

THE IDEAL OF DEIFICATION IN 17TH CENTURY ENGLAND: THE WHICHCOTE-TUCKNEY DEBATE*

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to offer a brief account of the epistolary exchange between two seventeenth century Cambridge theologians, the latitudinarian Benjamin Whichcote and the Puritan Anthony Tuckney, focusing on their respective soteriological views. More specifically, I am concerned with highlighting how each construed man's reconciliation with God in terms of deification or participation in the divine nature. Considering this objective, the main issues I will touch upon are: the importance accorded by each of the two divines to Christ as both mediator and internal principle of grace; the emphasis placed on man's role in the process of salvation; and the function of faith and reason in this process.*

Keywords: Christ, deification, faith, participation, reason

The epistolary exchange that occurred at the middle of the seventeenth century between two Cambridge divines, the latitudinarian Benjamin Whichcote and the Puritan Anthony Tuckney¹, provides a polemical context for the discussion of the ideal of deification. As has been observed, among the main issues addressed in this correspondence is also the topic of the reconciliation between God and man². In what

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¹ For discussions of this exchange see: John Tulloch, *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in The Seventeenth Century*, London, William Blackwood and Sons, 1872, II, pp. 49-51; F. J. Powicke, *The Cambridge Platonists*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons, 1926, pp. 54-56; W. C. De Pauley, *The Candle of the Lord: Studies in the Cambridge Platonists*, London, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; New York, The Macmillan Co., 1937, pp. 28-30; James Deotis Roberts, *From Puritanism to Platonism in Seventeenth Century England*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1968, pp. 49-65; for the issue of deification in Benjamin Whichcote see: Michael B. Gill, *The Religious Rationalism of Benjamin Whichcote*, “Journal of the History of Philosophy”, Vol. 37, No 2, April 1999, pp. 271-300; Edmund Newey, *The Form of Reason: Participation in the Work of Richard Hooker, Benjamin Whichcote, Ralph Cudworth and Jeremy Taylor*, “Modern Theology”, 18:1, January 2002, pp. 1-26.

² James Deotis Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

follows I shall focus on the two views concerning this theological trope with the aim of clarifying some of the peculiarities proper to each stance.

In his first letter to Benjamin Whichcote, Anthony Tuckney imputes to the former the notion that the basis for God's reconciliation is attributable to us and thus does not derive from God's free grace. In Tuckney's appraisal this is something contrary to one of the basic truths found in the Gospel³. In his reply, Whichcote proposes a Christological emphasis regarding salvation in a double sense – as Christ intercedes for us with the Father and as he affects us internally as a principle of grace: "Christ doth not save us; by onely doing for us, *without* us: yea, we come at that, which Christ hath done for us, with God; by what he doth for us, *within* us"⁴. According to Whichcote Scripture warrants a double notion of Christ:

1. to be felt in us, as the new man; in contradiction to the old man: as a divine nature; in contra-distinction to the degenerate and apostate nature: and as a principle of heavenly life; contrary to the life of sin, and spirit of the world: 2. To be beleaved-on by us, as a sacrifice for the expiation and atonement of sin; as an advocate and meanes of reconciliation between God and Man⁵.

These two features of Christ are linked and occur together. Also, given these considerations, repentance is antecedent to forgiveness of sins. Whichcote is adamant that for reconciliation between God and man to occur it is necessary for man to become God-like. This, in Whichcote's appraisal, is due to the fact that God is "perfectly under the power of goodnesse"⁶ and as such the creature "must yeelede, be subdued to the rules of goodnesse, receive stamps and impressions from God; and God can not be farther pleased, than goodnesse takes place"⁷. Considering that goodness is most peculiar to God's nature and that God cannot act against his nature, to be reconciled to the Deity presupposes that man acquire a nature that is good and thus God-like. For man to become acceptable to God, Christ's propitiatory sacrifice by itself is insufficient to facilitate this and an internal transformation is also requisite. In line with this Christological framework, Whichcote also rejects a separation between justification and sanctification in the order of salvation⁸. Sinners are justified by God

