THE CATHOLIC HUMANISM OF ROWAN WILLIAMS

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Thesis under the direction of Professors Robert MacSwain and Benjamin King

Abstract

In this thesis I hope to explore the Catholic humanism of Rowan Williams and glean something of the unity and beauty of his ecclesial vision, while also putting others in the conversation, including critics. The thesis divides into four chapters that will demonstrate that Williams is a theologian who does his work firmly planted within the tradition, while also driving the theological conversation into new territories. The first chapter takes a look at how Williams understands catholicity. He works with Cyril of Jerusalem’s definition that to be Catholic is to tell the whole truth about God and humanity. To suggest that the Church endeavors to tell the whole truth about God is to propose that God holds nothing back from humans, there is not some bit of God’s love and generosity that is sequestered off from creation. The second chapter surveys Williams’s sacramental theology. After investigating the role of memory and hope in shaping ritual practice, the symbols of Baptism and Eucharist are explored as the means through which the Church remembers its calling. Chapter Three examines the Church in the public square, or if you like, Williams as a public theologian. In order to give some form to his public articulation I have chosen three topics that are of a particular interest to him: the environment, economics, and secularism. The topic of Chapter Four is prayer and engages Williams’s work with icons to focus on his recurrent theme that contemplation is the key to prayer, liturgy, art, and ethics. Williams draws on the Benedictine insight that seeks to inhabit the ordinary with a contemplative perceptivity that makes room for God to come through.
One of the characteristic ways he talks about this is to say that the Christian is called on to take responsibility for God. The Catholic humanism of Williams’s ecclesial vision strives to tell the whole truth about God and humanity and is therefore always emerging, shifting, and growing, even as it finds its grounding in the inexhaustible mystery of the God-man. The Catholic tradition, from this vantage point, is seen as living and exploratory and not as a static deposit that can be neatly summed up. Williams’s Catholic vision throws light on all areas of human endeavor, as it is tasked with telling the whole truth.

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The Catholic Humanism of Rowan Williams

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INTRODUCTION

To explore the theological vision of Rowan Williams is at once exhilarating and daunting. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, now Master of Magdalene College, is a precocious thinker, and has been for several decades. One of the best bits of advice I received at Emory University, as I was embarking on theological study, came from the distinguished New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson. He suggested that I find a single thinker to journey with through seminary. His choice had been Karl Rahner, when he was a young student. By good fortune—even if it meant that I had a great deal of work in front of me to even begin understanding him—I discovered the work of Williams. For the last five years I have engaged in conversation with this thinker more closely than any other. This has meant not only reading his corpus that started with The Wound of Knowledge in 1979¹, published when he was only twenty-nine years of age (with the help of his mother typing his handwritten manuscript), but also fielding new scholarship and publication as it has been made available. Of course even when a single interlocutor is selected, the conversation widens very quickly. Textual references to a vast array of thinkers emerge and before long it becomes crucial to engage the scholars who influence your chosen teacher.

One way to get a sense of how Williams thinks is to look at three books: Wrestling With Angels, On Christian Theology, and Tokens of Trust. The first is an amalgamation of essays that demonstrate what is going on in Williams’s head as he

engages with Hans Urs von Balthasar, Simone Weil, or Hegel.² The content is dense, heavily footnoted, and the essays require a great deal of attention and patience. He shows a capacity for consistently narrating important intricacies, in a way that opens up exciting connections and landscapes, and this seems to come from a practice of contemplative patience. Rushing to a conclusion, or hastily putting closure on an important matter, is not preferred by Williams. Rather, he thinks that the truth is something that is patiently labored after, or better yet, patiently received with an attentive gaze.

The second book, On Christian Theology, grows out of the first in the sense that the conversations in Wrestling with Angels shape and refine Williams’s own theology. I was fortunate to explore this text with a group of three others.³ We would each take a chapter and on Wednesday evenings, over a cup of strong tea, attempt to trace his line of reasoning. In this text, Williams moves between the three different categories of theological speech he spells out in the Prologue: the celebratory, the communicative, and the critical. It is an important point to make that this compilation of essays, representing his theological method, moves interchangeably between these three modes, because the method resists the totalizing impulses of a more ‘scientific’ approach.

The celebratory mode is evinced in the “Odes of Solomon or the poetry of Ephrem Syrus, in festal homilies and certain kinds of scriptural commentary.”⁴ Perhaps the best way to understand this mode of doing theology is to think of it as taking place within a community of faith that is engaged in the language and symbolism of ritual and

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⁴ Rowan Williams, On Christian Theology, xiii.
prayer. Linguistic moves can be made in a way that can take a great deal for granted, and the task is to stirringly communicate something of the splendor of the triune God.

Williams suggests that the work of Hans Urs von Balthasar "might be characterized as essentially 'celebratory', in the sense that his intention is less to argue than to evoke a fullness of vision—that 'glory' around which his theology circles so consistently." Williams' own critical and communicative thinking is arguably nourished by the celebratory language that he has internalized through a life of disciplined prayer.

The communicative mode of public theology addresses a culture outside of the liturgical assembly. This task is no less persuasive in its scope than preaching, but it does attempt to "witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment." Williams suggests that Origen demonstrates a communicative mode of articulation through his engagement with the Platonic idiom and symbolic world. More recently, theologians operating in this communicative mode have engaged the landscape of Marxism (e.g., liberation theology) and feminist and gender theory (e.g., Sarah Coakley and Graham Ward). Importantly, for Williams, this mode does not only assume that a different intellectual language allows for a way into conversation with the current landscape, but that the idiom may uncover something within the Christian tradition that is yet to be fully explored.

The third mode of theological articulation is the critical. As the theologian passes through foreign intellectual idioms with the confidence that the gospel can be articulated in new landscapes with new language, the possibility of crisis can emerge. "Is there a

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stable conceptual area in the discourse of belief that will always remain unaffected by mediation in other idioms." This question, in the critical mode, is kept at the fore. The response will lead to one of two conclusions: either a creeping agnosticism and even nihilism, or a return to discovering celebratory language "by hinting at the gratuitous mysteriousness of what theology deals with, the sense of a language trying unsuccessfully to keep up with a datum that is in excess of any foresight, any imagined comprehensive structure." For Williams, the critical mode often mirrors the apophatic tradition that negates in order to delve more deeply into the mystery of the divine.

If *On Christian Theology* takes Williams’s conversations in *Wrestling With Angels* and turns them into a coherent shape and way of doing theology in all three modes, *Tokens of Trust* presents a celebratory and communicative distillation of the critical engagement found in the other books. It would be a misrepresentation to suppose that he has left the critical behind in *Tokens of Trust*, as the conversation is still right there with him, but he writes in a more popular mode. Nevertheless, the mode of articulation shifts and the resultant accessibility is enhanced without the substance being lost. His method in *Tokens of Trust* is to use sections of the Apostles’ Creed as the framework for each of the chapters. Structuring the book around the Creed suggests a celebratory style of theology, given that it is recited within the context of liturgy. Before we dive more deeply into the content of this theologian’s work, we should take a step back and say something about his story.  

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When Rowan Williams was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 2003, his elevation to the highest ecclesiastical see in Anglicanism was met with both enthusiasm and surprise: surprise as he was called from his native Wales, without ever having been bishop in a diocese in England, and enthusiasm as his rare intellectual gifts were highly regarded. Born in 1950, he studied theology at Christ’s College, Cambridge, and for his doctorate at Wadham College, Oxford. In 1986, at the young age of 36, Williams was appointed to the Lady Margaret Professorship of Divinity at Oxford. Williams was to stay in this post until his consecration as the Bishop of Monmouth, in Wales, in 1992. Seven years on, he was elevated to the Archbishopric of the Welsh Church and in 2002 it was announced that he would become the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury. To say that he took his seat on the cathedra at Canterbury at a tumultuous time in the life of the Church of England, and the Anglican Communion, would be quite an understatement. Fierce division over issues related to human sexuality and gender were threatening to dissolve a Communion that is consensual in construct.

Williams comes out of the Anglo-Catholic wing of Anglicanism, but that category can be as allusive as it can be helpful. For example, his patronage of the group called Affirming Catholicism confirms that he eschews certain traditionalist views such as a male-only priesthood. As a university student, Williams was unsure if he would remain an Anglican, the church he prompted his Presbyterian parents to join when he was 11 years old. He considered the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and even the

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Old Catholic Church. Nevertheless, like his doctoral supervisor Donald Allchin, Williams would discern a vocation to be “Orthodox in an Anglican form.”¹² This is an important piece of the picture that cannot be quickly discarded because this disposition shapes Williams to this day. Within Anglicanism, Williams found encouragement and vocation in the sacramental pattern of worship, the threefold order of ministry, and reflective preaching and teaching. He discovered that Anglicanism avoided both the overly confessional dogmatism of some churches and the pyramidal view of authority found in others. Within the generous contours of Anglicanism, Williams found a consensual Catholicism that was held together through a shared life of prayer rooted in sacramental practice. His engagement with the Eastern Orthodox Church was not only of academic interest, but deeply informs his Anglican practice and gives shape to his sacramental and political theology, not to mention his ecclesiology.

