Christ and Contemplation: Doctrine and Spirituality in the Theology of Rowan Williams

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This article examines the integration of doctrine and spirituality in selections of the work of Rowan Williams. The contours of this integration are elucidated through attention to the ways that Williams critiques the notion, prevalent in several modern spiritualties, of a stable hidden self that is to be excavated through various forms of therapy. In place of this notion, Williams articulates a view of the self that is always in the process of becoming, and he does so by deploying resources drawn from the Christian theological tradition. Williams's theologically derived convictions about the self mesh nicely with his contemplative spirituality: a posture of silent attentiveness and patient openness to the presence of God and so also to other creatures.

Introduction

In the rich and growing body of literature that explores the relationship between Christian doctrine and spirituality,[1] scholars are hoping to redress the fragmentation of the theological disciplines that took place during the Enlightenment. This fragmentation, it is thought, compromises the integrity of each sub-discipline of theological inquiry. Attention to the constructive reintegration of doctrine and spirituality might lead to increased awareness of how particular doctrinal formulations shape Christian life and, conversely, how particular habits and the cultivation of certain dispositions influence the formulation of doctrine. Known widely as a world-class historian of early Christian doctrine and of the Christian spiritual tradition, as

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[1] See especially, Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology,* Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), and Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

well as a constructive theologian in his own right, Rowan Williams exemplifies this integration of doctrine and spirituality. In what follows, I will analyze a series of Williams's works in which he deploys central Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, creation, and the person and work of Christ to critique the idea of the "stable self"—that personal identity is found by unearthing an immutable core "self" from layers of false selves imposed by others—and in support of contemplative spirituality. Attention to the deployment of Christian doctrine in Williams's contemplative spirituality illustrates the reciprocal relationship between spirituality and doctrine: doctrine describes the imaginative environment within which the Christian lives, and Christian spirituality elucidates the existential inhabiting of Christian doctrine.

Spirituality and Theology

The term "spirituality" is notoriously ambiguous, so we begin with an investigation of how Williams himself defines the term and adopt that as our working definition. In the first chapter of his book on the history of the Christian spiritual tradition, *The Wound of Knowledge,* Williams defines "spirituality" as the task of "each believer making his or her own that engagement with the questioning at the heart of faith."[2] As becomes evident throughout the volume, Williams understands this questioning to involve the theological structures of the Christian faith—questions pertaining to doctrines such as the Trinity, creation, and eschatology. Williams views spirituality as inextricably connected with doctrine. That which doctrine attempts to identify is that which unsettles and encounters the saints in their lives of prayer: the cross of Christ himself, the "final control and measure and irritant in Christian speech."[3] Williams's approach to spirituality is helpfully elucidated in

[2] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1991), 11. There are a handful of overviews of Rowan Williams's spirituality; see especially: Byron Smith, "The Humanity of Godliness: Spirituality and Creatureliness in Rowan Williams," in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2009), 115–140; Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 89–111; Luke F. Fodor, "The Occasional Theology and Constant Spirituality of Rowan Williams," *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 263–279; Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 73–81, 99–105.

[3] Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 13.

his monograph, *Teresa of Avila*. Here Williams shows that Teresa's reflection on and cataloging of spiritual experiences is inherently related to broader doctrinal structures. For Teresa, the spiritual—mystical—life ultimately means the reception of a particular pattern of divine action in a human life as a whole.[4] "Mysticism," like the term spirituality, typically suggests something quite different to modern ears; the scope of the "the mystical" is often treated as though it terminates in some kind of subjective or experiential state.[5] Williams uses Teresa to demythologize such an approach to spirituality by showing how she saw herself as interpreting her experience in the light of the Christian tradition in a way that does not set her directly against "institutional religion" and certainly not against doctrinal theology.[6] For Teresa, as Williams reads her, this means that the description of "mystical experience" cannot be divorced from Christology with its corporate and ecclesial, moral and sacramental dimensions.[7]

This idea is continued in an important essay entitled "To Stand Where Christ Stands," in which Williams again argues that the term "spirituality" requires a constant demythologizing in contemporary discourse. The classical texts in the Christian tradition imply something quite different from that which is often connoted by the term "spirituality" in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to Williams, many modern uses of the term "spirituality" tend to reflect a particular *dimension* of one's humanity and associate it with various therapies and tactics for living harmoniously with the world, whereas classical Christian spirituality aimed to describe an entire "environment"—a moral and imaginative world involving fundamental anthropological and theological beliefs—in which human beings interpret who they are and how they are to be.[8] For

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[4] Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Harrisburg, Pa..: Morehouse Publishing, 1991), 145–146.

