

Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), pp. xv + 277. ISBN 978-1472945549. RRP US\$15.39 or £19.49.  
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*Christ the Heart of Creation* is Rowan Williams' latest book, and after having recently published several short works in a popular style, he returns to Christology. As is the case with much of his prolific output, the book began as a lecture series, the 2016 Hulsean Lectures<sup>1</sup> of the Faculty of Divinity of Cambridge University.

The book has signs of its origin as a lecture series (plus a few other lectures and articles [p. x]), even saying at one point that Williams would take something up 'in the next lecture' (p. 197). He uses quite charitable language (since he is, after all, speaking) about those contemporary writers he disagrees with, although some impatience with a few comes out. But overall there is a passion for readers to discover, or re-discover, the explanatory power of classical Christology to help us once again 'hear the gospel'.

Williams' argument is that contemporary theologians (and by extension, the rest of us) would ignore at their peril the very real contributions of ancient, medieval, Reformed and modern authors in holding in tension the Word of God *qua* God and the finite humanity *qua* human of Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, the *dogmata* of the Church still matter, in that the history of their development demonstrates a much more sophisticated grasp of the issues of divinity incarnate than some today are wont to acknowledge. And while the doctrines themselves do not engender belief, they form a narrative frame for faith to be able to reflect on itself and draw conclusions that do relate directly to the life and work of faithful Christians. It is 'the model that clarifies all we say about God's relation with the world, the relation between infinite and finite, Creator and creation'. Jesus Christ as 'heart of creation' means that 'all the patterns of finite existence converge to find their meaning' upon Christ (p. xiii).

This book is much more than a historical theological exercise, albeit by one of the sharpest minds of our time. Williams puts forth as normative a Christology not his own, but one presented as a reliable development of still-relevant classical authors such as Aquinas. In order to do this, he begins by citing Austin Farrer, to whose memory the book is dedicated (he died in 1968).

Williams refers principally to Farrer's Bampton Lectures, printed as *The Glass of Vision*.<sup>2</sup> 'When we attempt to think about God,' he summarizes Farrer, 'we are attempting to deploy and clarify a notion of agency that is unbrokenly using its entire resource, generating possibilities for every other conceivable agent and fully exercising an unlimited intelligence ... [it causes] the system of secondary causality in which we finite agents act ... What it means for infinite causality/agency to be at work is that a system of finite causality is operating – not that a

<sup>1</sup><https://sms.cam.ac.uk/collection/2154437>

<sup>2</sup>He quotes from a recent critical edition with commentary, namely, Robert McSwain (ed.), *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry: Austin Farrer's The Glass of Vision with Critical Commentary* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

more impressive instance of finite causality is invoked to complete the picture' (p. 2). "There is a sort of paradox involved in the very idea of a supernatural act", quoting Farrer, in that the finite is not doing anything other than being whatever it is. And yet in such an act, "the creature and the Creator are both enacting the creature's life, though in different ways and at different depths."<sup>3</sup> "Upon this double personal agency in our one activity turns the verbally insoluble riddle of grace and free will, or of Godhood and Manhood in Christ's One Person, or the efficacy of human prayer."<sup>4</sup> And revelation as well, leading us, says Williams, 'to embark on the search for clusters of metaphors in Scripture that point towards the presence of the unlimited within history ... to have our imaginations enlarged in the direction of that which cannot finally be "imaged" with any adequacy – the reality of an unlimited actuality that can be thought of only in some sort of association with love and intelligence' (p. 6).

So Christology is at the center of this metaphysics, shaping it and as the centuries unfold, clarifying it. Farrer's own Christological reflection is summed up in a little essay, 'Very God and Very Man', to which Williams refers but does not quote.<sup>5</sup>

Williams shares Farrer's impatience with the reductionism of their respective contemporaries. Farrer can be cutting; Williams is kinder and gentler, though he does skewer John Hicks in particular, for saying that the Incarnation is like claiming a circle on a piece of paper is also a square.<sup>6</sup> To Farrer's point, divinity and humanity are not 'two *genera* alongside each other, so that the Christological claim is precisely *not* a claim that one subject possesses two kinds of (incompatible) defining natural qualities' (p. 8, emphasis in the original). The classical model does not diminish the real humanity of Jesus, as some suppose, nor does Farrer's 'paradigm' wall off the Word from what happens to Jesus and his human person. It does mean that the finite does not influence the infinite in the ways that one finite event influences another. This 'impassability' of God protects the distinction between Creator and creature, but it does not mean that the Word is not absolutely and intimately present to Jesus' suffering and death.