Within this expansive vision of catholicity, Williams draws on a myriad of diverse sources. You are as likely to hear him mention St. Paul or Augustine as you are to hear mention of Hegel, Sergei Bulgakov, or Donald MacKinnon. He practices the poetical discipline of patience and time-taking, looking at issues from as many angles as possible, and always hoping to draw out theological insight for the good of the Church. As noted by Benjamin Myers, “A study of fourth-century Latin heresy or the interpretation of a Russian novel can become a spiritual exercise once it is understood as a partial yet real reflection of Christ, the one whose risen life is catholic and

¹²Rupert Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule*, 79. The phrase was used of Williams’s doctoral supervisor, Donald Allchin. His influence on Williams was formative, as evinced in the requiem mass celebrated by Williams: http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2339/archbishops-sermon-at-high-mass-of-requiem-for-canon-donald-allchin (accessed March 3, 2014).
unbounded.”¹³ Williams allows for a symphony of voices to influence him, and he remains open and attentive so as to put in motion the fullest expression of breadth. He learns the idioms and patiently uncovers new layers of discovery all while being turned Godward, so that he might discover something more of the truth about God and humanity.

In this thesis I hope to explore the theology of Williams and draw out something of the unity and beauty of his ecclesial vision, while also putting others in the conversation, including critics. The thesis divides into four chapters that will demonstrate that Williams is a theologian who does his work firmly planted within the tradition—we might call him a kneeling-theologian. In other words, he understands his theological labor to be for the people of God called into being by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.¹⁴ His imagination and determination are subservient to the common call of the baptized to “follow me.”

The first chapter takes a look at how Williams understands the catholicity of the Church. He works with Cyril of Jerusalem’s definition that to be Catholic is to tell the whole truth about God and humanity. To suggest that the Church endeavors to tell the whole truth about God is to propose that God holds nothing back from humans, there is not some bit of God’s love and generosity that is sequestered off from his creation. Rather, God gives of Godself fully and freely, and the Catholic task is to fully receive the gift. To tell the whole truth about God is to come to grips with the reality that God is love— all-the-way-down. The first chapter will also show how Williams builds on Simone

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¹³ Benjamin Myers, Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams (London: T&T Clark, 2012), x.

¹⁴ “The people of God” is a theological phrase that represents the baptized, but also points beyond the church to all of humanity—a humanity made in the image and likeness of God.
Weil’s suggestion that the proper disposition before another person is hesitation. Williams teaches that we must contemplatively pause and hear before we impose solutions or interpretations, not to mention condemnations. To tell the whole truth about humanity, part of the Catholic vocation, is to sit with the actual density of humanity and not gloss over the rough edges. So, the Catholic vision is concerned with God and humanity, and the whole truth of each. A form of intellectual focus and paradoxical boundlessness emerge at the heart of the Catholicity Williams desires to promote and practice. His thought is put into conversation with the Jewish philosopher and legal scholar Martha Nussbaum, and her investigation of the role of the novel in shaping a genuinely human imagination. The chapter is summed up with Williams’s suggestion that to tell the truth about God and humanity demands holiness of life—it takes a humble and prayerful person open to the Spirit of delight shared between the Father and the Son. Only from a place of being grasped by such joy and splendor, the source of discipleship, can the Christian embody the breadth of the Catholic vocation.

The second chapter gives a close look at Williams’s sacramental theology. After investigating the role of memory and hope in shaping ritual practice, the symbols of Baptism and Eucharist are explored as the means through which the Church remembers its calling. Making sense of its own identity, the Church is bound to make reference to God’s gratuitous freedom to create a people. The Church cannot make up its own meaning or constitute itself with some kind of charter. The Church’s identity is reliant on the action of God and God’s desire to set humanity and all of creation in right relationship. The sacraments become the means by which the Church remembers what it is, the body of Christ. Baptism is not so much a point of arrival, but the beginning of a
narrative, a story of failure and rebirth, a growing realization of what it is to live in the company of Jesus. To participate in Holy Communion is to enter into the kenotic action of the eternal Son of God in the Spirit of self-giving love. The institution of the new covenant and the inauguration of the kingdom of God are made possible through the incarnate life and action of Christ. The extension of this life in bread and wine becomes the ritual means by which a covenant people receive this action that has come into the world. Undergirding his sacramental thought is St. Thomas Aquinas’s idea that to reason properly about the sacraments is to speak of what they are for. Rather than getting caught up in just how the sacraments become the body and blood of Christ, Williams reorients the question to argue that sacraments exist so that humans can be made holy in their participation in the life of the triune God.

Chapter Three examines the Church in the public square, or if you like, Williams as a public theologian. In order to give some form to his public articulation I have chosen three topics that are of a particular interest to him: the environment, economics, and secularism. Through an exploration of biblical exegesis, sermons, and lectures as Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams’s theological articulation of the environment comes into focus. The environment, like humanity, is to be properly seen as a creature utterly reliant upon the creative gaze of God. A contemplative posture towards all of creation, human and non-human, is necessitated if it is to be properly honored as gift. His writing on the economy has a recurrent theme that the economic crisis is not so much about greed as it is rooted in pride. For Williams, this is an important distinction as he gathers from the Christian monastic tradition the insight that pride is a failure to accept limitation. Finitude and limitation are realities of creaturely existence and the denial of limitation is
to live in an illusory and delusional realm. Much of the economic activity of late
capitalism has fallen into the category of profit maximization with little to no reference to
limits or risk. The point is not only to decide to be less greedy, but to have the
imagination transformed in such a way that we recognize ourselves as creatures who
grow and change, and therefore share in risk. To acknowledge mutual vulnerability that
comes with change and growth is the surest way to avoid the prideful assumption that
security can be managed without a cogent recognition of limitation. Finally, Williams is
concerned with defending a “procedural secularism” over and against a “programmatic
secularism.” The latter relegates ideological and religious conviction to the realm of the
private and dishonors difference. Instead of creating a space for genuine dialogue and
debate, programmatic secularism sanitizes the public square and monopolizes the
conversation in an utterly functionalist manner. Williams is concerned to argue for a
more robustly religious secularism in the sense that procedural secularism can make room
for religious conviction. He suggests, as others have done, that secularism is in fact made
possible because of the Christian understanding of freedom, a freedom that cannot be
overcome by the state. In the end, he is hopeful that an argumentative or procedural
secularism be secured so that modern totalizing visions that truncate the divine freedom
latent within humanity made in the image of God are stymied and the imaginative
capacity of the religious dimension of the human is preserved.

The topic of Chapter Four is prayer and engages Williams’s work with icons to
focus on his recurrent theme that contemplation is the key to prayer, liturgy, art, and
ethics. Williams draws on the Benedictine insight that seeks to inhabit the ordinary with a
contemplative perpectivity that makes room for God to come through. One of the
characteristic ways he talks about this is to say that the Christian is called on to take responsibility for God. With the likes of people such as Etty Hillesum, Williams characteristically points to holy lives as the evidence of God.\textsuperscript{15} It is through a life of patient prayer turned toward God that God’s action and will come through and the world is given a glimpse of the glory of a mysterious triune God who is love-all-the-way-down.

Throughout, I will place Williams in conversation with others. In two of the Chapters (I and III) I look at the ways a Jewish political philosopher—writing on the role of the novel in shaping the moral imagination of legal judges—and an Anglican theologian examining the built environment elucidate Williams’s theological ideas. These two interlocutors, writing about vastly different topics, demonstrate the relevance of Williams’s thought to modern challenges such as bleak capitalistic built environments, and moral formation in a morally ambiguous postmodern culture. In Chapters II and IV, I have opted to add the voices of a few thinkers who are explicitly critical of Williams.

When the cathedra of Canterbury will seat another Archbishop with the intellectual and theological capacity of Rowan Williams is hard to say. The sheer volume and breadth of his work to this point invites scholarly engagement and the possibility for continuing and challenging any number of his arguments. His contribution to Anglicanism and the Church Catholic has been formidable and the prospect of continued conversation concerning his labor seems warranted and necessary, not least in a North

American context. I hope that this thesis will contribute toward a greater understanding and appreciation of his work.
CHAPTER I

Catholicity

An appropriate way to launch into the thought patterns and imaginative theological capacity of Rowan Williams is to begin by defining terms, or if you prefer by paying close attention to words. Williams is a poet after all; he learned Russian so that he could read the works of Vladimir Lossky for his doctoral dissertation and read Dostoevsky in his own idiom. When he gave his lectures at Westcott House on the Christian spiritual tradition—from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross—students were so intrigued by his approach and learning that they asked for his notes. He was happy to oblige, but made it clear that they were written in Latin.