[5] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 143, 144–145. In "The Prophetic and the Mystical: Heiler Revisited," *New Blackfriars* 64, no. 757–758 (July 1983): 330–346, Williams explores at length the difficulty of how modern religious studies has used the term "mysticism" as a set of distinct psychological experiences. In this article he shows how biblical religions refuse such a treatment and instead relate the mystic to the community in a way not unlike a prophet—obscuring the very dichotomy that Heiler initially proposed.

[6] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 147–148.

[7] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 148.

[8] Rowan Williams, "To Stand Where Christ Stands," in *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward (London: SPCK, 1999), 1–2.

Williams, it is Christ himself who constitutes this environment—this narrative "place"—for Christians: "We stand where Jesus stands as Christian believers, and pray as Jesus prays; and in standing in that place before God as 'Abba', we share equally in Jesus' directedness towards the good and the healing of the world."[9] Since spirituality is becoming aware of our place as the place of Jesus and about learning to live from within it, spirituality is an inherently theological endeavor, inextricably related to doctrinal matters. Williams views the Christian spiritual tradition as enmeshed in the Christian doctrinal tradition. This perspective is illustrated in the way that Williams interprets the self.

Knowledge of Self and Knowledge of God

Central to Rowan Williams's spirituality is his take on personal identity. His discussion of the self is an *Anknüpfungspunkt*—a point of contact—between Christian experience and Christian doctrine. By paying attention to Williams's theorizing about the self, we see several doctrinal elements brought to bear. For example, in his essay entitled "'Know Thyself': What Kind of an Injunction?" Williams discusses critiques of the "solid self" in philosophical literature and looks to Christian resources to reformulate a view of human interiority that avoids such critiques. Williams is skeptical of any philosophy or spirituality that would, in theory or practice, see as its chief purpose a quest to uncover a stable self with its own integrity buried beneath layers of various narratives and social webs and habits. In such a mistaken view, it is the inability to unearth the "true self" that is the cause for so much confusion and frustration for the human person.[10] In place of the hidden, immutable self, Williams posits the "self" as something always being learned in relation to the other—something always in construction and so never able to be fully known.[11] The Christian tradition,

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9 Williams, "To Stand Where Christ Stands," 2.

10 Williams, "'Know Thyself': What Kind of an Injunction?" in *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements, no. 32, ed. Michael McGhee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211–228. Williams's engagement with some other philosophical critiques of the self can be found in "The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer," in Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 186–202; see also Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 139–187.

11 Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 213–214.

exemplified in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux and Augustine of Hippo, assumes that the quest for self-knowledge has little to do with individual self-analysis, but rather has to do entirely with the discovery of the history that a person shares with other people.[12] In a way that echoes his exposition of Teresa of Avila's spirituality mentioned above, Williams sees Christian spirituality locating and interpreting the human being within broader—particularly doctrinal—structures.[13]

St. Bernard, according to Williams, sees the human failure to "know oneself" as intimately connected with the failure to know God. The self-knowledge that a person might have is his or her moral and spiritual helplessness in relation to God, but also the knowledge that God continues to hear and give grace, and so to see him or herself as a "graced sinner." In this view of self-knowledge, the main emphases are the recognition that we are constituted as what we are in relation to our Creator, not as self-sufficient individuals, and the high priority placed on recognizing our feebleness and failures, while also perceiving that such a judgment presupposes a relation to God. "Thus," Williams writes, "there is no selfhood prior to the address or gift of God. . . . Even as a godless and forgetful sinner, I am called into being as a self by the prior love of God. . . . The 'authentic' self is what I acknowledge as already, non-negotiably, caught up in continuing encounter with or response to divine action."[14] In this view there is "no authentic *image* of the self that has definition and fixity of itself."[15] There may be a self, but it is known fully to God alone. The best human beings may hope for is to grasp something of themselves within God's knowledge of them. Bernard serves Williams by sketching a view of self-knowledge that undercuts humanly constructed images of the self and so also its need to be defended before God and others in a way that would deny its contingency.

