgement) we did, we overreached in the spirit of Luther's dictum that, knowing the gospel, we might sin boldly, and repent more boldly still.

### **Conclusion: The Influence of RIST on British Baptist Life**

This programme influenced Baptist life, particularly in its self-consciously evangelical expressions, through Spurgeon's; through the London Bible College/London School of

Theology; and through the influence of the individuals named above. It was certainly not the only influence, and I have not here attempted to evaluate its relative significance. Goodliff's story is of a wrestling between this 'missional stream' and a more 'ecumenical stream', seeking a specifically theological renewal after the model provided by Champion's account of the influence of Andrew Fuller. I have traced the involvement of several of the leaders of Goodliff's 'missional stream' in the RIST. I have also noted some of the themes in the way Gunton, at least, taught them (should I say 'us?') to do theology; some of these might appear to resonate—at least; I make no speculations about causality in any direction here—with aspects of that missional stream. These include, for example, a concern for the local congregation; an impatience with certain forms of liberalism that can appear as a lack of theological rigour. There is not space here to explore how this played out in Baptist life, but the reflections above might suggest that the 'missional stream' was not less theological, but just differently theological, to the other, for example. On any evaluation, however, the story of the RIST at KCL is a part of the recent story of British Baptist theology.<sup>47</sup>

#### **Note on Contributor**

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<sup>47</sup> This paper began as a seminar paper, introducing the 2022 Martinmas Semester Theology Seminar at the University of St Andrews, which is focused on 'the theological turn at King's' through readings of the various RIST publications. In revising it for publication, I have not attempted to hide the degree of personal reminiscence involved: not only was I at King's, but Gunton, Schwöbel, and Webster were each senior colleagues at various points in my career. I am grateful to colleagues and students for their engagement with the paper in the seminar, and to Andy Goodliff for helpful editorial comments in the process of revision.

*Holy Trinity* (Paternoster, 2012) and *Baptist Theology* (T & T Clark, 2012).