Williams is located in the Catholic wing of Anglicanism and his vast reading across the Christian tradition makes him a thinker who looks at the question at hand from as many angles as possible. To be Catholic for Williams is to constantly ask the question, how does this belong to the whole rather than the part? Reflecting on the working definition of Catholicism given by Cyril of Jerusalem, Williams suggests that a “Catholic Church is one which endeavours to tell the whole truth about God and God’s human creation.”

To posit that the Church endeavors to tell the whole truth about God is to suggest something about God—namely that nothing is held back from humans. Williams stresses the point that God, by nature, cannot be envious of creation. Unlike the deities of ancient Greece, the God of Jesus Christ is a God who does not hold anything back from God’s

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creatures in the fear of endangering his dignity.\textsuperscript{2} This is to say that the God who gives humans the capacity and permission to seek and speak the truth is a God who freely gives of self. The form, or shape, that presses in on Williams’s rumination is a metaphysical vision of generosity, trust, and reciprocity. The vision is one of active peace. Not merely the absence of violence but an activity of joy and delight. To be sure, this does not safeguard human language and discourse about God from being chaotic.

If God gives freely of himself in Jesus Christ then talk about God—the attempt to teach the whole truth about God—cannot be sequestered off into an ivory tower or to religious professionals. In a speech to a group of Catholics in the Anglican tradition on the topic of teaching the truth, Williams characteristically gets at a Catholic point from an angle that might make his hearers slightly uncomfortable. I would argue that this is precisely his point when speaking with a group of people he can identify with as “us Catholics.” To emphasize his argument that theological discourse can be a bit chaotic he customarily gives biblical precedent. “The first event in the public history of the Christian community was an outbreak of baffling, noisy, exuberant talk in diverse languages.”\textsuperscript{3} Williams’s audience would no doubt be comfortable with this biblical example and would affirm his methodology. However, we should pay attention to the next move that he makes. Up to this point in his speech he has quoted Cyril of Jerusalem, a fourth-century bishop, and the Acts of the Apostles, all very comforting to his Catholic audience. Yet, he cautions against a clericalism in Catholic circles and points out that the

\textsuperscript{2} Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in \textit{Living Tradition}, 31. See also, Rowan Williams, “On Being Creatures,” in \textit{On Christian Theology}. “With God alone, I am dealing with what does not need to construct or negotiate an identity, what is free to be itself without the process of struggle. Properly understood, this is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear. God does not and cannot lay claim upon me so as to ‘become’ God; what I am cannot be made functional for God’s being; I can never be defined by the job of meeting God’s needs” (72-3).

\textsuperscript{3} Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in \textit{Living Tradition}, 31.
Reformation, the Methodist Revival, the charismatic movement, and Bible study in Latin American base communities have been examples of all sorts of people finding the "authority to talk of God and to God." His hearers must have suddenly felt as though they were listening to someone speaking at an evangelical tent revival when they were cued up to hear from an Oxford don, in an impressive church structure, about Catholic ideas. Williams often disrupts any residual agenda that wants to hold onto the part rather than the whole. The concept that God gives freely of himself and holds nothing back from his creatures sounds like an exciting idea, but what about when those creatures are not "like us"?

Williams's vision of catholicity is anything but straight-edged, predictable and sanitized. This is best understood not as some kind of personal preference or desire to be eccentric. Instead, his deep commitment to look from positions that others might fear is due to his Catholic allegiance to tell the whole truth about God and God's creation. As his biographer states, "Self-displacement or self-questioning forms a central element in the kind of religion that Williams is commending – not from a sense that we cannot be sure about things, and had better reserve judgment, but out of fidelity to orthodoxy." I would propose that another way to phrase this astute insight is to suggest that Williams is primarily concerned about discipleship, not neat answers. The purpose of self-displacement is not the celebration of dislocation for the sake of it; rather, dislocation makes possible a transformed way forward that mirrors the self-giving love and the

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5 Williams's record as Archbishop of Canterbury can be criticized on this topic, specifically as it relates to accommodating members of the Anglican Communion who feel that gay people are somehow not "like us."

6 Rupert Shortt, Rowan Williams: An Introduction, 79.
generosity of Christ. Blind spots in our ways of thinking must be gently exposed and stretched so that a genuinely Catholic worldview might continue to take shape. What Williams is after as a Catholic thinker is to be consistently and imaginatively enlarged in his capacity to tell the whole truth about God and God’s creation.

It is often quipped that Williams is an unnecessarily complicated thinker who makes an easy subject seem impenetrable. In fact, his published work reveals the opposite. He is a gifted preacher to the curious as well as the committed. Even much of his academic work asks questions of fundamental importance in all of their complexity. Williams is convinced that Christian truth does, and should, challenge the mind, imagination, heart and will of every believer. To gloss over the complexities of reality and history is to fail to tell the truth about God and the world. “The less people are enabled to take responsibility for grasping the shape of the world they stand in, the shape moulded by a self-sharing God, the more readily distortion and manipulation of Christian rhetoric can have its way, whether in the anti-semitism of a French or Polish Catholic reactionary or in the bland pieties of Reagan’s America.”

For Williams, there is indeed a vital necessity to labor to tell the truth about God and to sit with the complexities and to slowly discern the form of an inexhaustible mystery. The process of discovering the truth takes time and patience but this does not mean that this labor of vision is meant to be dreary or suffocating, just the opposite. “The truth about God is a truth to be enjoyed.”

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7 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 33. See also, Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1982). “When we see societies losing or suppressing their past, we rightly conclude that they are unfree, diseased, or corrupt: either they are oppressed by an alien power intent on destroying their roots and identity, or they are engaged in an internal repression, a conscious or unconscious restriction of present human possibilities” (24).

8 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 33.
The animating metaphysical vision that Williams is committed to is a reality that is *wonderful*.\(^9\) God’s reality is made up of wonder and delight and the created human world is infused, or charged, with this divine action. A turn of phrase that Williams uses to articulate this point is to suggest that God is love-all-the-way-down. There is not some other force constraining the freedom of God to delight in the other. The doctrine of the Trinity has brought into focus this very point. “The life of God is movement, exchange and mutuality, the life of the Trinity.”\(^10\) All truth about God must be captive to the delightful action and movement of Triune gift-giving and mutual pleasure. Williams puts it plainly, “Christian doctrine is not just useful, it is beautiful. If we cannot give thanks for God’s great glory, the glory of the eternal Trinity, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, it will not even be useful for long, because it will not compel and involve us.”\(^11\) To be a Catholic Church is to not only recognize the usefulness of doctrinal truth in narrating human life fully awake to God, it is also to give thanks and to surrender to the sheer beauty and mystery of God.

From the interplay of usefulness and beauty we get a sense of Williams’s understanding of the dynamism of Christian truth. If there is a possibility of providing a theory and explanation for the unifying of the human world—and for Christians and others this is a possibility—Williams suggests that it is attained “only in the variety and

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\(^10\) Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in *Living Tradition*, 34.

\(^11\) Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in *Living Tradition*, 34. See also, Rowan Williams, “My Dancing Day,” in *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995). “He dances so that you will dance. He shows you what beauty is, his body awakens yours. He’s there to be your partner and everyone’s; sometimes you’ll see him opposite you, sometimes not. But he’s there, in and out of your dance, always affirming your beauty, fusing together your mind and your imagination and your flesh, so that none of it will be lost” (63). This captures the movement, exchange, and mutuality of the Trinity as well as the notion that Christian truth is to be enjoyed. The beauty of God’s revelation in Christ is to be actively contemplated and participated in.
unpredictability of specific human encounter, and so can only be a matter of hope.”\textsuperscript{12} So what of the Catholic Church? Does this stance of hopefulness square with a conviction that there is a unifying principle? From a customarily Christological and ecclesiological angle, Williams is able to affirm that this hope for unification is “nourished by the conviction that the story of Jesus and the Church, of \textit{Logos} and Spirit manifest in the world, affords us a truthful vision of how God is—not exhaustive, not exclusive, but truthful.”\textsuperscript{13} This is the Catholicity practiced by Williams: a deeply held conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the story of his Church, offer a truthful vision of how God is. This labor of vision, seeking to discern the action of the \textit{Logos}, always necessitates new layers of discovery so that an expansion of vision continues.

An important factor to keep in mind when wrestling with the subtlety of Williams’s Catholic vision is the inexhaustibility of Jesus. One way into his Christology is to work with his example of a musical performance. The “performance” of Jesus’s life and death is fully transparent to the inexhaustible mysteries of God. “He is performing God’s love, God’s purpose, without a break, without a false note, without a stumble.”\textsuperscript{14} Just as the eternal Godhead is generative and creating, so the action of Jesus, perfectly responding to the Father’s will without interruption, is inexhaustible. Seen from this angle we might understand why a recent study by Benjamin Myers on Rowan Williams is called \textit{Christ the Stranger}. Jesus is one we cannot fully control and tame. He, like the lion Aslan in C.S. Lewis’s \textit{Narnia}, is wild and always up ahead of us, inhabiting an

\textsuperscript{12} Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” in \textit{On Christian Theology}, 177.