Williams also looks carefully at the conception of self-knowledge in St. Augustine, where he again sees that true knowledge of one's self is inseparable from true knowledge of God. According to Williams's reading of Augustine, the "self" is not a hidden and stable entity, but is rather "the recollecting and ordering of [a person's] past" in the light of the belief that God has a "full and just perspective" on his

[12] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 216.
[13] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, 147–148.
[14] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 219.
[15] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 220.

or her history. As such, the human person is involved in an ongoing autobiographical project that narrates memory in such a way that is constantly being recalibrated according to the divine perspective over against fallible human perception. For Augustine, the self operates as if it knew more or less what it wanted to be like, which we can discern because we love good people and want to be like them. In knowing what we want to be like while recognizing that we are not yet there, we can discern that our knowledge of the self is incomplete; yet precisely in knowing ourselves to be incomplete we can know ourselves as a "reasoning creature."[16]

By way of Bernard and Augustine, Williams discerns that one of the main contributions of the Christian tradition of self-knowledge is that "the self is in construction."[17] Indeed, this construction cannot be a finished project because the process of self-knowledge takes place before God and God is eternal. Both Bernard and Augustine present a view of the self as constructed in contingency and only intelligible when viewed as responding to an address from beyond itself. The self is not self-constituting. Since the divine perspective from which one gets to know one's true self is beyond mastery, there is the possibility for change, repentance, and enlargement.[18] Because Christians believe that only God knows who they are, they are open to revision about who they think they are; Christians, thus, get a "self," but do not have to have it mastered, thereby relinquishing the need to defend it before others. The payoff for this is significant because it opens the way for renewed interaction with others, both God and other human beings, a way that is not built around defending a fantasy of the self. Politically, it allows for the questioning of the powerful—by themselves and by the disadvantaged—of their own illusory constructions of the world, and it opens the way for thinking through possibilities for the shared satisfactions of others.

[16] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 222. For Williams's extended analysis of self-knowledge in Augustine, see Rowan Williams, "The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in the *De trinitate*," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, Earl C. Muller, Roland J. Teske, *Collectanea Augustiniana*, vol. 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 121–134.

[17] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 222.

[18] Williams, "'Know Thyself,'" 223.

The Self and Creation

The interrelation between doctrine and spirituality is seen again in Williams's reflections on the self as grounded in a doctrine of creation. In his essay "On Being Creatures," Williams sets out to show how the classical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* shapes a spirituality that embraces humanness and enables freedom from diseased versions of dependence. In this essay, Williams explores the attempts of various theologians (such as Matthew Fox and Rosemary Radford Ruether) to rework the doctrine of creation in order that they might avoid the ontological hierarchies (God–creation, but also intra-creation) believed to be inherent in the idea of creation *ex nihilo*. Williams's response to these attempts involves a careful examination of the logic of the doctrine of creation as traditionally conceived, as he sketches the paradox of the experience of human dependence. On the one hand, human beings need others in order to form their own identity from which they might act as agents in the world—to develop a sense of "self." On the other hand, this human need is in constant danger from other human beings who have the same need and so are in a position to exploit the other's identity-shaping power to serve themselves. That is to say, human beings are tempted to reinforce their sense of self by prescribing to others an identity that substantiates their own. For example, one can conceive of a child whose sense of self includes being the daughter of a particular father, but whose father relates to her in a way so as to feed his own image of himself. Human beings are necessarily dependent on others and yet are in constant danger of being diminished by those on whom they see themselves as dependent.[19]

This paradox of dependence provides Williams a place to work out how the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* might shape Christian spirituality. Williams sees the solution to the paradox of dependence in learning to accept the fundamental dependence we require to form our sense of self, and locating that dependence outside the *specific* things upon which we become dependent. Rather than dependence being placed on other people, things, or institutions, Williams posits a fundamental dependence by which we can be formed as agents. That fundamental dependence is upon God. By accepting their

[19] Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 67–71.

fundamental dependence on God as creatures, human beings are freed for acts of trust, rather than bound to the exploitation of others. This is possible because, as the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* would portray it, dependence on God is absolute and unilateral.

> And to see that is already to have the need answered: my needful searching is part of what God gratuitously brings to be. The secret of understanding our createdness is that it makes both sense and nonsense of the 'search for identity': it justifies our need (i.e. it displays it as something other than a neutral fact) and it answers it. Before we are looked at, spoken to, acted on, we are, because of the look, the word, the act of God.[20]

Since God creates out of his freedom, there is nothing for which we are exploited: creation *ex nihilo* (read against the backdrop of the doctrine of the Trinity—that God exists in an eternal fellowship of love) means that God is not dependent on his creatures to fulfill some compulsive need within himself.[21] Unilateral dependence on God means that God is not a rival. In a spirituality that is constructed in dialogue with the classical doctrine of creation, Williams is able to show how human beings are given a sense of self in God's freedom, but in such a way that it need not be justified or defended before others, and so is freed from the penchant to exploit others.