Williams ends this reflection on Farrer with a characteristically long sentence:

That God is in no imaginable sense the rival of humanity, that the relation between finite and infinite agency can never be one in which more of one means less of the other, and (crucially) that God can therefore have no

<sup>3</sup>*The Glass of Vision* in McSwain, *Scripture*, p. 35; quoted in Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p. 4. '... in the second cause the first cause operates', completing Farrer's sentence that Williams quoted.

<sup>4</sup>Farrer, *Glass*, p. 36; Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Found in *Interpretation and Belief* (ed. Charles Conti; London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 126-37. To sum up his conclusions: (1) the God-Man is not a combination of divine and human, but the act of God 'finitizing' (his word) the divine personal action. So, Jesus is 'purely divine *in* being purely human'). And specifically, it is (2) the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word or Son, who is incarnate, so that we become God's adopted children 'by association. The sonship is spread to embrace us.' And so (3), the incarnation creates a real historical human being in the same limits of circumstances and knowledge as yours or mine. Yet Jesus 'knew how to play his divine part rather than *knowing that* his part was, in a metaphysical sense, divine.' Which leads to his compassion for us (p. 137; emphases mine).

<sup>6</sup>Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, p. 7, n. 12, referencing Hick's essay 'Jesus and the World's Religions' in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 167-85.

'interests' to defend over against the interest of the creatures God has made out of unconstrained and selfless love – all this is part of what makes the classical Christological synthesis still a spiritually and morally serious proposal for understanding what it is to be the object of creative and limitless generosity; or, in simple terms, for hearing the gospel. (p. 11)

Williams then moves directly to Aquinas, which he presents as the hinge between earlier Greek and Latin authors and the later Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians. Thomas sums up earlier reflection and creates his own language as well, clarifying the same point that Farrer would in essence reiterate almost 600 years later.

Jumping next to Aquinas may seem odd, as Williams acknowledges, but it makes sense, if only that most theologians have had to study the Angelic Doctor to some extent. Furthermore, Williams' argument is that Thomas gets Christology right, so to speak, developing a vocabulary in which it is impossible to speak of the union of divine and human that is Jesus Christ as 'the fusion of two comparable metaphysical subjects'. It is rather the Word's 'act of being' that is both itself as second Person of the Trinity in eternity and its 'enactment' in the real human being that is Jesus of Nazareth (p. 26). Christ is neither the sum of two, nor can one be subtracted from the other.

Williams' presentation is built around a vigorous defense of Aquinas against the charge of Richard Cross, an outstanding scholar of John Duns Scotus, that Thomas's system leads to a single nature or 'monophysite' Christ.<sup>7</sup> This enables him to clarify that latter's notion of the single Being or *esse* of Christ. It gives us 'a coherent way of speaking of an uninterrupted created agency which is at the same time in every respect activated, made actually present in the world by the eternal action of the Word' (p. 33). No 'god of the gaps'. And the reason this 'grammar' is important is because it allows us to enter into relation with God through the Word in Jesus. The chief image of this relation is the Body of Christ, of which we who are in relation with Christ actually are limbs: 'involved in a communal embodiment of the Word in Christ'. Thus, Jesus is for all people everywhere, his humanity and its actions the 'instruments' of the Word to enter with us into a saving relation (pp. 39-40).