\textsuperscript{13} Williams, “Trinity and Pluralism,” in \textit{On Christian Theology}, 177. If God is Truth—and for Williams and the Christian faith this is the claim—then the unitary source of all truth must be God. The truth of things is to be understood in the context of their participation in God (Truth).

\textsuperscript{14} Rowan Williams, \textit{Tokens of Trust}, 74.
atmosphere where the air is of a different quality.¹⁵ In other words, Jesus cannot be fully grasped and tamed by the human intellect. He is always, already, up in front of us, drawing us into the mysterious contours of the eternal Trinity.

Built into this Catholic vision is a form of deep commitment and profound humility. There must always be a reluctance to say the final word as if God has finished creating, as if Jesus is somehow fully in our possession. Christ is the image of the invisible God, the perfect harmony, and light from light. However, what this truth looks like is a persistent question. Jesus becomes the universal question to all of humanity, so that we never have the last word. Williams suggests that on the day of judgment we will be asked, “how far have I allowed Christ’s questioning to transform my life into compassion, and how far, therefore, have I allowed compassion in me to transform the world?”¹⁶ Precisely because Jesus is the translation of the eternal word into human form, a commitment to him and a prolonged encounter with him is always creative and generative, opening up new paths of discovery and transformation. Just as he is inexhaustible so is the Christian’s growth in his Spirit.

To be Catholic for Williams is not primarily about clutching on to different formulae, whether liberal or conservative, but is rather about discipleship. To be transformed into the likeness of Christ is the purpose of the Catholic vocation, nothing less. If we simply cling to certain elements of the Church’s words and practice without asking questions related to discipleship and commitment then we “are desperately in need

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¹⁶ Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel, 79.
of something—in our culture, in our individual experience—that makes us inarticulate.”17

Williams, the poet, understands the importance of language jarring us into deeper levels of reality and truth. Moreover, the icon and other forms of art can open up a space of inarticulacy where we are faced with a process of reevaluation and growth. The gift of their strangeness is to put us back in a place of receptivity, where restrictive and fearful habits are laid open. To tell the whole truth about God is not to achieve some kind of totalizing system—that would be to say that the system is God. Instead, to tell the truth is to recognize the inexhaustibility of the triune God made known in the outpouring life of Jesus, and discerned in his Spirit.

So far we have traced something of the first half of Williams’s definition of Catholicism—namely that which pertains to telling the whole truth about God. The rest of the chapter will look at Williams’s attempts at telling the truth about humanity. The Catholic vision of the human is, he says, to narrate a shared humanity where “all sorts of people may become holy and all kinds of sins and injuries can be healed.”18 “All sorts” and “all kinds” is used here to mean just that, all. If the Catholic vision is to be universal then nothing can be deemed outside of the scope of consideration. A temptation that must be avoided is to imagine that humanity can be turned into a kind of formula where what Williams calls “the density of actual human lives” is abstracted into a “single standard-

17 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 37. See also, Rowan Williams, Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). “Good history makes us think again about the definition of things we thought we understood pretty well, because it engages not just with what is familiar but with what is strange. It recognizes that the ‘past is a foreign country’ as well as being our past” (1). Here Williams is suggesting that the task of the historian, much like the Christian theologian, is to articulate the respective narrative in such a manner that it holds onto the otherness of the story and does not simply collapse into a subjective hobby.

18 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 36.
issue subject.” If the inexhaustibility of God is kept at the fore then the human, made in the image of God, also has something inexhaustible at its core. To suppose a “single standard-issue” human would be akin to a fundamentalist dogmatism in the theological realm.

Building on Simone Weil’s suggestion that the proper disposition before another person is hesitation, Williams suggests that we must contemplatively pause and hear before we impose solutions or interpretations, not to mention condemnations. This is a striking choice of the word hear, insinuating that mere listening—so as to simply interpret within our own framework—is deficient. The labor and discipline of hearing is to listen on the terms, or the given-ness, of the other. Characteristically, Williams interweaves a contemplative stance before God with the habits of what it means to be properly human with one another: “Just as in our relation with God our not knowing what to say may be what speaks most eloquently of God.” A contemplative stance before the other—putting into practice the art of hesitation—can be the most eloquent way to engage another human made in the image of God. Listening for another’s language, in

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19 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 36. See also, Rowan Williams, Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth, a lecture given at St. Cyprian’s, Clarence Gate, London on December 10, 2008: http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1205/not-being-serious-thomas-merton-and-karl-barth (accessed on December 16, 2003). Here Williams further elucidates the idea of the “density of human lives.” Karl Barth in his Dogmatics in Outline is “saying that the self before God is not serious, it is groundless. It is not something that exists in its own density and solidity: the self before God is poised on the divine word, the divine communication over an unfathomable abyss. It is both deadly serious in one sense and totally unserious in another.”

20 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 37. See also, Rowan Williams, “Analyzing Atheism: Unbelief and the World of Faiths,” Washington D.C., March 29, 2004, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1211/analysing-atheism-unbelief-and-the-world-of-faiths “And Simone Weil, in an argument of some complexity, concludes that when the human ego says ‘God’, it cannot be referring to any reality to which the name might be truthfully applied. Because the ‘I’ that says ‘God’ is always self-directed and so wedded to untruth, God cannot properly be spoken of. Any God my selfish mind can conceive is bound to be a false, non-existent God. The true God is known only in ways that cannot be reduced to theory or third-person language. If you meet God (in the language of systematic theology or metaphysics), kill him.”
some sense valuing strangeness, is ingredient to a genuine form of catholicity. Like the poem or the piece of artwork that expands our vision, our encounter with the difference inherent in other humans can become a practice of being made inarticulate so that we can receive the otherness, and the giftedness of another person.

Reflecting on the deportment of hesitation, Williams notes that Christian discernment and judgment must take place in a context where the object of discernment is present. Williams gets very practical at this point, arguing that discussing the remarriage of divorcees, the ordination of women, the ethics of homosexuality, and the representation of black Anglicans in Synod are not matters of ephemeral speculation, they are instead about concrete lives in real time that must be engaged.\(^{21}\) We can see this put into practice in the Indaba groups at the Lambeth Conference in 2008. Williams was all too aware of the division in the Anglican Communion. With the majority of Anglican Bishops present, he decided that they would practice, through biblical study, the art of hesitation before another.\(^{22}\) Instead of an evangelical bishop being deemed a fundamentalist or an American bishop being dubbed a liberal, the Archbishop decided that the bishops needed to take the requisite time to grow to hear another in their otherness, to let them become human.\(^{23}\) The implication behind this habit of hesitation is that our interests are bound up with each other, but we have to share the space and take the time to discern what this might look like.

To begin to tell the whole truth about humanity means that no part of it can be partitioned off: “the slogan of the Church’s life is ‘not without the other’; no I without a

\(^{21}\) Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in *Living Tradition*, 37.


you, no I without a we.” 24 Again, statements such as these might sound attractive on the front end, but they demand quite a lot to put into practice. In fact, I would argue that it was precisely the substance of this pithy sentence that created such difficulty and misunderstanding during Williams’s archiepiscopacy of Canterbury. Liberals in the Anglican Communion felt abandoned and conservatives never could trust that Williams was not a liberal, in both cases despite his concern and commitment to engage in dialogue. In a climate of individual pursuit and clear, if fabricated, demarcations of “us” and “them,” the labor of attempting to keep many different voices at the table is both counter-cultural and nearly impossible. The critical reaction to Williams’s archiepiscopacy demonstrated the difficulty our culture has with keeping many voices engaged in dialogue. Clear, dogmatic, and assertive “leadership” (defined in all sorts of ways by various camps) is what many felt lacking during his tenure at Canterbury. For Williams, this kind of leadership would have been to misrepresent the slogan of the Church. Patience, trust, and an ability to let the truth settle in and emerge cannot be short-circuited with enticing declarations from others that what is needed is leadership. Often the call to strong leadership can mean little more than a perpetuation of biases, not least partialities that support the powerful.

