SJT 56(1): 73–81 (2003) Printed in the United Kingdom © 2003 Scottish Journal of Theology Ltd

Rowan Williams on Christian Doctrine[1]

Geoffrey Wainwright
Duke University Divinity School, Box 90967, Durham, NC 27708-0967, USA *gwainwright@div.duke.edu*

Abstract

The skilfully arranged pieces collected in Rowan Williams's *On Christian Theology* are regarded by Geoffrey Wainwright as an informal dogmatics, an instance of 'open system'. A subtle thinker and writer, Williams starts from the heartlands of the Christian faith and explores its boundaries. His work is evaluated in this article according to what he himself establishes as the celebratory, communicative, and critical styles of theology. Williams's kenotic trinitarianism is matched with his Abelardian view of the atonement, which seems to neglect some scriptural and traditional elements that a more Anselmian understanding would take into account. Freedom is a key notion for Williams but needs more definition in relation to 'choice'; and his location of the church remains institutionally imprecise. Wainwright particularly appreciates Williams's exposition of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and the aesthetic, doxological, and eschatological dimensions of his ethical thought. The book under discussion is disarmingly modest in tone, and the author himself declares that repentance is always in order for a theologian.

Dr Rowan Williams thinks and writes with a subtlety rare among contemporary theologians. He is also an explorer: from a base in the heartlands of the faith he will push towards and perhaps beyond the boundaries, advancing, yielding, withdrawing, staking claims for possible future occupation but also sometimes leaving behind him hostages to fortune. He is confessedly happier with narrative than with system, with what he calls the diachronic rather than the synchronic.

That is not how things immediately appear from the table of contents of his modestly entitled book *On Christian Theology*. At first blush it seems he could be offering a quite classically structured dogmatics. The first part – 'Defining the Enterprise' – looks like prolegomena, with chapters headed 'Theological Integrity' (1), 'The Unity of Christian Truth' (2), 'The Judgement of the World' (3), and 'The Discipline of Scripture' (4). Part 2 – 'The Act of God' – could be listing the traditional topics of creation, anthropology, christology, soteriology, pneumatology: 'On Being Creatures' (Chapter 5), 'Beginning with the Incarnation' (6), 'The Finality of Christ' (7), and 'Word and Spirit' (8). It is perfectly respectable to wait until this

[1] cf. *On Christian Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 328 pp.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stage before making a full exposition of the doctrine of the trinity, and so it is not surprising that Part 3 – 'The Grammar of God' – should have for chapter titles 'Trinity and Revelation' (9), 'Trinity and Ontology' (10), 'Trinity and Pluralism' (11). Church and sacraments might be expected next, and Part 4 – under 'Making Signs' – does indeed tantalize with the liturgically flavoured 'Between the Cherubim: the Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne' (12) and then promises 'The Nature of a Sacrament' (13) and 'Sacraments of the New Society' (14). The fifth and final part – 'Living the Mystery' – rounds off the pattern with ethics and eschatology: 'Incarnation and the Renewal of Community' (15), 'Interiority and Epiphany: a Reading in New Testament Ethics' (16), 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics' (17), and '''Nobody Knows Who I Am Till the Judgement Morning'' (18). This skilful arrangement indeed gives a comprehensive and cohesive character to a book composed of what began life as occasional papers, written over a period of some 15 years while Williams was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford and then Bishop of Monmouth (and latterly Anglican Primate of Wales). These origins suggest that the author may in some way have been beginning afresh each time in response to questions posed by those inviting him to deliver an address, and the dialogical nature of Williams's thinking comes pleasantly through.

