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ONE ETERNAL GOD: FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

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1. BEGINNING IN WORSHIP

If we are going to make sense of the doctrine of the Trinity, we need to begin—and end—in worship. $^{\rm 1}$

We begin with Israel's worship, and the particular form of Israel's monotheism. You will know of the variant translations of the *Shema*, the famous confession of faith from Deuteronomy 6:4, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one God' or 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone'.² We do not need to decide between these translations: the Hebrew is ambiguous, and the evidence from ancient versions seems to suggest a gradual shift in understanding; the very fact of ambiguity is enough to make the point.³ Ancient Israel, at least in its Scriptures, was actually rather uninterested in counting deities. We certainly do find powerful assertions that the Lord alone is God, and that the 'gods' of the nations are idols, but we also find—sometimes in contiguous chapters—language about the Lord being 'enthroned above all other gods', which at least implies their real existence.⁴

Back to the Shema: the commitment demanded here appears to be fragile and in need of constant reinforcement: 'write these commands on the frames of your doors; bind them to your foreheads...'. If what is being demanded is a philosophical conception that the number of deities who exist is an integer between zero and two, then this seems bizarre: the point

This paper was prepared for the SETS 2013 annual conference, and is largely a summary of themes I treat in more detail in my *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

On this, and the broader claim that 'monolatry' is a better category than 'monotheism', see Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of 'Monotheism'* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

For a succinct statement of the issues for translation and a pointer to further discussion, see R.W.L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 9-10.

So, e.g., Psalm 96:5 'All the gods of the nations are but idols', and Psalm 97:7 'All gods bow down before [YHWH]'

may be believed or doubted, but, once believed, it is not a fragile or easily-lost confession.

For reasons like this, it seems appropriate to suggest that Israel's 'monotheism' is more properly classed as 'monolatry': it does not actually matter very much whether other deities exist, Israel's worship and loyalty is to be offered to the Lord alone. We know, as they knew, that such loyalty is far more fragile than a philosophical position. There is a constant temptation to idolatry, and it is there whether the idol is a real and powerful being, or something we have carved out of a piece of firewood. Israel is to worship, adore, serve, and seek help from one God alone, the Lord.⁵

When we come to the New Testament, worship is again—unsurprisingly given this construction—the crucial concept. Hebrews 1 does give us a theological account of the Son's superiority to the angels, but the really decisive point is that the Son is properly worshipped (Rev. 1:17-18; John 20:28), whereas angels and apostles refuse worship (Rev. 19:10; Acts 14:14-15), protesting that worship should be reserved for God alone. Larry Hurtado's compelling defence of the universal early ascription of deity to Jesus in the proto-Christian movement turns largely on this fact of worship.⁶

The same point is there in the earliest extra-Biblical records we have of the Christian church: Jesus is worshipped. Consider the famous letter of Pliny the Younger to Trajan, where he recounts what he has discovered of the Christians: 'They asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god...' Worship of Jesus is the distinctive mark of Christianity.

Somehow, right at the beginning of the church, the exclusive loyalty and worship demanded by God alone in the Old Testament is assumed to be upheld and not violated by worship offered to Jesus. For all the diversity we can discover in early Christian communities—and it is great—on this point they are remarkably united. And this is present and fullyformed from the beginning, or at least from as early as we can know: the church knows from its birth, it seems, that offering worship to Jesus is not incompatible with exclusive loyalty to God. At the risk of oversimplifying, the church always knew how to speak to God; it took four centuries or so

 $^{^{5}}$ This is essentially the argument of MacDonald's monograph, cited in note 2.

⁶ Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁷ Book X, Letter 96; *The Letters of Pliny the Younger*, trans. and intro. by Betty Radice (London: Penguin Books, 1963; rpt 2003), p. 294.

to work out how to speak *about* God in ways that were compatible with its speaking to God.