For Williams, believing in the Church “is really believing in the unique gift of the other that God has given you to live with. The New Testament sees the Church as a community in which each person has a gift that only they can give into the common

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24 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 106. See also, Rowan Williams, “Nobody Know Who I Am Till Judgment Morning,” in On Christian Theology. “Action in the church must be regulated not by abstract rule but by the goal of reinforcing and affirming the other believer in such a way that the community overall is affirmed and strengthened and moved on towards the Kingdom. In other words, my act must be a gift for the deepening and strengthening of another’s faith...” (285).
This makes each voice, each life, indispensable to the maturation of the body of Christ. In Pauline fashion, Williams notes that the body metaphor suggests a giftedness inherent in the other. Each has not only a function but also a gift to bring to our shared humanity. The mutual delight is made possible by a communal space cleared out by Christ, a communal space in history to actualize and share gifts for the common good. The reverse is also true, "the frustration of any one member is the frustration of all—because then there is something that is not being properly given. Someone has not been granted the freedom to offer what only they can give to the whole." It is important to note that the giving is for the sake of the whole and is not merely some sort of personal taste.

If the idea of sharing gifts and the creation of a community that shares frustration seems soft around the edges, or is heard as simply squaring with the kind of self-actualization in the individualistic tone of contemporary capitalistic culture, it is not quite the demanding idea that Williams writes of. "The Church is a diverse community, but its diversity is not just a natural diversity of temperaments or preferences—we trivialize the idea if that’s all there is to it." In other words, the recognition and sharing of gifts requires attention to the a priori relationship with God that each person embodies. That is to say that each member of the body has a way to make God’s work known, and the task of the Church is to make space for God’s work to come through. Perhaps the image of refracted light coming through a stained-glass window can be helpful. If God’s work, or will or action, is the ray of light and each person is a bit of the window, it is the task of

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25 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 106.

26 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 106-7.

27 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 107.
the praying Church to allow the ray of light to come through with the particularity of its
own hue and tinge. If all of this still seems to cheery or rose-colored, as if the Church’s
motto were “come as you are and stay as you are,” we should give heed to Williams’s
understanding of sin and repentance as it relates to Catholic discipleship and telling the
whole truth about humanity.

Part of the attention and listening that goes on in building up the body of Christ is
attentiveness to where the “tangles of resistance and destruction really are.”28
Importantly, the resistance shows up in us, in others, and in society. This part of
Catholicity—telling the whole truth about the person—does not isolate sin simply to the
individual, or merely to society. Patterns of resisting God’s work in the world are
necessarily discerned with patient attention to what is going on, individually and
collectively. Because of the enmeshment of sin, Catholic discipleship necessitates
perpetual repentance: “we are brought to Jesus Christ for judgment and for healing; we
are to be shown uncomfortable truths.”29 It should be duly noted that judgment and
healing belong together. A bland acceptance that flattens out difference or pretends that
nothing needs to change would be sentimental at best, and destructive at worst.
Moreover, a type of glib moralism that discounts human complexity is equally deficient.
Simply stated, a superficial acceptance or a facile moralism does not tell the whole truth
about humanity. The Catholic personality necessitates a daily renewal made possible by
bringing the discord and the dis-integration of the self and the world to the presence of
God, so that all of the entanglements can be exposed and opened up to the transformative
and regenerative action of the triune God.

28 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 40.

29 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 40.
The Church is meant to be the place that shows forth what it looks like when humanity is in touch with God through Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{30} Reflecting on the desert tradition, Williams points out that monastics did not return simply to tell about how prayer is to be experienced “but also about how humanity is to be understood—about life, death, and neighbors.”\textsuperscript{31} For Williams, leaning into the fullness of being a Catholic body is not about some kind of church housekeeping that simply needs to get its hierarchy in order, but about becoming fully human. Staying in communion with one another is about living into a new humanity made possible by the action of God in Christ. Perhaps we can get a clearer picture of Williams’s Catholic ecclesiology by looking at some of his work as the Archbishop of Canterbury that is concerned with Anglican unity.

Without getting bogged down with the minutia of Anglican discord, I believe that a look at Williams’s thought concerning the current state of Anglican affairs can flesh out his Catholic vision as a desire to say the whole truth about God and humanity. Williams’s hope for Anglicanism is that it can inhabit a climate he likes to call consensual Catholicism. Each of the 38 Provinces of the Anglican Communion has their own canon law and much of the tension of the last decade has been over a lack of clarity of how Provinces relate to one another and even how a particular Province works. Williams has advocated, most notably through his support of the Anglican Covenant, for a new climate in which Provinces could relate to one another. While critics have claimed he was trying to Romanize the Communion or centralize power, an alternative construal is that he hoped that the Covenant could at least be a start to a more transparent Communion that

\textsuperscript{30} Rowan Williams, \textit{Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another} (Boston: New Seeds, 2005), 12.

operates in a way that recognizes it is bound together in 38 Provinces. In other words, to be a consensually Catholic body is to inhabit a shared space that recognizes mutuality and commitment to one another because of the new human future made possible in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

For Williams this space is one of enabling authority, as he spelled out in his last Presidential Address with the Anglican Consultative Council. He contrasts two different types of authority evinced in the New Testament. There is corrective authority on the one hand and empowering authority on the other. He is clear that these are two sides of the same coin and that they belong together. Nevertheless, he is certain that enabling authority is what the Gospel is really getting on about. Reflecting from his post as spiritual head of the Anglican Communion, Williams is hopeful that ours is a season of renewal despite the obvious wounds and schisms. He says this not as some kind of cheery optimist but as a hopeful and prayerful man who sees examples of consensual Catholicism at work in the life of the Communion. He points out projects such as the Bible in the Life of the Church, and Alliance, not to mention theological education and Continuing Indaba, as examples of what it looks like for Anglicans to live into a model of enabling and empowering authority.

Spaces that foster standing together with faces turned towards Christ are what a consensually Catholic body will look like in Williams’s view. It is not surprising that he would point to such projects and commitments, as they allow for Christians to engage in


the work of expanding their imaginative capacities. These diverse endeavors share a common theme: they each make room for the poetical capacity of texts, and the density of human lives, to shift our perspective, opening up the possibility of transformation. The legal scholar and Jewish philosopher Martha Nussbaum, in her book *Poetic Justice*, points to the literary genre of the novel as having similar capacity.  

A deeper engagement with her work might further elucidate Williams’s vision of catholicity and its attendant humanism.

Nussbaum’s primary point is that novel reading has the potential facility to expand the political and moral imagination. She remarks that novel reading all by itself will not supply the requisite moral and philosophical theories (let alone economic and scientific) needed to adequately conceive of a robust worldview. In other words, the reader of the novel must be prepared to question their reading using philosophical and moral theory. At the same time the reader engages the literary genre of the novel so as to explore the human intricacies and realities of any preconceived theory or systematic suppositions (economical, political, moral, or theological). The novel is saturated with ordinariness and resolutely engages in the particulars of our shared humanity. If it is necessary, as Nussbaum suggests, to engage the novel with moral and philosophical theories then theology may be in play. In fact, novels have the possibility of participating

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in the process of dehumanization that Nussbaum is explicitly trying to work against. In order to be offended by, and question, a literary depiction of a human situation the reader must be equipped with moral and political theories that challenge the text. It should be noted that this works both ways. The political and moral assumptions brought to the novel (by the reader) have the possibility of being challenged and enlarged by a novel that presses on an imagination.

Nussbaum is chiefly concerned with demonstrating the ways in which a literary imagination can foster the humanization of public life. Reconfiguring social structures and habits necessitates a polis with imaginative currency. According to Nussbaum, the novel has an important role to play in engaging and expanding the human imagination.

Nussbaum argues that the author is in the position of establishing a “normative sense of life.” She is emphatic that the imagination must be tempered by constraints. Lacking what she calls the “capacity for humanity” presents an atrophied logic. In order for a legal judge to have the “capacity” for humanity, she must be capable of both fancy and sympathy. Sympathy is to do with a kind of feeling with another person as they are impacted by certain circumstances; whereas fancy is a term that can best be understood as a kind of metaphorical imagination. The novelist is not only able to disseminate innuendos, but is also able to subvert the political, moral, and social presuppositions that

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37 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, 10. “Reading can lead us to alter some of our standing judgments, but it is also the case that these judgments (moral and philosophical) can cause us to reject some experiences of reading as deforming or pernicious.” It would be interesting to follow this line of thought in an assessment of Indaba listening sessions of difficult biblical texts, or with the Bible in the Life of the Church project.

38 I have in mind, again, Williams’s appropriation of Simone Weil’s notion of hesitating before the other.

39 This imaginative currency plays a role in Williams’s Christian humanism that is at once spiritual and political. This theme is explored at the end of this chapter.

40 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, 2.

41 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, 120.
a culture and/or reader bring to a text. The purpose of subversion is not solely to
deconstruct flawed moralities, but also to expand ethical capacities and enhance
rationality. In fact, central to her book is the belief that the novel has the capacity to
properly cultivate human emotion (passion in antiquity) for the sake of a more nuanced
ability to reason through the details and intricacies of various human situations. If the
novel allows for a glimpse into the intimacy of human exchange, it nevertheless must be
interpreted and filtered. In order for the emotions, evoked by the literary text, to properly
influence reasoning capacities, certain limits are necessary.