Despite his suspicion of the notion of system and the genre of systematic theology, I am tempted to say that this book – and Williams's thought – instantiate what I myself call with favourable intention an 'open system' of theology. To warn my students against the overly constricting dangers of system (and incidentally to introduce a few technical terms), I early on in my basic teaching list a number of factors that should keep the theological enterprise open: the ktiseological, the hamartiological, the historical, the doxological, the euchological, the mystical, and the eschatological. These figure, deliberately less schematically no doubt, in Williams's opening chapter on theological integrity: we have our 'particular', and therefore limited, time and place as creatures; we need to 'repent' where the 'interests' of 'power' distort our discourse; we need to admit the 'complexity' in the ongoing story of 'God in the world and the world in God'; our thought should be offered to God in a self-surrendering 'sacrifice of praise'; the practice of thanksgiving and intercession recognizes our 'incompleteness', our dependence on grace; 'waiting on God' in 'silence and attention' points to *apophasis*, 'the acknowledgement of the inadequacy of any form, verbal, visual or gestural, to picture God definitively, to finish the business of religious speech'; our 'mortality' is a reminder at the personal level of a 'transformation' that is still to come.

Humility is proper for a theologian, but it may be wondered whether

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Williams – in his concern to avoid what with the postmoderns he calls a 'totalizing perspective' – may not have underplayed, already here in theory and in later chapters substantially, the justifiable *kataphasis* that is represented by the noun in the phrase 'open systems'. At the close of this first chapter, the author affirms that 'theology needs to make connections, to search out and display unities or analogies (good biblical interpretation has always sought to do this), and – borrowing the phrase from Dietrich Ritschl's *Logic of Theology* (London, 1986) – to ''try with overall outlines''' (p. 92). Williams refers several times appreciatively to Ritschl's book but without taking up the figure of the 'net' that that writer uses. A net allows breathing space and consists in 'connections', but it also requires nodal points for strength; and it is those – such as the articles of the ancient ecumenical creeds – that I would wish to see more prominently displayed by Williams.

In the prologue to the book, Williams talks about three modes or styles that are appropriate to Christian theology: the celebratory, the communicative, and the critical. The celebratory, which is 'typically the language of hymnody and preaching', attempts to 'draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used'. Now Williams may have thought that he could take largely for granted among his original hearers and likely readers a familiarity with, and acceptance of, the classic traditions of Christian worship which serve – at least in a secondary way after their primary purpose of glorifying God – as vehicles of the story and of the faith down the generations and within the contemporary communities. But I am not so sanguine. He is, of course, correct that the faith needs to be intelligently appropriated – and that is where the communicative and critical modes of theology come in. Perhaps the three modes have to be practised simultaneously. But my experience leads me to think that the first and greatest emphasis needs to be placed, at least in the circumstances I know, on the almost 'raw' data of the gospel (of course, they are never quite raw, for there is always a context of meaning in which events occur and are interpreted, though this itself may be changed by the events; but I will borrow a trick from Williams himself who is rather fond of qualifiers such as 'almost' and 'not quite'). Thus, our author talks often enough of 'resurrection', but it is as though reference to 'the Empty Tomb' has to be dragged out of him; and when on a couple of occasions he does affirm the empty tomb, he claims and splendidly displays the epistemic status of dogma (pp. 194f., 252). Would that he had been more often so forthright!

Williams senses that celebratory theology may be 'in danger of being sealed in on itself'. What, then, about the communicative and critical modes of theology? Communicative theology is 'theology experimenting

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment': 'Theology seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought' (p. xiv). Much of the present book is, I think, meant at least to be overheard by the sympathetic outsider or by the fringe Christian who can be brought around gradually to the classic faith. Perhaps its cultural explorations will help even committed Christians to see just how far we have absorbed or been absorbed by our contemporary world and then provide us with strategies for resistance where needed. For the world of advanced modernity also has its 'commitments' that may run counter to the Christian, its 'plausibility structures' (to use Peter Berger's phrase) that exclude certain crucial features of the faith. To stay with our example, and to quote from Lesslie Newbigin: 'That the tomb was empty ... can be accepted as a fact only if the whole plausibility structure of contemporary Western culture is called into question. To accept it as a fact means that history has a meaning that cannot be found from any study of the regularities and recurrences of the past. It means that the whole existing order of nature and history is confronted by a new reality that gives it a new meaning.'[2]