The discussion moves to consider what came before Aquinas's synthesis of Greek and Latin theologies, and this section (pp. 43-124) is itself one of the many and very valuable contributions of *Christ the Heart of Creation*. Beginning with the language of the New Testament, especially in Paul and John, Williams sees much of twentieth-century exegesis as misplaced emphasis on one or another historical quest, or else existential alternatives like Rudolf Bultmann's. The issue is what the text narrates: 'a couple of decades after the execution of Jesus of Nazareth, what was being said about him by some of his followers showed signs of exceptional linguistic eccentricity ... [Paul's] bewildering variety or register or idiom within a very brief space ... well beyond what is normally ascribable to a human individual' (pp. 47-48). Furthermore, this quickly leads to an expansion of Christ's risen life to

<sup>7</sup>See Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: From Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

become the identity of the community of followers. Finally, it includes even the universe itself (Rom. 8).

The term *Logos* provides a fertile field for a variety of Christologies, leading to Origen's in Williams' account. What is the relation of the *Logos* incarnate to the Father is the question, famously answered by the Alexandrian priest Arius as that of 'ultimate' creature to creator. The problems raised by that account led (with great struggles, over which Williams elides) to the determination that the Word made flesh was *homoousios* or 'of one substance' with God – and Jesus 'of one substance' with us (the Nicaean determination). Curiously, Williams does not spend much time in the book on the accomplishment that this represented.<sup>8</sup>

The Definition of Chalcedon is where he lands, as it set the terms for future Christologies, not by explanation so much as by inscribing a 'hermeneutical circle', so to speak, within which speech about Jesus Christ must remain.<sup>9</sup> The discussion of the council and its aftermath is magisterial, as it traces the struggles to refine a metaphysical vocabulary leading to Aquinas's account from the theological ferment leading to the council's definition, through later figures like Leontius of Byzantium and Leontius of Jerusalem, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, and Latins like Lombard, Gilbert Poreta, and finally to Aquinas.

Then Williams returns again to Aquinas and Scotus in preparation to discuss developments leading to the Reformation and beyond. As he had noted before that much of medieval theology strikes modern people as rebarbative and overweeningly technical, this discussion revolves around something which makes us today quite reactive: the notion of merit. Specifically, what did Jesus deserve for his service? And how can we gain merit in God's eyes?

Williams puts John Calvin and Aquinas up against Duns Scotus, as well as later medieval theologians like William of Ockham. The heart of the matter is that for the former, the actor is more important than the act, and in any event, there is nothing we can do to please God, for as (unforgiven) sinners we cannot even bear to be in God's presence. Scotus agrees in general that we cannot merit salvation, but he does allow for meritorious acts among the baptized, focusing on the act not the actor. This develops from his own reading of Aristotle against Aquinas, to which Scotus added a new term, *haecceitas*, literally 'thisness', to complement analysis of a thing's nature, form and matter (p. 135 n. 18).<sup>10</sup>

I am crudely summarizing Williams' extensive and subtle discussion of this issue, which he argues turns out to be crucial to Christology in general. For while we can have no merit, it seems clear that Jesus Christ of all people should have ultimate merit for 'coming to serve, not to be served' (Mk 10.45). But no. To impute merit to him is to say in effect that the *Word* deserves merit, which is impossible. Rather, the 'merit' won on the cross is radically for us, not for Jesus. So far all agree. Scotus's crucial move is to impute Christ's meritoriousness to a

<sup>8</sup>The term *homoousios* occurs only once, as does the term *homoousion*.

<sup>9</sup>By this I mean a move similar to the effect of Article 6 of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, declaring that the 'Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation', without spelling out what those 'things' are *per se*.

<sup>10</sup>It is worth noting that 'haecceity' remains an important concept down to our day, embraced by some philosophers over against Thomist quiddity. This fact underlines the enduring power of both men's thought – Duns Scotus is not called 'The Subtle Doctor' without reason.

prior decision of God in eternity, which reflects his overall shift of emphasis from the divine love of us to the divine will for us. That opened the door to decadence, against which the Reformers reacted ('the schoolmen'), though, of course, influenced by the very theologians they denounced.

The gift of the Spirit that forms the Body of Christ on earth is ours by the 'overflow' of Christ's 'merits' which are 'won' *for us*, not for him. This theme, so important to Aquinas and Calvin, recurs in the discussion of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's contribution to Christology.