The cultivation of imaginative capacities is the gift of the novel in Nussbaum’s
mind. She is not opposed to science, institutional constraints, or
moral/political/philosophical categories. In fact, she belabors the point that the
imagination must be constrained or given form by these categories. Through her
experiences she has noticed a kind of scientific reductionism that lacks the capacity for
humanity. Nussbaum is primarily concerned with reinvigorating the manner in which
reasoning is carried out. The novel in her view has the qualities that facilitate a more
comprehensive analysis of the human situation in all of its particularities. In order for

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42 This seems like an apt description of the role of the prophet more generally. Israel’s Prophets uttered and
enacted any number of speech acts not as a means of simple deconstruction, but in the hope that their
utterance would shift and re-call the culture.

43 Nussbaum, Poetic Justice, 4. The emotions, “properly limited and filtered…provide an irreplaceable kind
of guidance for reasoning.”

44 See Rowan Williams, “From Faust to Frankenstein,” Prospect Magazine, April 23, 2012,
https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/economics/rowan-williams-archbishop-canterbury-markets-sandel-
skidelsky-marx-morality-aristotle-good-life/#.Ux5vCkJDvHs (accessed March 10, 2014). “And for a habit
of ironic self-awareness to be generated, we need some concept or image of what is normatively human
that does not simply become an oppressive stereotype—a good myth, you might say; we need the saint or
hero to illustrate what the well-lived life might look like. This in turn requires…a doctrine of the cardinal
virtues—another bit of revived Aristotelianism. What are the habits and practices that will educate our
passions and allow us to shape a credible narrative of the self, understood against the backdrop of some
idea of what the ‘excellence’ of human nature might consist in?”
judges to properly reason, they need not only have legal wherewithal, but must also be able to administer and conceive of justice in a manner that analyzes all of the facts, both scientific and utterly human; in other words, to tell the whole truth about humanity. Williams suggests in his work that a Catholic theology that seeks to tell the whole truth about God and humanity provides a robust worldview that allows for the kind of expansion of imagination Nussbaum advocates for. A genuinely Catholic theology provides a worldview that has what Nussbaum calls the “capacity for humanity.” It is the Catholic humanism advocated by Williams that can imaginatively subvert any number of unimaginative social responses to what it is to be human.

The Catholic Christian vocation of telling the whole truth about God and humanity provides the theories Nussbaum deems necessary for properly engaging the novel. However, Christian ethical and political theories are not so much philosophies as they have to do with discerning the spirit of events: both the events of Christ and the subsequent proceedings of human history. Once more, the Christian vocation labors to embody and enact the humanity disclosed in Israel’s Messiah. The novel, understood in the context of Nussbaum’s approach, provides an entrée for the Christian to cultivate and exercise a humanistic imagination. The reader can empathically enter into the intricacies of each character and labor to place every story within the narrative of the fully realized humanity disclosed in the God-man. This practice of a laboring humanistic vision, in the context of Christian spirituality and novel reading, can help foster a worldview that has the capacity to reimagine the ways in which society is given shape.

Rowan Williams, in his writing on Dostoevsky’s works of fiction, suggests, “the novels insistently and unashamedly press home the question of what else might be
possible if we—characters and readers—saw the world in another light, the light provided by faith.”\textsuperscript{45} This precisely captures the dialogical profundity made possible when the Christian theological tradition approaches literary depictions of human realities. Within this interaction the imagination is able to conceive of the recapitulation of human relationship and exchange. Christian theology has the capacity to provide the requisite moral and political “theories” needed to approach the novel in a way that allows for the practice of cultivating the affections necessary for reconsidering the possible in human affairs.

The underlying crisis confronting the West is an inability to properly think through the question: what does it mean to be human? Insofar as this question remains pushed aside for the seemingly more important inquiries concerning how to maximize profits, the social and moral landscape will remain severely atrophied. Without a view toward an “integral humanism,” America’s political and ethical practices will remain void of the capacity to imagine the possible.\textsuperscript{46} And as Nussbaum puts it: “in the absence of that capacity, the ‘interminable generation of prisoners and slaves’ will dwell in pain around us and have less hope of freedom.”\textsuperscript{47}


\textsuperscript{46} Rowan Williams, “The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Acceptance of America Magazine’s Campion Award,” New York, June 25, 2010, \url{http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1486/visit-to-new-york} (accessed December 12, 2013). “Maritain, whom again I count as a great intellectual and spiritual influence, wrote a well-known book under the title of \textit{Integral Humanism}, and that does seem to be finally what we are reflecting about today. Humanism that is integral because it refuses to ignore the depths of possibility in humanity, for evil and for good. A humanism that is integral as it sees the capacity for human beings to be integrated, drawn together in themselves by that fathomless love and forgiveness of God.”

Williams’s vision of a Catholic humanism, and its ethical implications, finds its form through the Christ event. If Christian ethics is to be understood as a labor of vision, then the task is to look upon the person of Jesus as the ultimate expression of divine beauty through the fullness of his humanity. His life is one that changes us, enlarges our world, and—whether understood as a biography, picture, novel, or drama—brings us to see more and more dimensions and connections within the world. The Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart helpfully frames Williams’s vision of a Catholic humanism: “Christ takes up the human story and tells it correctly, by giving the correct answer to God’s summons….He renarrates humanity according to its true pattern of loving obedience, humility, and charity.”48 This is to suggest that the form, or pattern, of Christ’s embodiment redeems a blurred ethical and political vision. The events of the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth set forth a pattern to be religiously discerned through the gift of sight received through the Spirit of truth. Again Hart is helpful: “Christ bequeaths the church neither simple ethical principles nor ‘facts’ of heaven, but a way of being in the world, a form that must be answered ‘gracefully.’”49 The spiritual form perceived in Christ does not equate to a worldview devoid of ethical and political action. On the contrary, the content of a first century Jew who was executed is concretely enmeshed in the contours of history. The way that Christians are called to be in the world is bound up with reimagining social and

48 David Bentley Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 371. The emphases are mine, suggesting that Christianity is thoroughly humanistic. Williams has pointed out that one of the strengths of Hart’s work is the way “he shows how the most treasured principles and values of compassionate humanism are rooted in the detail of Christian doctrine,” http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2052/winner-of-10000-theology-prize-announced (accessed March 10, 2014).

political structures and institutions that disfigure the human form revealed in Christ.50

The Catholic humanism of Williams is at once spiritual and political.

Above all else, to be Catholic in Williams’s view is to stand where Christ stands in relation to the Father through the Spirit, and from this place to be a Church that seeks to tell the whole truth about God and humanity, with generative capacities. To put it plainly, “telling the whole truth about God and humanity is inseparable from becoming holy: enacting our doctrine, realizing that doctrine itself is simply the deposit of a transforming of a relationship to God and God’s world.”51 In a similar fashion to his predecessor Michael Ramsey, and the theologically astute Austin Farrer, Williams suggests that the best evidence of the Catholic way is the saint. The Church must be able to point to particular lives that have been given shape by the pressing in of the glory of God. Holiness of life is not about a total elimination of error, but about a life fully opened up to the transformative and liberating action of God. “Expecting holiness in one another is not a matter of optimism. It is what we learn by discovering in ourselves that repentance constantly opens us to an inexhaustible source of mercy and nurture.”52 This, for Williams, is what it means to be the Church, and the sacraments are the way into this transformed relationship with God and the world.

50 Again, I am implying that the perfection of Jesus’ humanity is what displays his divinity. In this way, Jesus fulfills, or discloses, the fullness of being human.

51 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 42. See also, Rowan Williams, “Romanes Lecture,” Oxford, November 18, 2004, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2101/romanes-lecture-oxford-religious-lives (accessed on November 29, 2013). “A religious life is a material life in a particular place, marked by particular material patterns and rhythms. Its goal is for the place it inhabits to be a place in which certain realities become visible. It takes responsibility for the appearing of God; in doing so it equally embodies responsibility to God. It makes a bid to be fairly ‘tired’ as a narrative among others; and what it has to show is that it is indeed a distinctive place, not a version of some other discourse.”

52 Williams, “Teaching the Truth,” in Living Tradition, 42. A community marked by the form of Christ’s action that has the capacity to imagine what is possible.
CHAPTER II

Sacraments

To begin to make sense of Rowan Williams’s sacramental theology, it is necessary to recall what was said above, that doctrine is simply the record of a transforming relationship with God and God’s world. Customarily, Williams roots the sacraments in their proper ecclesiological and Christological milieu. “Sacraments are perhaps harder to understand the more we isolate them as a set (let alone a pair) of unique actions prescribed by Jesus as guaranteed signs of the new covenant.”¹ Turned into some kind of special action, the sacraments can be pulled out of context and become misunderstood or made to be seemingly arbitrary to changed life. Williams is intrigued with St. Thomas Aquinas’s notion that what makes sacraments unique is what they are for, which is to create space for human beings to participate in the divine life.² More simply put, sacraments are for making human beings holy.