Williams completes his description of how the doctrine of creation reorders the relationship between the self, God, and other human beings by way of a theology of contemplation. By "contemplation," Williams means something like a life posture and practice that is silently attentive and patiently open to God's presence, out of which stems attentiveness and openness to other creatures.[22] It is the contemplative life that, for Williams, both teaches and responds to the reality of human beings as creatures. Contemplation teaches that the standing of human beings within the freedom of the triune God is one of gratitude and silence.

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[20] Williams, "On Being Creatures," 72.

[21] Williams, "On Being Creatures," 74.

[22] Many of the contours of Williams's contemplative spirituality can be seen in his various interactions with the work of Thomas Merton. These essays are now helpfully collected in a single volume: Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, Ky.: Fons Vitae, 2011).

> Contemplative prayer classically finds its locus in the awareness of God at the centre of the praying person's being—God as that by which I am myself—and, simultaneously, God at the centre of the whole world's being: a solidarity in creatureliness. It is the great specific against the myth of self-creation and isolated self-regulation.[23]

In the practice of contemplative prayer, the human being exists most properly as creature and puts an end to the steady stream of language by which we construct our identities of the self, and instead rests before God, trusting in his knowledge of who we are and in the sheer grace of our existence. Contemplative prayer allows space to be present to ourselves in our world with trust and acceptance. In this silence, contemplative prayer opens the believer to awareness of God's movement of generosity that finds joy in the being of the other. In contemplation, we rest in God's joy and love for us, which we know simply by virtue of our being created. This contemplative life thus aims to follow the pattern of Jesus himself who lived each moment open to the self-giving of God and who freely gave of himself to others.

The Self and the Person of Christ

These themes and patterns come together in another important essay, entitled "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics." In this essay Williams criticizes again the notion of a hidden and buried stable self, to be excavated by some kind of therapy. This time, however, his critique is a moral one. The problem with the quest to uncover a stable "true self" is that it is ultimately individualistic. "It plays with the idea that my deepest, most significant or serious 'interest' is something given and something unique; it brackets the difficult issue of how we are to think through our human situation as embodying a common task, in which the sacredness of the authentic selves' account of its own interest is not the beginning and end of moral discourse."[24] That is to say, the quest for the "authentic self" displaces the quest for common good. In place of the notion of a buried, stable self, Williams argues that the self is constantly being shaped in the world of language and exchange; self-consciousness is a product of

[23] Williams, "On Being Creatures," 76.

[24] Rowan Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany: A Reading in New Testament Ethics," in Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 239.

time, shaped in conversation and negotiation. It is as we try to express and explain ourselves before another, and in the difficulty of this process, that we come also to see how obscure we are to ourselves (and it is here especially that we might mistakenly imagine a hidden self confronting others and in need of excavation).[25] The formation of our interior life—our sense of self—is difficult space: in order to emerge as an agent in the crucible of exchange we tend to view the other as in some sense a rival or adversary. This makes ethics problematic because when others are placed in the position of rivals the possibility of a common good is compromised. Williams believes that the solution to this problem is a real—not imagined or projected—partner, but one that is not engaged in the process of mutual adjustment in his or her own interior life in the midst of the exchange.[26] Hence, Williams posits a transcendent interlocutor. However, he insists that in addition to his ideal transcendent interlocutor, the partner must also be historical in order to be learned by other human beings. His ideal interlocutor must be both divine and human.

It is here that Williams directs us to how the narrative of Jesus might function as a solution to the paradox of self-formation. Jesus is the non-competitive other, conversation with whom can shape one's interiority without rivalry and so open the quest for a common good. Williams appeals to two aspects of the narrative of Jesus that allow for this to take place. First, Williams appeals to the way the Gospels present Jesus offering access to God for all—a sort of radical hospitality. In the Gospels, God does not function as one who sustains structures and conditions for access to that which is holy, thus encouraging competition among human beings. Rather, the God proclaimed by Jesus shows himself to be gracious *prior* to human activity—God's gracious action precedes human action. As such, God's action and human action do not occupy the same moral and practical space and so are never in rivalry.[27] "My behavior does not have to be a defensive strategy in the face of what is radically and irreducibly other, because the radicality of that otherness is precisely what establishes my freedom from the necessity to negotiate with it."[28] Thus, we have in Jesus the announcement, indeed the very presence, of a non-competitive other,

[25] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 240–241.
[26] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 243.
[27] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 247–248.
[28] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 249.

and the freedom offered by this non-competitive other allows human beings to grow ethically and in a new relation to other creatures.