So, the doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to speak about the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit that makes sense of the church's worship. Basil of Caesarea somewhere makes an argument that runs, roughly, 'If the Spirit were not truly God, those who worship the Spirit would be idolators; in my church we worship the Spirit; I am not an idolator; therefore the Spirit must be truly God.' Thus stated, it is amusing, but spread wide over the history of the Christian church, this describes fairly accurately the process of development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

2. THE BIBLE

The description above might be heard by a Reformed or Evangelical polemicist as being uncomfortably Catholic, in the sense that it relies on tradition—the liturgical practices of the church—far more than on an appeal to Scripture. The church fathers can often look uncomfortably Catholic, of course, but let me turn to the question, 'is the doctrine of the Trinity biblical?'

Several things need to be said. First, worship which is exclusively loyal to the Lord alone, and which is able to include the Son and the Spirit in that exclusive loyalty, is biblical, as I have indicated in passing. Second, the crucial fourth-century debates which settled the doctrine of the Trinity were almost entirely exegetical; the Fathers debated over the interpretations of texts. One of the reasons, indeed, it is so hard for us to understand some of the Patristic writings—for example, Augustine's *De Trinitate*—is that much of the first half of that book is a series of interventions in long-running exegetical debates with which we are not familiar.

That said, and famously, the crucial terms used in the orthodox formulations of the doctrine are not biblical terms, and the nature of the fourth-century exegetical debates is worthy of examination. Fairly quickly as the debate developed, each side had its set of proof-texts which seemed to support its view; after that, the major developments in debate tended to come as someone stepped back from the texts a little, and offered a piece of theological conceptuality that allowed some texts to be read in a different way. To take an easy example, the pro-Nicene theologians fairly quickly developed what we might call a 'two state hermeneutic'. Their description tended to draw on the language of Philippians 2 to insist that some texts spoke of the Son in the form of God, whilst others spoke of him in the form a servant. This allowed the most obviously apparently-subordinationist texts to be read without compromising the equality of

Father and Son. Jesus indeed said 'The Father is greater than I,' but he said this 'in the form of a servant'.8

What we call 'the doctrine of the Trinity' is, I suggest, a formal set of conceptualities developed like this, a set of conceptualities which finally allowed every text to be read adequately. As such, it is not a 'biblical doctrine' in the sense of being the result of exegesis, rather it is a set of things that need to be believed if we are to be able to hold to the truth of every text of Scripture. Or, rather—and here I display my less-than-Catholic sensibilities—the ecumenical doctrine of the Trinity is *one example of* a set of things that need to be believed if we are to be able to hold to the truth of every text of Scripture. Could an equally effective set of conceptualities based, not on late-antique Greek categories, but on Vedic or Hegelian or Xhosa categories be developed? I suppose it could, but it might well take four centuries of extensive argument by brilliant minds to do adequately, which makes holding on to the late-antique Greek form look attractive to me.

(This supposes that the fourth-century settlement was in fact adequate. This is something I do suppose, not because it must be because of the indefectibility of the church, but because it seems to have been found adequate by a very wide set of believers in different times and cultures and because I think that the arguments for their inadequacy can generally be shown fairly easily to be based on misunderstandings.)

3. THE DOCTRINE

In a recent book, I attempted to sum up the doctrine of the Trinity as it was developed in the patristic period under seven heads;¹⁰ I will repeat these heads here, and offer some exposition of each in order to give you an account of the doctrine as I understand it:

1. The divine nature is simple, incomposite, and ineffable. It is also unrepeatable, and so, in crude and inexact terms, 'one'.

This exegetical move was fairly common amongst pro-Nicene theologians, but for a series of examples of its use see Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, IX, conveniently available in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, ed. by P. Schaff and H. Wace (1890; rpt. Edinburgh & Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), vol. 9, pp. 155-81.

Drawing here on an argument for the authority of tradition I develop in my Listening to the Past: On the Place of Tradition in Theology (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), pp. 156-64.

Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 146.