If the sacramental life is purposed for making human beings holy it is important to give some thought to the Christian understanding of human nature. As linguistic creatures looking for and creating meaning, we work on our world over and above what is needed for survival. Williams notes that we seem to have an “insatiable desire for new perception and new possibilities of action.... All of which is to say that we are conscious of living in time, with memory and hope.”³ In other words, humans have the capacity to make


² Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae III.Ix.2c and ad 1.

³ Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” in On Christian Theology, 199. See also, Rowan Williams, Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1982). Chapter II is especially relevant to Williams’s understanding of the role of memory and hope: “God is the agency that gives us back our memories, because God is the ‘presence’ to which all reality is present. We have already begun to see how this returning of memory is very far from being a congenial and painless process, because
meaning through recollection of past events while simultaneously hoping for a better future. As we explored in Chapter One, what Williams narrates about the human is necessarily linked to what is said about God. We are not simply utilitarian creatures but agents with memory and hope. There is something more than brute existence, and humans articulate this most poignantly in art and music, in ritual and symbol.

Given that humans have the capacity for memory and hope, and can therefore participate in meaning making, it begs the question: what type of context is necessary for this type of creature to exist at all? What must we say about a world that has the capacity for humans to make meaning? Human capacity for art suggests that the world is in and of itself existent because of a communicative form that creates. The creative Logos of God (especially manifest in the incarnation) is the communicative form that allows human beings to bodily inhabit a space and make meaning through signs rooted in memory and hope. Signs, meaning-making ritual and art, not to mention language, are not arbitrarily tacked on to an otherwise straightforward world and humanity. Quite the contrary, the task of molding symbolic forms is intrinsic to our human nature and the way the world is: “they are what we live through as humans—as beings capable of recalling and re-moulding ourselves, the horizons of our understanding and our hope.”

Again, this suggests of a way of being that is not reductively functionalist as, for example, a capitalistic or materialistic anthropology.

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memory is the memory of our responsibility for rejection and injury, for diminution of self and others” (23).

4 Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” in On Christian Theology, 201. See also, Rowan Williams, Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2005). “The artist perceives the material of the world—visible things, patterns of sound, texture—as offering more than can appear in one moment of encounter and so begins to produce a further thing in the world that will allow that unseen or unheard life to continue itself in another mode” (149). Williams also delivered the 2013 Gifford Lectures, which he titled, “Making Representations: Religious Faith and the Habits of Language.”
The particular history of a community is bound up within this inherently symbolic world and participates in the activity of shaping form so as to create meaning. Williams explores ancient Israel as a community of sign making that constituted its identity by recognizing God as giving them a history, a calling, and a future. Through the Torah, Israel organized life as a nation resting on God’s covenant faithfulness. The logic of the code of Deuteronomy was to make all Israelites contemporaries with those who came out of Egypt. As such, the people were called to be faithful to God’s covenant, to trust in God, as they came to know, and to experience for themselves, the liberating action of God. Because of the gratuitous action of God in freeing the Israelites from slavery, Israel had been made a people, not on their own accord but through God’s care and protection. In order to maintain this status of election the people understood that they must honor God in all aspects of their shared life. The nature and trustworthiness of YHWH is to be shown forth by a people who only exist because of this God. The festival life prescribed in the Torah anchors the community in a set of ritual action that allows them to become again the people God has elected. Again and again, through the enacting of ritual, the Israelites become God’s covenanted Israel.

Williams urges us to look at Jesus as a sacrament in and of himself, within the framework of the people of Israel. This opens up the possibility to grasp the paradox of Jesus remaining deeply committed to the symbols of his people while also stretching, renewing, and reshaping them. “It is his identity that is set before us as a sign, the form of

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a new people of God.” If Israel’s vocation is to show forth the character of God by being a sign of what it means to get on with life as if God was in charge, then Jesus within this way of life becomes the sign of a human biography formed by God. Williams, in keeping with New Testament strands of thought, suggests that Jesus is the new Torah and the new Israel. What these were are now fulfilled and made new in Christ. “He proclaims the imperatives of the kingdom, realizes them in his life and death, and so begins to make the possible community actual in the post-Easter experience of his followers.” Within this rich view of Christ as sacrament and foundational symbol we will now take a look at the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist.

Rather than viewing the sacraments as simply becoming isolated guarantors of a new covenant, the contextualization of Israel and Jesus offers an entrée into discovering what the sacraments are for. It is not the sacramental action in and of itself that is of fundamental importance. Instead, what matters most is what the Church signifies in ritual action—the new covenant and new creation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The symbols of Baptism and Eucharist have become the means through which the Church makes sense of itself and remembers its vocation. Importantly, for the Church—as for Israel—making sense of its own identity is completely wrapped up with making

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7 Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” in On Christian Theology, 204. See also, Williams, “The Finality of Christ” in On Christian Theology, 100.


9 Williams, “The Nature of a Sacrament,” in On Christian Theology, 205. By announcing and living out the imperatives of the kingdom Jesus becomes the law, the fulfillment of Torah. His obedience to live life transparent to God makes possible a new shape of life for Israel. In this way the singularity of Christ becomes a sign of fundamental importance. To use Williams’s language Christ becomes an effective and converting sign.
reference to God’s gratuitous freedom to create a people. In other words, the Church cannot make its own meaning or constitute itself. Its identity is bound up with the activity of God and God’s desire to set humanity and all of creation in right relationship. Christians are brought together in the Church to breathe the air of Christ through sacramental constitution made possible not by their own efforts and goodwill, but through the action of the Spirit in Christ.

The Church, for Williams, “is the community of those who have been ‘immersed’ in Jesus’ life, overwhelmed by it.” To be baptized into Christ is to disappear under the surface of Christ’s love and to reappear as different people. The reappearance as a new people makes possible a life where new relationship is actualized with God and with one another. To be baptized is simply to be where Jesus is; we are baptized “into Christ,” after all, so addressing God as “Our Father” along with Jesus is the new territory the baptized inhabit. Entering into the body of Christ is to be put into the family of God, not as one would enter a royal palace as a subject to the king, but family in the sense of sitting around the fireplace in the den at Christmas time. There is a level of intense intimacy when invited into the inner courts to stand where Jesus stands in relation to the Father.

In a speech given at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in London, Williams explores the multi-dimensionality of what it means to be where Jesus is. “Jesus is in the neighbourhood of God the Father and so when we stand where Jesus is we too

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10 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 113.

11 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 112. See also, Rowan Williams, “Incarnation and the Renewal of Community” in On Christian Theology, 231-2.

12 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 60-61.
are in that neighbourhood and we learn his language of his relation to God the Father."\textsuperscript{13}

In this way our nature is elevated into the sharing of life within the Godhead. The eternal Logos is situated in the "neighborhood" of the Father in such a way that we are brought very near to the eternal mystery of the triune God. However, the incarnate Logos is also situated in the mess of human history. The art (the Son) of God the Father enters into the chaos of sin and the dis-integration of creation gone awry. Christ is in the heart of both realities simultaneously. Williams points out the epigram formulated by the great Benedictine Columba Marmion, where Christ is \textit{in sinu Patris} and \textit{in sinu peccatoris}—in the bosom of the Father and in the bosom of the sinner.\textsuperscript{14}

Given that the baptized Christian is with Jesus, in his company, this means that the baptized are simultaneously navigating two realities. Indeed, the Christian prays in the Spirit of Jesus the word \textit{Abba}, but also is firmly planted in the fallen creation to which Christ descended. "And that, of course, suggests that when we as baptized persons come to be in the neighbourhood of Jesus, that same dual proximity is what we have to get used to."\textsuperscript{15} The immersion into two different worlds, as it were, creates a dynamism that leaves no space for static religiosity that sits on the sidelines. To be near the bosom of God in Christ necessitates a deep engagement in the brokenness of the human world, inside and outside of the Church. Going along with this trajectory of thought we can get a sense of the ways in which contemplation and action belong together. To enter into the prayer of

\textsuperscript{13} Williams, \textit{The Fellowship of the Baptized}, The John Coventry Memorial Address, March 20, 2010, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/583/the-fellowship-of-the-baptized-the-john-coventry-memorial-address (accessed July 25, 2013). It should be noted that this address is given at a Roman Catholic Church.

\textsuperscript{14} Williams, \textit{The Fellowship of the Baptized}.

