

[MJTM 21 (2019–2020)]

BOOK REVIEW

Rowan Williams. *Christ the Heart of Creation*. New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018. xvi + 279 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-4729-4554-9. \$35.00.

When in Sunday service, it is not infrequent to hear a passage from the Gospels read where Jesus, for instance, gets sleepy, is hungry, does not know the future, etc.—whatever the passage is—to which the preacher wisely qualifies, “Remember folks, this was only his humanity there, not his divinity.” If this is true, the listener, if they bother to think about what is said (which perhaps is to say too much of what the average mind is capable of before lunch on a Sunday morning) may have the impression that much of Jesus’ life does not communicate divinity, or worse, that there are large segments of the human life in which God is not present: birth, infancy, learning, sleeping, sex, desire, suffering, and death. These are no small omissions.

Perhaps the conclusion goes further and deduces that if God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, and whatever other “omni” one is raised with, then this God is not in Jesus at all. The very notion, as in much liberal theology, that Jesus is God incarnate smacks of dogmatism and incoherence. Here, fundamentalism and liberalism are merely, as in many other things, two sides of the same ugly coin.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, has offered a redoubtable exposition of the incarnation in his book *Christ the Heart of Creation*. The thesis of the book is that Jesus is “the one on whom all the patterns of finite existence converge to find their meaning” (xiii). To flesh this out, Williams looks to Austin Farrer, who offered a vital exposition of how the finite and the infinite relate. What Farrer concluded is that God and creation are not in competition. To think of the infinite to act in

the finite in a way that replaces or adds to the finite would cause both to cease to be what they are. God acts such that “infinite agency cannot be prayed in aid to fill a gap in finite causal chains” (2). Stated fuller, Williams writes,

Revelation is something communicated from infinite agency or reality to the finite mind. But (in Farrer’s picture) this is not a matter of God just interrupting the process of the world to ‘insert’ something alien into the gap; it happens as a result of what happens in the world of finite agents or substances, as these finite realities are modified in their relations to one another, drawn into newly meaningful shapes. There is no suspension or displacement of the stuff of the world, but that stuff is reorganized as if around a new magnetic point of focus (3).

God and the world, and so also, Jesus’ humanity and divinity, are not two “comparable metaphysical subjects” (26). The incarnation is not about fitting divine prerogatives into an (all too) human narrative, an illogicality upheld by pure assertion. Instead, Williams invites the reader to see the Gospels as narratives displaying “the finite as enacting the infinite without ceasing to be finite” (5). It is the narratives of the human Jesus that show something at all points about God, from conception to resurrection.

This is a challenge both to some two-nature theologies where the infant Jesus must be in some sense omniscient as well as to some kenotic theologies that assert the notion that in order for God to be Jesus, God had to relinquish his attributes. Neither allow Jesus to be the visible image of the invisible God nor do they allow these moments in Jesus’ life to be the bearer of a new humanity possible only by a truly restored union of God and humanity.

In a journey through theological history that is nothing short of a tour-de-force, Williams begins his argument in the “middle (ages)” (vii) with Aquinas, who he sees as a kind of pinnacle and cumulative thinker of the tradition, before jumping back to Paul, where Williams argues that the biblical grammar warrants the kind of reflection on Jesus’ unique identity the later writers develop in more conceptual ways. He then continues forwards to

Nicaea, Chalcedon, and Augustine, and then moves on to Eastern voices: Leontius of Byzantium, Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor, and John of Damascus, each offering their own terminological refinements. He then treats the Reformation, looking at Luther and Calvin, and finally ends in the twentieth century with Barth and Bonhoeffer.

A secondary theme emerges through this travail. Notably, in Augustine, Calvin, and Bonhoeffer, Williams builds a case for the social and political ramifications of the incarnation. The unreserved identification of God with Christ is also the uninhibited presence of God with his church, and so too, the unrestrained solidarity of God with humanity. “God can have no territory or interest to defend over and against the created order” (192) Williams writes of Bonhoeffer. This dissolves any artificial divide between sacred and profane but also is an implicit rebuke of Christian political agendas:

The Church inevitably appears as a visible social unit—and thus it occupies real space in the world; it jostles up against other social forms. But its fundamental challenge is to occupy that space *solely* for the sake of the world’s eschatological solidarity: ‘The space of the Church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God.’ So the church is not simply a *realm* of reality, a subdivision, but a locus from which the world can be seen as whole and responded to with a wholeness of service and compassion. The Church exists to say to the world that it need not be afraid of the Church, of a Church that seeks to displace it or control it . . . (202).