Williams' discussion of Calvin's Christology might come as a surprise to some readers, for he shows that the Frenchman developed a very clear equivalent to Aquinas's theology. It follows a comparatively brief analysis of Martin Luther's Christology, which Williams (like many others) sees as powerful but problematic, in that by trying to defend the Real Presence in the Eucharist, Luther ended up defending the ubiquity in time and space of Christ, a 'spatial' interpretation which the earlier theologians had rejected as implying that the Word is somehow 'in' the universe (p. 139).

What Calvin did reflects his exegetical prowess as well as learning, especially his awareness of the earlier patristic developments (but apparently not Aquinas). He is clear that through the Incarnation we become human as God intended, through 'adoptive filiation', not by the acquisition of divine qualities, over against Luther. And this is the work not only of Christ's glorified humanity but also the action of the Spirit. Calvin's well-developed pneumatology is part of a full-throated trinitarian theology as well as a sound theology of atonement. In his hands, the action of Word and human in Christ is without competition: 'in different ways and at different depths', as Farrer says.<sup>11</sup>

Williams picks up again his narrative with Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, two theologians who wrestled with the inheritance of Lutheran and Calvinist rivalries. Adverting to ongoing debate about the substance of Barth's Christology, Williams argues that Barth ends with a developed theology of adoptive filiation through and only through the 'elected history of Jesus as the basis not only of our election as human beings but also our transformation as agents' (p. 182). His discussion of Bonhoeffer is much broader, and leads from the 1933 Christology lectures through to his enduring legacy as martyr: the ethical imperative that Christians must be living for others, just as the Church must not be about its own existence but has to be 'Christ existing as community', bearing witness to the absolute centrality of Christ to history, nature and the human race (p. 191).<sup>12</sup>

The last theologian Williams presents to complete his book's argument is the Jesuit Erich Przywara, better-known as an influence on his disciple Hans Urs von Balthasar. The earlier master developed a view of metaphysics as requiring that we can never know God as God: at best we can arrive at what Williams calls 'the space where a recognition of God, but not a concept of God, can occur ... it points to a God who is necessarily incomprehensible, whose reality can never be an object for thought' (p. 233). But we have Christ, and rather than

<sup>11</sup>The full discussion of John Calvin's Christology is found on pp. 141-67.

<sup>12</sup>Williams' far-ranging analysis of Bonhoeffer is found on pp. 183-217.

being able now to know what God is, we have to enact it. Williams quotes Przywara: ‘a participatory re-enactment and comprehension of “the theology of God Himself” (in his “self-expression as Christ”) as the “Christological theology of God Himself” (p. 234 n. 20).<sup>13</sup>

Williams ends the corpus of the book by returning to Austin Farrer once more, to close the circle he opened at the beginning. Like Farrer, he dwells on the incompleteness of theological endeavor, always to be straining to explain. He ends by expressing hope that reconsideration of the permanent achievement that is ‘the grammar’ of classical Christology will continue to pull us away from facile oversimplifications of one type or another – ‘perhaps these pages will serve prompt some at least to look longer and harder at the classical shape of incarnational teaching, and to see how it is in this light that we see light upon the entire creaturely landscape we inhabit, and which we are called with and in Christ to transform’ (p. 254).

In an appendix entitled ‘A Concluding (Untheological?) Postscript: Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard, and Chalcedon’, Williams adds to his argument with almost an aside on the relationship between the two philosophers and Chalcedon’s definition. To summarize, religious discourse is not a system of assertions that can be proven or disproven by some new piece of evidence, but rather only by shifting the global frame of reference. In other words, the ‘validity’ of the Gospel depends on the ‘performance’ of it by the Church.

Overall, *Christ the Heart of Creation* is an extraordinary achievement, a text which will I believe become itself a classic account as gauge and measure of future Christologies. It bears some of the weaknesses that its origins as lectures necessarily have: one can say the same about Farrer’s *Glass of Vision*. To make a book from lectures requires some stitching, and the stitches do sometimes show. Williams’ transitional passages are superb, however, so this is a small cavil. Another small cavil is ending with a provocative appendix, as in *The Edge of Words*,<sup>14</sup> and sallying around Wittgenstein again: so write a book already.