- 2. Language referring to the divine nature is always inexact and trophic; nonetheless, if formulated with much care and more prayer, it might adequately, if not fully, refer.
- 3. There are three divine hypostases that are instantiations of the divine nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- 4. The three divine hypostases exist really, eternally, and necessarily, and there is nothing divine that exists beyond or outside their existence.
- 5. The three divine hypostases are distinguished by eternal relations of origin—begetting and proceeding—and not otherwise.
- 6. All that is spoken of God, with the single and very limited exception of that language which refers to the relations of origin of the three hypostases, is spoken of the one life the three share, and so is indivisibly spoken of all three.
- 7. The relationships of origin express/establish relational distinctions between the three existent hypostases; no other distinctions are permissible.

I will examine these one by one.

3.1 The divine nature is simple, incomposite, and ineffable. It is also unrepeatable, and so, in crude and inexact terms, 'one'. We need, of course, to distinguish ousia and hypostasis. Here we deal with ousia, which I have translated 'nature' in the heading. Why assert that the divine nature is incomposite? There is an old bit of Greek logic that runs, roughly, anything composite must have been composed by an agent, so to describe God as incomposite is merely to insist that God was not made by any more basic agent.

If God is incomposite, however, God is necessarily simple—the two words are not quite synonyms, but they are certainly mutually entailed. There is no complexity in the divine nature; God is not separable into this bit and that bit. This is not primarily a claim about Father, Son, and Spirit—we will get there—but a claim about God's life. In classical doctrine, we are talking about divine perfections: our narration of the divine life is inevitably partial and multiple: we say God is loving, just, merciful, omnipotent, and so on; but we need to recognise that such descriptions are ours, and do not relate to any divisions in God's life. The divine mercy

is strictly identical with the divine justice; that we cannot narrate how this makes sense is a limitation of our language, not a problem for God's existence.

Repeatedly, the classical concern here was a desire to avoid putting God into any class. Again, the logic is easily described: if God is one example of a class of things—say, one merciful thing amongst many other merciful things—then the class as a whole is larger than God, and so God is not the most ultimate being.

Can we say God is 'one'? This, also, is an attribute of God, and so subject to the same logical limitations. The divine nature is necessarily beyond number; number is just another human classification. We can, however, say that the divine nature is unrepeatable—in this sense, to say 'God is one' makes sense.

3.2 Language referring to the divine nature is always inexact and trophic; nonetheless, if formulated with much care and more prayer, it might adequately, if not fully, refer. I have already begun to stray into this area. When we say 'God is love' we are not claiming a strict logical identity. The reason for this is rather obvious, and worked out with more patience than it deserves by, say, Thomas Aquinas, 11 although this has not stopped various modern writers who seem not to have read Thomas making the basic error. If such claims were strict logical identity claims, then saying 'God is love,' and 'God is eternal' would lead easily to the conclusion that 'love is eternity' which seems nonsensical. So we have to assert that our language about the divine nature is sufficiently loose—Thomas used the term 'analogical'—that it does not require or even permit such identity-relations.

This point was at the very heart of the fourth-century doctrinal development. Eunomius had advanced an argument that ran along these lines: to be God is necessarily to be unoriginate; the Father is unoriginate, but the Son has his origin in the Father. Therefore the Father is truly God, whereas the Son is not. This was combined with a distinctively platonic theory of language in which words corresponded to things in a one-to-

Classically in Summa Theologiæ, 1a q. 13.