The book ends with reflections on the analogy of being as it is fully shown in Christ. “The *homoousion* of Nicaea thus allows us to imagine that there is what might be called an analogue of ‘createdness’ within the divine life—that is, a form of living the divine life in the mode of reception and response, which is no less truly divine (possessed of unconditional freedom) than its source” (220). The movement from divine being to human being shows, “Thus we can say about creation that it is itself what most fully and consciously aligned with the divine act of self-giving” (223). Does this reduce God to the creaturely order? Does this

commit a kind of onto-theology? Here, Williams dialogues chiefly with Erich Przywara and notes that the analogy of being does the opposite: understanding what God is “like” is also to respect that that simile is not equivalence. “Metaphysics leads again and again to the ultimate ‘poverty’ of this formal necessity of denying any determinate concept of the divine and being reduced to a sort of gesturing towards the generative mystery” (233). In other words, how is God able to be in human form? How is the infinite able to be in the finite? Or how is the omnipotent and omniscient found in the limited? If one has committed oneself to a totalized metaphysic that thinks it knows what God truly is, all these become an insurmountable problem. To understand God as ineffably free to be himself in love means God is able to take on any form other from his essence to communicate himself.

The God whose *quid* is revealed in Christ is the God who is strictly unspeakable by finite beings but who speaks himself in and as an entirely finite subject, wholly flesh and blood, mortal and vulnerable. This is why we can never speak of the nature of God as an object in anything like the ordinary way: we speak because God has given us (literally) a Word: God has invited us into the life that is his self-expression (234).

Williams’ argument then presupposes that in order to show that Christ is how humanity can best understand what it means to be human, finite, and created, this is only possible by a radically Christ-like depiction of God’s identity.

As a kind of conclusion after the conclusion, Williams reflects on the resurrection. This is a kind of elucidation of how one believes in the resurrection in light of all the modern historical-critical complications by looking to Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard. Williams is admittedly a fallibilist in regards to the Bible’s history: “Faith does not guarantee the historical accuracy of the text; equally, lack of faith is not the same as skepticism about the history” (262). Nevertheless, there is a kind of narrative trust in the history of the resurrection that is possible in the practice that Wittgenstein describes. Just as Wittgenstein states that “only love believes the resurrection,” Williams explains, “Thus the

grammar of belief in the Resurrection, say, is manifest in narratives of how a person's life is radically and comprehensively altered by belief in the Resurrection" (264). While this seems like a scandal to the modern need for certainty, Kierkegaard argues that belief is similar to what is believed in. One could not believe in the resurrection truly if it was perfectly obvious and certain. For the Gospels to offer four very human narratives of the historical resurrection is to suggest that belief in the resurrection is only possible within the form of life of the church. This explanation is consistent with his reflections in *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (2003), where he affirms the historicity of the resurrection but focuses on its significance.

The book is a marvelous journey through great minds focused on the essence of Christ. This is sort of like looking at a lineup of masterpiece paintings that have been cropped down to a thin ribbon composed of their centers. Beautiful as it may be, one gets the immediate feeling with every passing frame that they have missed a lot and want to see more. His historical lineup curiously leaps over Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm of Canterbury, and others, although confessedly, it never aims to be a comprehensive survey. Surely there is always more to say about Aquinas and Barth, both covered in pointed depth that had to set aside their vast breadth. In treating the incarnation metaphysically, the book produces an appetite for further exegetical commentary and theological explanation that only Williams' earlier works can fill. While *Christ the Heart of Creation* gives a lot to chew on, the book pairs well with sermons and biblical reflections such as *Christ on Trial* (2000), *Resurrection* (2003), or *The Sign and The Sacrifice* (2016), as well as theological works such as *On Christian Theology* (1999), *Arius* (2009), or this book's prelude of sorts, *The Edge of Words* (2014), not to mention his many works on spirituality. The present work offers one more masterpiece to an already extraordinary corpus of writings.

Just as *Christ the Heart of Creation* tackles the great paradox of the Christian faith (how Jesus is both God and human), it also accomplishes perhaps its own apparent paradox: it is something that is both profoundly traditional and yet also progressive. It challenges both conservative and liberal paradigms in that it

Review: WILLIAMS *Christ the Heart of Creation* R19

offers an account of the incarnation resolutely catholic, drawing from the great thinkers of church history, working in conformity with the councils and Scripture, and yet offers insight that is remarkably fresh, irenically innovative, and profoundly politically progressive. Then again, could a substantive contemplation on Christ's identity be anything else?

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