³ Anthony Tuckney, Benjamin Whichcote, *Eight Letters of Dr. Antony Tuckney, and Benjamin Whichcote*, in Benjamin Whichcote, *Moral and Religious Aphorisms*, (ed. Samuel Salter), London, 1753, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

only after grace commences its operation in them⁹. Justification must be accompanied by sanctification for a true reconciliatory process to take place. The two articulations of the order of salvation, the one extrinsic, the other intrinsic, must go hand in hand just as Christ's sacrificial work is inseparable from his affordance of grace. This outlook also engenders a synergistic understanding of salvation. Thus, Whichcote underlines the fact that repentance "is truly our acte, *sub Deo*"¹⁰. He further adds: "God is not properlie said to repente in us, but to work repentence in us: Wee are truly and properlie said to repent, *sub assistentia, motu, ductu, divini spiritus*; or as in composition with God's grace"¹¹. Whichcote seems to be concerned to preserve the role of human initiative in the process of salvation while at the same time asserting a strong participatory metaphysics between creator and creature. In this respect he writes:

In the sense of my minde, I was verie farre from taking from God; to give to myselfe: God is reallie all in all to mee; I hold of Him, derive from Him, live by Him, enjoy my self under Him, hope in Him, expect from Him: there is nothing more written in my heart, than the sense of my dependencie upon Him: there is nothing, that I am more free to acknowledge; than His influence, operation and presence¹².

Another important facet of Benjamin Whichcote's soteriological outlook is grounded in the symmetry between human and divine reason. According to the latitudinarian divine, though divine reason is infinite, reason in the case of God and man share the same basic nature¹³. Whichcote states: "A man can not think againste the reason of his mind: that of necessitie must be satisfied"¹⁴. This assumption has important consequences for the relationship between human reason and revelation. Whichcote sees no tension or antagonism between faith and reason but rather an agreement between the two. Thus, for one who is cognizant of his own condition as well as aware of God's goodness the matter of the main articles of faith, such as "expiation, remission of sinnes" is "rather a matter expected, as becoming God, Godlike; than eyther contrarie to reason, or unworthie of God"¹⁵. The proper usage of the understanding together with the fact of God being the source of goodness would lead one to the realization that God would either remit sin in the case of those who

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 57.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹³ Michael B. Gill, *op. cit.*, p. 274.

¹⁴ Anthony Tuckney, Benjamin Whichcote, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 102.

reform or provide a course for the attainment of forgiveness and reconciliation¹⁶. Furthermore, according to Whichcote, though God does not consult with the creature but with his wisdom and goodness in designing the remedy for our lapsed condition, yett God proposeth, with respect to our understandings; viz. what they can receive, what they are able to beare. And indeed, the matter which hee doth propose, viz. expiation of sinne, in the blood of Christ; and our renovation by Him, into his divine spirit; are things gratefull to man's mind: and, in the sense before express'd, as it were, expected¹⁷.

Reason or "the candle of the Lord"¹⁸ should be valued as "itt is a principle, which speakes much of God in the worlde; and is of great pregnancie: and, under the superintendencie of God's spirit, is of great sufficiencie and efficiencie"¹⁹. To disparage this faculty would bring injury to God's honor as creator and belittle the restoration of creation brought about by Christ²⁰. When Whichcote urges the use and advancement of reason this is within a Christological frame, as this is achieved "by and under Christ"²¹. Whichcote's positive appraisal of human nature as rational is thus balanced by a strong emphasis on the source of mankind's salvation and inner restoration: "I attribute to the creature, upon itt's own accounte, nothing but unworthiness inabilitie and insufficiencie: and look-at Christ, as the onlie ground of acceptance; and his spirit, as the onlie principle of enablement power and sufficiencie"²².

I now turn to Anthony Tuckney's considerations touching on reconciliation with God as well as the central role he grants to faith. The Puritan divine tends to place great emphasis on the role of divine assistance in man's restoration from a sinful state while at the same time and in line with this emphasis to downplay the capacity of human reason by itself to discern in matters pertaining to revelation. Faith is instead accorded a fundamental importance in approaching the content of Scripture.

Tuckney seems to be in agreement with Whichcote on the issue of the connection between justification and sanctification. Considering that "for the order of nature" faith precedes the outcome of justification, faith is inseparable from restoration. Thus, according to Tuckney, "sanctification, that is, first sanctification or regeneration or

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 104-105.

¹⁸ For this issue in Whichcote see: Robert A. Greene, *Whichcote, the Candle of the Lord, and Synderesis*, "Journal of the History of Ideas", Vol. 52, No. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1991, pp. 617-644.

¹⁹ Anthony Tuckney, Benjamin Whichcote, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 112-113.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 127.

²² *Ibidem*.

vocation, is in nature before justification”²³. When God justifies a person he also sanctifies him or her. Tuckney is careful to emphasize God’s priority in the process of reconciliation both in terms of purpose and execution:

God, not onlie in his eternall election had before purposed, and by the death of his Son after purchased, our reconciliation: but, even in the execution of that purpose, and application of that purchase, Hee is before us; and is setting-out first that happie meeting of our fulle reconciliation²⁴.