Eunomius's extant works are collected, together with an excellent introduction to his thought, in R.P. Vaggione, *Eunomius: The Extant Works* (Oxford: Clarendon: 1987); this argument is developed most clearly in *Liber Apologeticus*, §7.

one mapping.¹³ 'Unoriginateness' was the proper name, the true definition, of the divine *ousia*.¹⁴

The Cappadocian achievement, properly read, is nothing to do with redefining ontology in personal terms; rather, it is the development of a theory of language which allows this problem concerning the divine names to be solved. The negative point was easy: as Gregory of Nyssa pointed out, Eunomius said the divine nature was simple, as well as saying it was unoriginate; on his own doctrine, either there are two divine natures, or his theory of language must be wrong.¹⁵

What of the positive, however? Basil argues that our words only inexactly refer to the divine; our language about God is an example of epinoia, a Greek word meaning something like 'mental construction'. Eunomius mocks this—is Basil saying that his own theology is mere imagination? Eunomius will cheerfully agree to that! Basil's point, however, is subtle and curiously modern: there is, necessarily, a gap between what we can say about a thing and what it is *in se*; in the case of the ineffable divine nature, this gap is yawning; our language has only very weak purchase. In particular, we can only speak of the divine nature by piling up multiple inexact terms: it is simple, ineffable, eternal, unoriginate,.... But if the divine nature is simple—something all agreed on—then it is not, in principle, divisible into these various different attributes. Eunomius's strict logical formulations are inadequate because they presume too much about the ability of our language to refer to God; he was right to assert that there is one single perfect divine life, but wrong to think he could name it exhaustively, and reason on the basis of the name he had given. 16

3.3 There are three divine hypostases that are instantiations of the divine nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We turn now from the unrepeatable divine ousia to the divine hypostases. The relation of hypostasis

On this, see Jean Daniélou, 'Eunome l'Arien et l'exégèse néo-platonicienne du Cratyle', Revue des Études Grecques 69 (1956), pp. 412-32; and Lenka Karfíková, 'Der Ursprung der Sprache nach Eunomius und Gregor vor dem Hintergrund der antiken Sprachtheorien (CE II 387-444; 543-553)', in Gregory of Nyssa Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies, ed. by L. Karfíková, S. Douglass, and J. Zachhuber (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 279-305.

¹⁴ Lib. Apol., §§23-4.

Gregory of Nyssa, Contra Eunomium 1; see W. Jaeger (ed.), Contra Euonium Libri (Leiden: Brill, 1960), p. 233.

Mark DelCogliano, Basil of Caesarea's Anti-Eunomian Theology of Names: Christian Theology and Late-Antique Philosophy in the Fourth Century Trinitarian Controversy (Leiden: Brill, 2010) discusses this point helpfully.

to *ousia* is, as Basil famously put it, the relation of the particular to the common. More precisely, it is the relation of the existence of a thing to its essence, its 'whatness'. The simple life of God exists three times over.

Two comments need to be made here: first, why three? The primary answer must be, because that is what we find in the New Testament: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each properly named to be God, and no other thing is. The history of the doctrine of the Trinity is full of attempts to make this something more than this, a necessary logical proposition. So Richard of St Victor argues that there is one divine person who originates but is not originated—the Father; one who both originates and is originated—the Son; and one who is originated but does not originate—the Holy Spirit, and that there is completeness here. If I see no great harm in such speculations, but nor do I find them particularly convincing: I cannot help feeling that if Scripture had spoken to us of four divine persons, we would have found it just as easy to discover reasons why it must have been four.

Second, my definition above echoes (deliberately) a common scholastic slogan. To define hypostasis as existence, and *ousia* as essence, might seem to stand in opposition to the maxim that God's essence is his existence—a medieval definition of the crucial idea of divine simplicity. In fact, however, this is almost precisely the point of the slogan: God's existence is his eternal life as Father, Son, and Spirit—and this is, precisely, his essence. The eternal, simple, ineffable life of God is, just, being Father, Son, and Spirit. The best definition we can give of God's eternal being is, in fact, 'Trinity'.

3.4 The three divine hypostases exist really, eternally, and necessarily, and there is nothing divine that exists beyond or outside their existence. This is an elaboration and consequence of the previous point. If God's essence, his ousia, is his triune life, then the existence of the three hypostases is necessary and eternal: this is what it is to be God. And this—being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is all that it is to be God. There is no residue, no divine nature behind the three persons. The eternal life of the three persons just is the divine nature.