The second element of the narrative of Jesus that enables him to serve as the non-competitive interlocutor is his resurrection and the community in which he is present. The Gospel narratives posit the vindication of Jesus' mission by his being raised from the dead and the notion that the community of Jesus is the place of his ongoing, living presence. Not only does Jesus proclaim the non-competitive other, his resurrection allows that other to be contemporary with the community. The resurrection guarantees the presence of Jesus in the community as a source of judgment to which the community looks, and as such opens the possibility for the community itself to live in a relation different from competitive rivalry.[29] Williams's critique of the stable self, defended against others, is bound up with Christology. Jesus must be fully divine if he is truly to be the non-competitive other, but he must also be human if he is to be encountered historically. Something like a Chalcedonian Christology is required for Williams's theory of the self.

The Self and the Suffering of Jesus

Williams's slim book *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* is a reflection on the trial of Jesus through the vantage points of the four evangelists. By portraying the ways that Jesus was tried, the Gospel writers show that it is "*we* who are on trial" before God: "The various ways in which we can ask Jesus who *he* is, summed up in the variety of ways he is cross-examined by his judges, tell us where we are coming from, what it is in us that is afraid of the prisoner in the dock."[30] In each trial narrative, Christ has one charge against us: that we "choose to be somewhere other than where Christ is. Each gospel in its own way challenges us to step down from the tribunal to stand with him."[31] As we recall from our discussion above, this notion of "standing where Christ stands" is central to Williams's view of spirituality and the problem of the constructed self. The trial of Jesus serves Williams as a challenge to our constructed sense of self: Jesus before the tribunal confronts us

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[29] Williams, "Interiority and Epiphany," 251–252.

[30] Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), xiii, 135.

[31] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 92.

with the question of Christ's identity and, with that, whether we will stand with him—"to move from our centre to his."[32]

In the trial narrated in the Gospel of Mark, Williams sees great significance in the way that Jesus breaks the silence of his identity (the so-called "Messianic secret"). For Williams, Mark's Jesus holds back a clear declaration of his identity because his hearers are not ready to understand Jesus' words without treating him as just one more competitor for space within a world of tyranny and power.[33] Mark's trial narrative is constructed around the awareness that human beings are expert in describing God in words that reflect our own aspirations, with what seems to us to be wise, holy, or impressive—examples of our own justification.[34] Thus, it is only when Jesus has been stripped of all earthly power and prestige that he finally speaks. When he does, he identifies himself with the God of Israel and proclaims to the court that they will see the Son of Man seated at God's right hand in judgment. This is, for Williams, a publication of the true identity of humanity before the judgment of God against the masks and caricatures set up by the religious authorities. Before this publication can be heard for what it is, it must be stripped of all human power and authority. By speaking the divine name only at the point of great humility, helplessness, and nakedness, Jesus removes himself from all of our false constructions and instead reshapes our imagination and language. Mark's trial narrative teaches us to see Jesus in his "unbreakable rootedness in the life of God, precisely at the moment when no worldly condition secures or makes sense of this."[35] We are challenged to reimagine God as free to speak to us specifically as God and not simply to hear our own voice and a version of whatever makes us feel secure.[36] Such a realization issues into a way of being exemplified by "a particular kind of contemplation and stillness"—by which we rest from the verbiage that conforms Christ (and others) to our agenda.[37]

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus replies to the high priest's "tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" with "so you say" (alternatively

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32 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 93.
33 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 6.
34 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 8–9.
35 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 22.
36 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 15.
37 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 20.

rendered, "the words are your own") (Matthew 26:63–64). For Williams, this is "almost as if Jesus says, 'It's for you to tell me whether I am what you think I claim to be. The world in which these words about God's anointed make sense is *your* world.'"[38] Williams uses this trial narrative as a way to explore religious language; the reply of Jesus to the high priest reveals how words such as "God" and "anointed one" and "Son of God" have become dead to those who have religious power. Jesus' reply is a question put to all who are "insiders" in discourse about God. Those judged here are those who have the story of God but do not know themselves in it, and instead use religious discourse as a weapon against others. For Williams, Caiaphas's problem (and ours) is that of ownership of the story and yielding it as a weapon to defend ourselves.[39] Matthew's counter is that the Wisdom seen in Jesus "interrupts and reorganizes the landscape [of truth] in ways that are not predictable."[40] Recognizing truth, then, requires some measure of "dispossession" by following the same path as Jesus' own self-emptying and so "letting go of whatever it is that allows us to use the language of faith as a defence or a weapon."[41] Williams does not mean this to imply some sort of self-denigration. Rather, he sees Jesus advocating for the renunciation of the attempt to establish one's position at the expense of others and instead looking at the world from the point of view of those who are excluded by its systems of power. This can only be done by being willing to stand before Christ, not as the accuser of either Christ or oneself, but by waiting patiently to learn who one is from Christ.[42]

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is asked by the Sanhedrin, "If you are the Christ, tell us" (22:67). Jesus replies, "If I tell you, you will not believe; and if I question you, you will not answer." Williams observes: "In other words: I have nothing to say to you that you will be able to hear or to which you will be able to respond. Luke's Jesus places himself with

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[38] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 30.