Some readers may react to the fact that Williams never criticizes his subjects with reference to their putative personal failings: Cyril of Alexandria’s unclear relation to the murder of the philosopher Hypatia, Aquinas’ ambiguous attitude toward women, Calvin’s involvement in the execution of Michel Servet,<sup>15</sup> Karl Barth’s long-standing relationship with his secretary, and so on. It is a time-honored technique to condemn someone’s thought because of their failings, in which our age particularly excels, magnified as it is by social media. However, there is no legitimate way to counter a thinker other than by thinking, not more or less hypocritical moralizing.

Rowan Williams is very careful to use inclusive language as much as possible, given his subjects of discussion. He makes many admiring references to works by women

<sup>13</sup>Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (trans. John Betz and David Bentley Hart; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), pp. 531–32.

<sup>14</sup>*The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* by Rowan Williams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). See my review, in the *Sewanee Theology Review*, 57.4 (2016).

<sup>15</sup>The subject of a recent critically acclaimed opera in Geneva, Switzerland, by a local composer, Shauna Beesley, and Jean-Claude Humbert, librettist, entitled ‘*Le Procès de Michel Servet*’.

(including the Episcopalian Kathryn Tanner), and of course, his wife Jane Williams is herself a well-known and accomplished theologian in her own right.

The aspect of Williams' argument that struck me is that *homoousios* is barely treated, and yet he acknowledges that it is the lynchpin of all Christology, indeed, any Christian theology: 'begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father'. Furthermore, the Nicene Christology engenders the theology of the Holy Trinity, and implicitly raised the question of the humanity of Jesus: it is at the heart of the need to constantly restate for every generation its underlying challenge to all the myriad ways we humans believe we understand ourselves, our universe, and the question of God.

It is worth noting that the term itself, *homoousios*, occurs nowhere in the Scriptures. And yet it is arguably the touchstone of Christian belief. To reject it (as do for example the Jehovah's Witnesses or differently, the Church of Latter-day Saints) is to be outside a fully authentic witness to the Word made flesh. How this word, which first appeared in gnostic texts, came to have this status is clearly explained in Bernard Lonergan's little-known book, *The Way to Nicaea*.<sup>16</sup> In essence, the Canadian Jesuit shows through a historical survey of texts how this Christology was also an answer to the need for a genuinely theoretical statement – as opposed to earlier commonsensical or outright mythological accounts of the Incarnation. In other words, the need for the metaphysical in giving an account for the Church's faith that Rowan Williams so brilliantly carries forward is already present in the first council's adoption of *Homoousios*. Bringing that out would have in my reading perfected an already fine argument.

My last comment is the notion of Christ as 'the heart of creation'. One gathers what this means as one reads, and that it is a true descriptor, but it does not receive a fulsome treatment of its own that could further spell out why Christ is indeed that. The implications for this planet's climate crisis are obvious, for instance, and I think the reader would have benefited from such a treatment. Perhaps Rowan Williams is already writing something more on the profound and wide-ranging issues that he has powerfully treated in *Christ the Heart of Creation*.

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<sup>16</sup>Like Williams, Lonergan's intent is to re-pristiniate classical Christology and its development for his own generation. And similarly, both have been labeled conservatives, which might fit if developing startling new perspectives from a careful study of what has been handed down is actually what that means. See Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicaea: The Dialectical Development of Trinitarian Theology* (trans. Conn O'Donovan; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976). A newer version is the complete bilingual translation of *De Deo trino*, the original Latin document of which *The Way to Nicaea* is the *Prolegomenon*. See Bernard Lonergan, *The Triune God: XI. Doctrines, and XII. Systematics* (trans. Michael G. Shields; ed. Robert M. Doran and H. Daniel Monsour; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009). According to his first translator, Lonergan was unenthusiastic about translating his treatise. He had been obligated as professor in Rome to write in Latin, and he remarked once that 'Latin is fine, if you have nothing to say that Marcus Tullius Cicero could not have said'.