In so saying, of course, we hit the crucial problem that fourth-century trinitarianism addressed: can we really say this sort of divine essence is simple and incomposite? It gives every appearance of being made up of three parts, after all. (This, of course, is a heavily schematised account of the fourth-century question, which was never phrased in such terms,

De Trintate Bk. III.

but the various debates around modalism and subordinationism turn on essentially this point.)

Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and the others never doubted divine simplicity—indeed, from their time down to the eighteenth century pretty much everyone assumed that the doctrine of the Trinity entailed simplicity—if you believed in simplicity, you were a trinitarian; if you didn't you weren't—but they still had to explain the point. This takes us to the next point of my summary, and the concept they introduced of 'relation'.

- The three divine hypostases are distinguished by eternal relations 3.5 of origin - begetting and proceeding - and not otherwise. The term 'relation' is introduced by the Cappadocian Fathers and by Augustine in exactly the same way, and for exactly the same reason.¹⁸ They are faced with a philosophical dilemma based around the old Aristotelian categories of substance and accident. If the Son is substantially God, then, either, Father and Son are the same thing—modalism, one way or another—or the divine nature is divided and there are two gods. If the Son is only accidentally God, then divine simplicity is compromised, because everyone agrees that simplicity entails possession of no accidental properties. So how do we speak of Father and Son in a simple divine nature? The answer, Geek and Latin, is to invoke a third term—not substance, not accident, but relation. (I assume that Augustine knew of the prior Cappadocian use, either directly or mediately, and was consciously borrowing from them, but the genealogy is not important here.) Essentially, we are offered a philosophical claim: the category of relation establishes a real distinction in a substance that is not accidental, and that does not damage that substance's simplicity.
- 3.6 All that is spoken of God, with the single and very limited exception of that language which refers to the relations of origin of the three hypostases, is spoken of the one life the three share, and so is indivisibly spoken of all three. Because God's essence is his existence, all language that refers to God's life necessarily refers to Father, Son, and Spirit together as well as severally. As the so-called Athanasian Creed has it, 'the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Spirit is eternal, yet there are not three that are eternal, but one who is eternal.' This is, as can be seen, a necessary consequence of the logic we have been developing thus far. God's life is simple; and God's life is to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ I argue this at length in an essay in Jason S. Sexton (ed.), *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014, *forthcoming*).

The most profound, and most extensive, working out of this logic in contemporary theology is Barth's treatment of the divine perfections in *Church Dogmatics* II/1. Barth locates all the perfections under the rubric of God as 'the One who loves in freedom' (pp. 322-677), but this formula itself has been carefully developed as a Trinitarian formula. Barth makes this absolutely clear at the very beginning of §29: '[s]ince God is Father, Son and Holy Ghost, i.e., loves in freedom, every perfection exists essentially in Him.'¹⁹ The point, however, has been carefully developed through the sections that lead up to the confession of God as 'the One who loves in freedom'. In developing the account of God as the One who loves, Barth repeatedly returns to the love shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as his primary determinant of what this means (whilst carefully guarding against any suggestion of a 'social' doctrine of the Trinity');²⁰ similarly, if less pervasively, the account of the divine freedom is presented as an outworking of the doctrine of the Trinity.²¹

It is important to stress at this point that Barth's insistence—rightly—is not that the divine love and freedom (and all the perfections which he will group under each) are shaped in Trinitarian ways, but that the statements 'God loves,' 'God is free,' and 'God loves in freedom' are each to be read as specifications of the claim 'God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'. The same is true of every divine perfection: inasmuch as words like 'goodness,' 'eternity,' omnipresence,' and the like work (in a limited and analogical way) to describe the perfect life of God, their referent is the divine life, which is the shared existence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3.7 The relationships of origin express/establish relational distinctions between the three existent hypostases; no other distinctions are permissible. There are two relations of origin in the eternal life of God: the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father

¹⁹ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, 4 vols in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), II/1, p. 323 (hereafter CD); the German is 'Indem Gott der Vater, der Sohn und der Heilige Geist ist und das heißt: liebt in der Freiheit, ist ihm jede Vollkommenheit wesentlich zu eigen' (Kirchliche Dogmatik, II/1 p. 363).