There is, I would say, a danger of theology in its communicative task leaning too much towards its critical function while drawing insufficiently on the deliverances of celebration. The 'passage through unfamiliar thought', Williams recognizes, may provoke a crisis of tradition: 'Is what is emerging actually identical or at least continuous with what has been believed and articulated?' Critical theology then is theology 'nagging at fundamental meanings'. Williams thinks that such critical theology 'may move towards a rediscovery of the celebratory by hinting at the gratuitous mysteriousness of what theology deals with'; but almost all the examples of critical theology that he cites veer – with statistical justice for the late twentieth century – towards 'agnosticism, even nihilism'. Perhaps it was inevitable that the results of critical theology in the environment of the modern West should have been reductionist in respect of the inherited faith; but it is possible that 'critical theology', in Williams's sense of testing for identity or continuity with the (pre-modern) inheritance, will lead, even kataphatically, to the restoration or enrichment of the great tradition if the geographically and culturally southward shift in Christianity's centre of gravity continues.

Williams himself in this book engages quite heavily in critical theology

[2] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 62.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not so much in an epistemological as in a moral sense. A suspicious reader of history, he is very sensitive to the moral failures of Christians and their communities, their abuses of power, their hunger for control, their internecine conflicts, their downright crimes. In Christian ethics a 'penitent irony' is called for with regard to performance. Theologians are under obligation to 'repentance' on account of their own complicity. Much of what our author says here must be endorsed; but ecclesiological questions are thereby raised, and this seems to me an area in which Williams is curiously vague. For all the 'embodied' feel of his writing, it is rare to find him palpably locating 'the Church' or 'the churches'.

In the chapter on 'Trinity and Revelation', Williams enumerates, on a NT basis, what look like 'marks of the Church' (p. 136):

> To belong to a community associated with or defined by Jesus is to use certain kinds of language about resurrection – a fairly basic distinctive theme. It is also to be engaged in a startlingly vehement and bitter debate about Israel and the Law, especially (in Paul's churches at least) about circumcision. It is to treat 'Father' as a normal and indeed normative address to the God of Israel. And it is to be involved in active commendation of Jesus as a determinative focus of commitment for – in principle – any human being: to speak of him as the 'judge' of all. In terms of the actual social life of Christian groups, it is to be preoccupied with issues about the equality and complementarity of 'ministerial' gifts, about the relative standing of rich and poor, about the legitimate place (or lack of it) of marriage and sexuality, about degrees of contact with the 'non-believing' world and right and wrong responses to its contempt or hostility.

But in references to history and to the contemporary scene Williams scarcely commits himself to identifying *which* claimants to ecclesiality may properly be regarded as 'Church' or 'churches', and in what sense. Given the contentions and divisions of both past and present, there is surely a real problem as to where authentic witness to Jesus was and is made; and it calls for a more deliberate engagement in controversial and ecumenical theology than Williams here undertakes.

In his chapter on 'Trinity and Pluralism' the author takes up the stimulating suggestions of Raimundo Panikkar for breaking out of the 'exclusivist' versus 'inclusivist' versus 'pluralist' straitjacket. As Williams presents him, Panikkar distinguishes between three 'styles of Christian understanding': 'Christianity' (as '*faith*, commitment to and conversion to what the event of Jesus concretely enacts'), 'Christendom' (as '*belief*, commitment to an institution and its mythical cosmology'), and 'Christian-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ness' (as '*confidence* in the general human future as capable of what is shown in Christ'). This third – 'Christianness' – resembles what in my book *Doxology* I called the discernment and recognition of the 'Christ pattern' beyond confessed faith and ecclesial institutions.[3] Judging that Panikkar's model possesses 'real consistency and plausibility', especially when explicitly formulated in terms of what he himself calls a 'Logos-Spirit' pattern, Williams writes (pp. 170f.) that Christianness