[39] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 40. Williams does not want his reading of Matthew's trial narrative to undercut Christian commitment to historical doctrinal formulas, but rather to see them less as "positions" to be defended and more suited to "place us in a certain kind of relationship to truth such that we can be changed by it." See Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 39.

[40] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 40.

[41] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 44.

[42] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 36.

those whose language cannot be heard."[43] For Luke, God's voice is to be found with those who do not have a voice—those without power, those believed to be without right in the world. The voiceless also serve as a reminder of our inability to master the world and our own limits. Jesus' trial in Luke is a stripping of the human penchant to assimilate others into our own moral and spiritual world and so to silence them—an echo of Williams's discussion of the exploitation of the other to serve one's own constructed identity. Luke's trial narrative invites us to be aware that the stranger exposes our own "learning difficulties" and to allow the stranger to remain a stranger rather than "a failed member of my world or an incompetent speaker of my language."[44] Significantly, the existence of the outsider to the world's systems of power puts to the powerful the fact that our rendering of the world—even of our own self—is not complete and so is not God's.[45] The challenge of Luke's trial narrative is to put to the forefront of our awareness, by way of the excluded other, our own fears and weaknesses and so the inadequacy of our handle on the world and ourselves.

In the Gospel of John, Williams focuses on Jesus' reply to Pilate's question, "So you are a king?" The reply of Jesus is the same as that offered in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to the high priest: "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (18:37). The reply signals that the word "king" on the lips of Pilate is compromised by its use in the imperial administration and, without serious refinement, actually misses the truth.[46] As Williams reads John's Gospel, Jesus is a king of a kingdom that cannot be defended against rivals and is actually undermined by the use of violence. It does not take up space in the world; it is not a rival system. But because it is not on the same plane as other kingdoms, the kingdom of Jesus "puts into question the very definitions of belonging and power that previously seemed so obvious."[47] We do not get to "own" a sense that we are ultimately satisfied with where and what we are in a way that is unwilling to respond to challenge and question. This realization has profound implications because it means the

43 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 54.
44 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 61.
45 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 65.
46 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 76.
47 Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 84.

possibility to accept the brunt of the challenge to one's perceptions without feeling like one's integrity as human beings is in jeopardy; ultimately, it creates the possibility to embrace life as it has been given. The spirituality that this bequeaths is one that is able to recognize and accept the reality of injury, disability, and trauma. It is not a spirituality of denial or of mind/will over body. "Truthful living involves being at home with ourselves, not complacently but patiently, recognizing that what we are today, at this moment, is sufficiently loved and valued by God to be the material with which he will work, and that the longed-for transformation will not come by refusing the love and the value that is simply *there* in the present moment."[48] Thus, like the previous trial stories, John's account invites readers into the "contemplative enterprise of being where we are and refusing the lure of a fantasized future more compliant to our will, more satisfying in the image of ourselves that it permits."[49] Living in the truth, as Williams interprets John, is to live in the present moment of the present world, in all of its hostility and brokenness, with the perspective that this is God's world.

The Self and the Resurrection of Jesus

Williams's reflection on the trial of Jesus concludes with a brief meditation on the resurrection. In Williams's reading of the New Testament, the resurrection is not merely a "happy ending" but entails a further call to trial and judgment. Due to the resurrection, the interrogation of Jesus' trial becomes contemporary with us. In the risen Jesus, we encounter his judgment.[50] The role of the resurrection is discussed more extensively in the seminal work, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*. In this volume, Williams reflects on patterns in the Gospel narratives in order to argue that the resurrection stories explore the connection between Christ's resurrection and God's forgiveness by which human and divine relations are transformed.[51] Jesus can effect transformation in oppressor–victim relations because he alone is the "pure victim" and so can also be the merciful and

[48] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 86.

[49] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 86.

[50] Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 135–138.