See CD II/1, pp. 272-97; with particular summary passages on p. 279 and p. 297. The rejection of (what we would now call) social Trinitarianism is on pp. 287-97, leading to the comment 'Being in Himself Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, God is in Himself the One who lives and loves...' (p. 297).

See CD II/1, pp. 297-321, particularly the small-print section on p. 317, beginning: '[w]e have seen that freedom of God, as His freedom in Himself, His primary absoluteness, has its truth and reality in the inner Trinitarian life of the Father with the Son by the Holy Spirit.'

(and the Son? The point is not very important in Trinitarian terms, although I think that probably dual procession makes more sense once the question is asked). ²² These relations are eternal²³ and are the content of God's life, insofar as we can speak that phrase with any meaning at all. The Father is eternally begetting the Son; the Father is (or the Father and the Son together are) eternally spirating the Spirit. That, according to doctrine, is what it is to be the God of the gospel.

4. FNDING IN WORSHIP

What use is the doctrine of the Trinity? Well, first why does it need to be of any use? It is an account—a careful and spare account, paying as much or more attention to what cannot adequately be said as to what might, hesitantly, be said. To know God is our highest end, and it is of the essence of highest ends that they have no utility beyond their own existence. ²⁴ To know God, that is to say, is not a step along a road to somewhere else, but our final destination; and so the doctrine of the Trinity is not to be found useful or generative for ethics.

We might push this a little further, however: the knowledge of God, specifically the 'beatific vision,' the sight of God, is the final end of humanity in medieval tradition, but medieval tradition is not beyond criticism; in particular, speaking of vision or knowledge as our final end might be considered a little passive. Now, this does not work as a criticism of sophisticated medieval accounts, but my purpose is not to defend them, but to reflect on the Trinity. Suppose we insist instead that our final end is active, worship? Does the doctrine of the Trinity have a use here?

²² See Holmes, *The Holy Trinity*, pp. 147-64, esp. pp. 163-4.

There has been a recent fashion in certain traditions of evangelicalism to deny the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son, on the grounds that it is not explicitly affirmed in Scripture. This seems a very odd position: the generation of the Son from the Father, and the eternity of the divine life, are both clearly affirmed in Scripture, and eternal generation is a very straightforward deduction from those two points. I understand that the denial of eternal generation is in some way bound up with an attempt to read 'eternal functional subordination' into the Trinity, and so to find a defence in theology proper for a particular vision of gender roles in the church, the family, and the world; whatever the merits of that ethical position, this line of defence must fail, as a moment attempting to fit 'eternal functional subordination' with the (central) doctrine of the inseparability of divine operations will demonstrate.

The point should be clear enough, but see the extensive analysis in Jonathan Edwards, *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God created the World* (in Jonathan Edwards, (ed. Paul Ramsey) *Works* vol. 8, *Ethical Writings* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989); see on this pp. 405-15.

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To answer this, we might consider Lindbeck's account of what doctrine does. ²⁵ The basic function of doctrine, he argues, is to regulate Christian speech: on such an account, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us how to speak well when we speak of God (and indeed when we speak to God, notwithstanding the comments with which I began; Christian liturgical language is not indefectible). The doctrine as outlined above presents rules for speech which, if followed, will mean our doctrinal formulations, our instruction, and our worship and petition will not be utterly inadequate of the God we profess to name, invoke, teach about, or praise.

Our end is to worship. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us how to speak adequately as we worship. That is its highest use, and there can, for us, be none higher.

George Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (London: SPCK, 1984).