> is what we are bound to work at in our present circumstances, when a particular global awareness has been forced upon us; it does not completely negate the other two dimensions. What it means, though, is that being Christian now is going to be more a matter of living out a distinctive witness to the possibility of human community than of 'pre-occupation with self identity' at the public and corporate level. The Christian does not ask how he or she knows that the Christian religion is exclusively and universally true; he or she simply works on the basis of the 'christic' vision for the human good, engaging with adherents of other traditions without anxiety, defensiveness or proselytism, claiming neither an 'exclusivist' perspective invalidating others nor an 'inclusivist' absorption of other perspectives into his or her own, nor yet a 'pluralist' meta-theory, locating all traditions on a single map and relativizing their concrete life.

In my estimation, the 'other two dimensions' require a firmer status than that of being 'not completely negated': they need positive maintenance as the motive, instrument and locus for mission (which is integral to the apostolic gospel and is to be distinguished from abusive 'proselytism') and worship (which, according to 1 Cor 8:5f., is properly directed to 'the one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him, and the one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him'). Again, then, I am somewhat disappointed by the insufficient concreteness of Williams's ecclesiology. When Karl Rahner is invoked, albeit tentatively, in support of the view that the 'network of relations (implicit and explicit) in which a new humanity is to be created ... has its symbolic form in the Christian Church, but its life is not identical with the institutional reality of the Church' (p. 177), it should also be remembered that Rahner made strong claims for the Roman Catholic Church and (at least towards the end of his life) saw the importance of Christian ecumenism. Williams himself admits at one point (p. 233) that 'the Church', albeit concretely unspecified, must 'understand its distinctiveness and separateness – not from the human race

[3] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 68ff.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but from all communities and kinships whose limits fall short of the human race. . . . [T]he Church needs practices, conventions and life-patterns that keep alive the distinctiveness of the Body. . . . [A] church which does not at least possess certain features of a ''sect'' cannot act as an agent of transformation.'

In one place, at any rate, Williams becomes more specific in his ecclesiology. That is when, in the chapter on 'Sacraments of the New Society', he chooses to base his exposition of baptism on the rite for the baptism of infants in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. He writes approvingly (pp. 210f.):

> What ought to strike us is how both the kinds of belonging evoked here – the condition of sin, belonging with Adam, and the new life of belonging in or with Christ – are not *elective* matters, not things over which the subject has any control. . . . [W]e look in vain, in the course of this liturgy, for an autonomous subject choosing its companions. The subject coming to baptism is not only a subject incapable of choice, an infant, it is also enmeshed in unchosen relations and subject to irresistible and destructive compulsions; in the course of the rite, it is symbolically stripped of all this and given a new context and new associates, new goals and (implicitly at least) new desires. Everything about the rite seems to push *choice* to the margin.

Now, granted the priority of grace which every Christian theologian would wish to maintain; granted also that secular 'freedom of choice' is not identical with 'Christian freedom'; and granted, too, that a Christian community is vital to the shaping of a Christian identity: it yet seems something of a cavalier move on Williams's part to question not only modern but also apostolic understandings at a place where there is at least some overlap between them; for he writes (pp. 211f.) that, in contrast with what the (sympathetically presented) Prayer Book rite 'takes for granted', 'we are a bit more uneasy than our forebears were about the obliteration or displacement of personal commitment in a rite whose New Testament roots seem to be a good deal more interested in moments of choice'. As one for whom 'freedom' is a key category throughout, Williams owes us a clearer account of how in his sense it is to be related to, or distinguished from, the 'choice' about which he shows such suspicion. At one point (p. 237) he himself writes, in muted criticism of the 'incarnationalist consensus' as it marked Anglicanism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that 'the Church's *specific* and *constructive* vocation' entails that 'the relations of human beings in the Body of Christ, relations dependent simply on a shared *commitment* to and *promise* to be with the risen Jesus, provide the context and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

critique for other systems, the irritant that can prevent the human world from simply settling down with mutually exclusive and competing tribalisms' (third and fourth emphases added); and even (pp. 284f.) that 'the society of the Church in its origins creates considerable tension with the society around because it will not take for granted (even if it will not often challenge head-on) the finality and authority of the socially prevailing accounts of status and power. The more Christianity ceases to be a distinctive communal life to which adult persons *choose to commit* themselves, the more this tension is eroded' (emphasis again added).