[51] Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002), xii.

vindicating judge.[52] The victim Jesus does not condemn, resist, or exclude; his life is defined as embodying an unconditional and universal acceptance. Williams charts this discussion with reference to his distinctive view of the self as a developing story: "The self *is*—one might say—what the past is doing now, it is the process in which a particular set of 'given' events and processes and options crystallizes now in a new set of particular options, responses and determinations, providing a resource of given past-ness out of which the next decision and action can flow."[53] To be a self is to "own" the story and act out of its particularity. The resurrection brings to the forefront our acts of victimization and the identity of our victim embodied in the same person who embraces us as loved and forgiven. The resurrection of Jesus is thus a crucial aspect of the formation of the self: we are confronted with the truth of ourselves as victimizers but also given room for expansion and repentance through forgiveness by that victim.

In order to think through how the resurrected Jesus transforms the memory of guilt, hurt, and diminution, Williams turns to the fourth Gospel. After the events of Good Friday, the disciples make the decision to return to their previous lives as fishermen. The resurrected Christ comes to these disciples and renews their memory and they recognize him. This recovery of memory is extended particularly in the story of the reinstitution of Peter (John 21:15–17). In Peter's case, his past is returned in a relational context of love that is moving and growing: Christ's invitation to Peter is an invitation to know himself as forgiven. The memory of failure is the indispensable basis for calling forward and hope; Peter comes to know himself but also to know himself in hope.[54] He encounters the one he has betrayed but the one he betrayed embraces him with forgiveness. He does not escape his failure, but sees his failure in the one who gives him hope for new possibilities beyond his failing. Indeed, the memories of one's failings as they come to us in the resurrection of Jesus are transfigured to be the "key" or "mode" of how human beings might serve and love in the future.[55] The resurrection of Jesus thus opens the way for the pattern of oppressor and victim to be transcended into relationships of giving and receiving one another as gift.

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[52] Williams, *Resurrection*, 7.
[53] Williams, *Resurrection*, 23–24.
[54] Williams, *Resurrection*, 31–32.
[55] Williams, *Resurrection*, 38.

Williams also depicts how the resurrection helps human beings to take responsibility for their future. Human beings have a propensity to adopt the role—construct themselves in a certain way—of victim in order to avoid responsibility for their actions. They conflate their sufferings with the suffering of Christ and so turn the cross of Jesus into a legitimation of their actions and a weapon to use against others.[56] The resurrection, however, disallows such a move. It forces us to recognize the sufferings of Christ, not as my suffering, but as that of a stranger. Because Jesus is alive, he is there to be encountered again and his personal identity remains distinct from ours, which means that his cross is his and not ours, and will not be assimilated into our own memories. It teaches us to see the cross as the cross of our victim, not as our own to bear. This opens the way to responsibility for the future. Encountering Jesus as my victim awakens me to my responsibility for my violence, and so also allows me to acknowledge the possibility that things could be otherwise. We learn in the resurrection that we have a choice, that action is possible, and we are delivered from a sort of infantilism before the patterns of our past and in our world.[57]

Furthermore, it is because of the resurrection that human beings are able to confront their desires and see those desires changed. The resurrection reminds human beings of both the absence and presence of Jesus—that he is not grasped or mastered. This begins a trajectory by which we learn to live differently in the world in which we are not at the center or in control. The human problem is the desire for a situation in which one's ego is in control, or supposes itself to be in control—where the self is in the center. However, this desire can actually be a barrier for change, since authentic desire for change acknowledges the inability to prescribe exactly what will fulfill the lack—that we do not know exactly what we want. It is from this acknowledgment of poverty that alertness and receptivity begin, where we open our eyes and wait for the manifestation of the truth that will transform and liberate. "The stripping away of the longing for 'tidy drama,' a shapely narrative of which I am the hero, is the precondition of hearing ourselves called and finding ourselves situated in a new world."[58] The transformation that takes place requires the address of my victim, the risen Christ, to show me how my egotism is already a sign of lack

[56] Williams, *Resurrection*, 71.
[57] Williams, *Resurrection*, 73.
[58] Williams, *Resurrection*, 77–78.

and poverty out of which I injure others. But Jesus also communicates to me that I am accepted and forgiven absolutely and so there is no need for my ego to compensate for its privation by depriving others; human beings are then freed to extend compassion to others. As such, it calls forward a life in which the ego is displaced from its central position as human beings accept themselves as loved by God.[59] It is the resurrection that frees Jesus from our projections and expectations; though he is our partner, he is a stranger. Learning to become attentive to this stranger while allowing him to remain such is what teaches us to have a similar sort of attentiveness to others. "To let the other be strange and yet not reject him or her, to give and to be given attentive, contemplative regard—this is all part of our encounter with the risen Lord."[60]

As we have seen, Williams interprets the trial narratives and the resurrection encounters as ways that God cracks open the self closed in on itself, locked in its own constructed fantasies and exploiting others in a bid to justify and defend itself. Into this miserable dynamic, the judged and resurrected Christ comes as the great questioner who shatters our illusion of ourselves, but also embraces us, involving us in a new relation with God that transcends the dynamics of rivalry and competition and exploitation. Occupying this new relation with God as described by Williams is helpfully understood in the vocabulary of contemplation.