The point Tuckney wishes to make is that the possibility for man’s restoration to an amiable relationship with God is first and foremost attributable to the designs and performance of the Deity and has nothing to do with the creature’s initiative. This stance entails a differentiation from Benjamin Whichcote’s position considering that, as has been noted, the latitudinarian divine tends to favor man’s natural faculty of reason for the overcoming of sin²⁵.

The fact that God has the prerogative in the process of salvation means that before justification, that is the absolution of sin, takes place, a renovation occurs which prompts an act of faith. It is this initial moment in which “God moves first” that justifies the sinner: “so farre as Justification consists in pardon of sinne, itt is verie considerable; whether *immediate antecedenter* itt hath for it’s object a sinner, as a sinner, under the guilt and in the state of sinne; though it do not so leave him: and so God properlie justifie the ungodlie”²⁶. Tuckney also adds that it is through faith that the image of God in man is restored both in terms of understanding and righteousness. This is also the ground for acquiring a belief in that which is beyond the ambit of reason. This is a clear indication of the fact that for Tuckney reason and revelation are not as seamlessly reconcilable as for Whichcote. Reason, even as it is regenerated, simply cannot accede to certain truths that are to be believed. Tuckney writes: “Where Faith is, there is renewall of God’s image; in knowledge, as well as holiness and righteousness: and there *a liberum arbitrium ad bonum spirituale* is in parte renewed, as well as a *recta ratio*; and a beleeve of that, to which reason cannot reach”²⁷.

Tuckney provides additional nuances to his understanding of the soteriological role of faith in his sermons on 2 Peter 1: 4. Here, among the causes listed as conducive to a participation in the divine nature, he also mentions “the *knowledge*, or acknowledgment of Jesus Christ” as being the instrumental cause²⁸. This is faith in the promises made by Christ, or, more precisely “the benefits of *things promised* rather

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁵ Edmund Newey, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

²⁶ Anthony Tuckney, Benjamin Whichcote, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 94.

than *promises*.” Relative to the promises, these function as “moral causes” that lead one to “Divine Purity.” Regarding the things promised, which are “all *those things which pertain to life and godliness*” – “faith, repentance, holiness, grace, glory,” these constitute “proper and Physical causes” that “do formally make us *partakers of the Divine Nature*”²⁹. However, this is no autonomous achievement on the part of the believer as it requires an “immediate working cause” that communicates “an answerable *Divine nature*” to those who are effectually called³⁰. It is beyond the capacity of human nature, regardless of its effort, to reach the state of faith and partake of God’s nature. Tuckney clearly states that: “it’s only a *Divine Power* that can produce this *Divine Nature*, and *precious faith* in Christ, which alone instates the Christian believer in this *most precious promise*, or promised mercy of being *made partaker* of it”³¹.

The importance of faith is further stressed by how Tuckney conceives of the inextricable link between Christ and his promises. In exercising faith in what Christ has promised we thereby also come to an internalization of the Redeemer and an inner transformation. This is because: “Christ is wrapt up in those promises, who as in his Incarnation was made partaker of our *nature*, so by him and his grace alone we are made *partakers* of his”³². Belief in what Christ has pledged to us reveals Him in an intimate manner and opens the way to our being restored in His image. The following passage sums up Tuckney’s views on this matter:

And faith is the eye and hand which seeth and taketh hold of Christ in the promises, and so by *beholding* him in that *glass*, as *intellectus fit idem cum objecto*, we come to *be changed* (as we heard) into the same *image from glory to glory*. There is an image of the thing seen in the eye that looks on it, and we by faith wistly eying of Christ have his image so imprinted on us, that we prove no longer like our selves³³.

As we have seen in both Benjamin Whichcote and Anthony Tuckney there is a strong Christological emphasis when dealing with the issue of mankind’s salvation. They do however diverge when it comes to the aspect of the extent of man’s involvement in the process by which he is deified and thus reconciled to God. Whichcote is more concerned with highlighting the continuity between reason and

²⁸ Anthony Tuckney, *Forty Sermons upon Several Occasions* (ed. Jonathan Tuckney), London, 1676, p. 224.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 223-224.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 224.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 257.

³³ *Ibidem*.

revelation in his soteriology while Tuckney insists on the centrality of faith as above understanding for being made partakers of the divine nature.