Underlying some of my critical questions to Williams may be an unease about his doctrine of God. On the one hand, he offers an impressive version of the kind of trinitarianism that gained the day in the latter part of the twentieth century as part of 'the ecumenical rediscovery of the Trinity'.[4] That is a trinitarianism noetically based on, and ontologically grounded in, the kenotic 'self-dispossession' of the persons: their internal self-giving and their self-gift to the world produce and expound the belief that 'God is love'. On the other hand, and despite a chapter entitled 'The Judgement of the World', Williams's doctrine of God gives little if any room to the biblical theme of the wrath of God (e.g. John 3:36; Rom 1:18–2:11; Eph 5:3–19; 1 Thess 1:9f.) and to the enormity of sin as an offence against God and the divine order that requires an objective atonement if unholy man is to find communion with the holy God. Regarding the 'peace' obtained by the death of Christ (p. 265), there are a few remarks on the 'cost' to God of 'our restoration to wholeness' (on p. 10, for example, in connection with the 'breaking' at the eucharist) and, obliquely, on an 'injury to be healed by mercy' (p. 272). But the 'interest' of God (cf. pp. 248f.) does not seem to include that of one who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity and whose righteousness is to be found and displayed in the right ordering of creation and of humankind. For all the attractiveness of an Abelardian vision ('vulnerable love' is the key for Williams, as on pp. 41f.), scripture and tradition require that an Anselmian perspective also be taken into account.[5] Or would all this fall under the strictures of Williams concerning an 'infantile' view of God (pp. 121f., 125, 138)?

At the outset I spoke of Williams's subtlety, and in conclusion I will elevate the language to that of brilliance. I do not want the criticisms I have explicitly or implicitly raised to obscure the flashes of insight that illuminate so many pages of this book. I think, for example, of Williams's exposition

[4] See my article under that title in *One in Christ* 34 (1998), pp. 95–124.

[5] R. W. Southern, for instance, has illuminated the *Cur Deus homo* in a sympathetic way in his *Saint Anselm* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 197–227.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in Chapter 5 of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and his positive demonstration of what is at stake in it. Or again, there is his repeated emphasis on the need for diachronic awareness of the factors that go into dogmatic decisions and theological developments – an emphasis grounded in Chapter 8 by the elaboration of hints from Karl Barth and Vladimir Lossky concerning the historicity of the Spirit's work in revelation and transformation and illustrated in Williams's capsule summary on pp. 139f. of the fourth-century debates concerning the divinity of Christ. Then there is Williams's refusal of an essentialism that posits an altogether 'ready-made' soul, and his due recognition of the social contribution to the making of the human person (see especially the chapters on 'interiority and epiphany' and on 'nobody knows who I am till judgment morning'). And finally there may be instanced from the later chapters Williams's display of the aesthetic and doxological character of Christian ethics.

Even at the points where I have ventured criticisms and questions, one could point to the nuances in Williams's positions as they are expressed at various times in these pieces that originated over 15 or more years. In his prologue to this book (p. xvi), the author disarmingly refers to possible 'incoherences' as 'an index of lived incoherence', whereas the 'continuities' and 'unities' have 'something to do with the coherence of a biography'. In any case, I would wish to take to heart for myself his 'reminder of the inescapable place of repentance in all theological speech worth the name'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930603000152 Published online by Cambridge University Press