Conclusion

As is evident, the writings of Rowan Williams are not presented here as a closed system, but as a series of occasional investigations and dialogues. However, when viewed together, these various investigations and dialogues are quite consistent in their critique of the idea of the stable, hidden self and the positing of an alternative worked out on the anvil of Christian convictions about God, human beings, and Christ. Williams's various investigations into Christian doctrine lead to the same sort of spiritual posture: a way that allows human persons to acknowledge their fundamental contingency as creatures, freed by

[59] Williams, *Resurrection*, 80.
[60] Williams, *Resurrection*, 82.

the embrace of God in Christ and invited to live contemplatively without the need for defense before God or their fellow human beings.

In conclusion, we now ask what we might discern of the relationship between doctrine and spirituality in Williams's critique of the stable self. First, we note that it is not really, at least in the first instance, doctrine that relates to spirituality. Instead, for Williams, doctrine identifies that which human beings encounter in their spiritual life. A doctrine is a linguistic construction by which the church aims to identify—not to master—God and the pattern of God's activity. As such, doctrine's relation to spirituality is indirect and oblique. What is so engaging about Williams's work is the way that the integration with spirituality keeps doctrine from becoming some kind of intellectual puzzle to sort out; his integration of spirituality with doctrine invites the reader to engage that which doctrine identifies, and so to see that doctrine is at its best when it is transparent. Without abandoning the critical and analytical edge that doctrine provides, the integration of doctrine with spirituality forbids these processes from unduly eclipsing the breadth of Christian existence.

With specific regard for his treatment of the self, Williams repeatedly draws out and deploys aspects of orthodox Christian teaching in order to elucidate something of the texture of spiritual experience: a sense of self, from a Christian perspective, is shaped through the environment described by the doctrines of the Trinity, creation *ex nihilo*, the divinity and humanity of Christ, and Jesus' suffering and resurrection. The doctrines are involved, but they are taken up for the purposes of elucidating the transformative experience that Williams hopes for, and it is precisely in the service of facilitating this transformation that the truth of these doctrines is demonstrated. In summary, we might say that spirituality serves doctrine by anchoring and testing talk of God in a holy life.[61]

In addition, by so integrating doctrine and spirituality, Williams is able to show how the interpretation of Christian existence takes place within an environment described by doctrinal formulations. Doctrinal structures facilitate the spirituality of a community and of a tradition by offering common language and a common conceptual grammar by which to discuss—and learn—Christian life. Without

[61] Williams describes the relationship between experience and Christian doctrine in this way in "Christian Experience and the Christian God," *The Furrow* 35, no. 11 (November 1984): 673–682.

such attention to language and conceptual grammar, spirituality is in danger of individualism and so also the inability to enlarge or communicate.[62] Doctrine provides Williams with a living tradition of reflection by which the interpretation of Christian existence might be critiqued and shaped toward a common benefit, offering a way to integrate the diverse experience of its members within the life of the church. Doctrinal structures also help to safeguard and communicate Christian dispositions and behaviours.[63] Just as spirituality aids doctrine by refusing to allow it to be taken too seriously, doctrine aids spirituality by offering a common vocabulary by which to describe it.

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[62] It is interesting to consider Williams's reflections on the disagreement in the Anglican Communion over sexuality and the mutually interpreting roles of doctrine and spirituality. Williams's constructive approach is very much to sketch a description of Christian sexual existence (a spirituality, if you will) as framed by the great themes of Christian doctrine and tease out their mutual implications. See Rowan Williams, "Knowing Myself in Christ," in *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church*, second edition, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 12–19; see also his famous essay, "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers, Jr. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 309–321.

[63] The way in which doctrine and spirituality interact in this facet of Williams's theology accords with the way in which he construes the role of heresy and orthodoxy in the early Christian era—that doctrinal boundaries emerged as a way to safeguard certain Christian behaviors. See Rowan Williams, "Defining Heresy," in *The Origins of Christendom in the West*, ed. Alan Krieder (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 313–335; and Rowan Williams, "Does It Make Sense to Speak of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy?" in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1–23.