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{The Fellowship of the Baptized}. 
Christ is to be taken to the bosom of God and to be firmly situated in the incarnate Word’s descent into the tragic contours of life turned in on itself. Williams helpfully situates this duplicity within the language used in relation to Baptism—that one is baptized into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The sacrament of Baptism is not merely some kind of vague acceptance or basic agreement with what Jesus said, but is rather a concrete enactment of our being joined with Christ, in all that that encompasses. If this is true, then to be baptized is not some kind of end, but is rather a beginning of a new way of inhabiting the world: holding together a supernatural joy and an intense awareness of brokenness and sin. Williams deserves to be quoted at length at this point:

> to be baptized is to be constantly re-awakening our expectation, our penitence, our protest, our awareness that the chaos and darkness of the world is not what God wills; our awareness that we are colluding with that state of chaos which God does not will. So as baptized persons we look constantly into ourselves, rediscovering over and over again the hope that comes out of true repentance.16

From this quotation we get a sense that the baptized, due to their proximity to the bosom of God are made to feel that the pain and suffering of a world is out of accord with the will of God. Moreover, the baptized Christian is challenged to look honestly at how they collude with worldly measures that imprison themselves and others, rather than liberate with the light of the gospel.

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16 Williams, *The Fellowship of the Baptized*. See also, Rowan Williams, “Enthronement Sermon, Canterbury Cathedral,” February 27, 2003, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1624/enthronement-sermon (accessed December 15, 2013). “...we are given the joy of speaking about one who is the secret of all hearts, the hidden centre of everything—and so one who comes to us always, yes, as a stranger, ‘as one unknown...’” As baptized Christians we do in fact look inward, but this inward turn is not simply a subjective navel gazing but the discovery of the yet unknown Christ calling the soul into new territories.
This is the “difficult gospel” that Williams will not let out of sight too readily. Baptism, in his estimation, is not a point of arrival but the beginning of a baptismal narrative: “a story of discovering and rediscovering through failure and restoration, just what it is to live in the place where Jesus lives.” Saint Augustine, when faced with communicants who seemed to have tricked themselves into thinking they had ‘arrived,’ hastens their attention to the Lord’s Prayer. He points out that first we say, “Our Father,” and this already denotes a shockingly intimate way to approach God. In this Prayer the baptized ask that their sins be forgiven even as they forgive the sins of others. Given that this is the exemplary expression of Christian prayer—taught by Christ himself, and containing a petition asking for forgiveness—this is evidence enough for Augustine that repentance and restoration are part of the baptismal narrative because we continue to pray it after baptism. It took the early Church a long while to accept the fact that the forces of disintegration are still alive within the baptized community and that repentance and restoration were part of the unfolding drama of the body of Christ in the world. Nevertheless, the unfolding of the baptismal narrative, worked out in the lives of Christians, is rooted in a practice of repentance and transformation.

The fellowship of the baptized, known as the Church, is a wounded body just as the risen Christ retains his injuries. The Church carries the tension of being unified in baptism, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism,” while simultaneously watching human brokenness perpetually create new schism within the one mystical Church. Williams points out that the fragmentation is always in process of being overtaken and transfigured

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17 I use this phrase with an awareness of Mike Higton’s book by the same title, as cited above.

18 Williams, The Fellowship of the Baptized.
by a stubborn Christ who has promised to always be with the Church, and the Holy Spirit which daily renews the eternal covenant between God and the world sealed in the person of Jesus. Christ’s unconditional promise and covenant to remain with his Church is what makes the second dominical sacrament—the Eucharist—the heart of the Church.  

In Jesus’s earthly life he expressed his promise to create a new people of God by eating with unlikely people, and after his resurrection he shared in meals with the disciples so as to reorient them to their mission, and so this sharing in food continues in the life of the Church.  

It is through the sacrament of Eucharist that the fragmented baptized Church is perpetually renewed and restored to communion with Christ and one another. The lived fact that the pledges of the covenant of grace are not shared between all Christians demonstrates the deep wounds carried in the body of Christ. Jesus is unwilling to abandon his Church, but a rebellious and dis-integrated people that struggle to stand where he stands inevitably abandon one another (and Christ in the process) and the reality of schism perpetuates itself. Faced with this hard reality of disunity, exacerbated by differing views on the sacrament of unity, Christians are left in a very difficult position. Holy Eucharist is the offering of Christ to the Church, so that they may be one as he and the Father are one. In a very real sense, Holy Communion, as stressed by Henri de Lubac in his book Catholicism, is the sacrament of communion with God and one another, making it the sacrament of unity. It is the pledge of the covenant faithfulness that creates the people of God. Due to the differing stances taken on

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19 Williams, The Fellowship of the Baptized.

20 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 113.

Communion—not least in the Western Church in the last five hundred years—different parts of the body remain fractured. So what can the Church do when the sacrament of unity does not unite the whole Church on earth?

In answer, Williams suggests that there are some other signs between churches that show forth God’s unconditional and covenant desire to be in relation. The examples he uses are inter-confessional marriage and communities such as L’Arche and the World Community of Christian Meditation.\textsuperscript{22} He points out that across denominational lines, not least those where Holy Communion cannot be shared, is a sacramental example of God’s steadfast commitment to be with the Church. Christ’s restorative action is at work in the midst of a fractured Eucharistic body. Inter-church communities such as L’Arche are admittedly not sacramental in a sense, yet they nevertheless show forth through patient attention and commitment, the stubborn desire of Christ to bring humanity together in relation to God and one another. Standing where Christ is—as evinced in the life-long commitment of marriage or the care for those who cannot care for themselves—opens up the space for God to act in new ways to restore unity. Williams is clear that this is a theological matter, not just a sociological one: “And this is not simply a matter of creating an environment in which individuals get on better together. It is something to do with raising up transforming signs, and making available in the life of the Church the covenant of grace renewed.”\textsuperscript{23} Through obedience to Christ, imaginative possibilities can yet spring up that recall the Baptismal unity of the body. Although Eucharistic divisions and other theological differences may persist, signs of unity and fellowship can continue

\textsuperscript{22} Williams, \textit{The Fellowship of the Baptized}.

\textsuperscript{23} Williams, \textit{The Fellowship of the Baptized}. 
to show up if the Holy Spirit is given room to do the restorative work of healing division within the body of Christ.

The sacramental grace of Holy Communion compels Christians to erect signposts that show forth the kingdom of God and establish fidelity and commitment across all sorts of boundaries. Just how this grace is received through Holy Communion has been, and continues to be, quite a contentious area of discourse. Recognizing the complexity and controversy as well as anyone, Williams seeks to offer some perspective that might be edifying. He sets the Eucharist in its New Testament context as a covenant meal. In the Old Testament sacrificial meals involving an animal renewed the alliance between God and Israel. The animal was shared so as to make new the “renewal or confirmation of God’s promise to be with us, and the blood was sprinkled on the holy place.” Like the eating of the sacrificial animal, Jesus, through his institution of a meal during the Last Supper, suggests that sharing in the bread and wine is a sharing in the one sacrificed, so as to make lasting peace. Williams notes that the symbolic drinking of the blood by the people assembled would have been a shocking image for Jews who were mandated not to drink blood “because it was the life principle of any living being.” Here we see Jesus stretching the symbolic framework. Jesus is stepping into the symbols, into the rituals, and suggesting that it is his very person that renews and makes real the covenant between God, humanity, and all of creation. In this way Jesus become the icon of God.

A sharing in bread and wine is recognized by almost all Christians to be a renewal of the covenant, a sign of the fellowship with God that is to be enjoyed at some point in a heavenly future. Nevertheless, Williams points out that the urge to say more than this has

24 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 114.

25 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 115.
always been quite strong. Not least, Jesus’ very own words at the Last Supper have stretched the imagination and urged deeper reflection. “This is my body; this is my blood.” Rather than engage doctrinal disputes of transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or a memorialist view of the Sacrament, Williams does something more interesting and effective. He suggests that we hear Christ saying, “This too is my body; this is as much a carrier of my life and my identity as my literal flesh and blood.” 26 The simple addition of the word too or also cuts through a great deal of confusion concerning the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. For Williams, “this too is my body” gets at the force of the Gospel text, which is more to do with “a kind of extension of the reality of Jesus’ presence to the bread and wine.” 27

Jesus’ physical flesh in his earthly form communicated the kingdom of God. He became the fulfillment of the Torah and Israel as a living and breathing person. His action, his ministry, and his words communicated and made real the reign of God in heaven and on earth. To say that the bread and wine are also his body and blood is to say that they continue to communicate this life and action. Again, the question for Williams, following St. Thomas Aquinas, is: what is the sacrament for? With this in view, it is safe to say that the sacrament is for humans to participate in the “radiant action and power of God the Son, the life who makes him who he is.” 28 The sacrament, as an extension of the incarnate and living Christ, carries the force of Jesus’ outpouring of life to the Father. To

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26 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 116.

27 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 116. See also, Rowan Williams, “The Covenant in Our Flesh” in A Ray of Darkness (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1995). In this sermon Williams is drawing out the relationship between covenant and sacrament, but his overarching point is that the sacramental life is a sharing in the life of Jesus. The covenant, as renewed through the sacrament, is understood to be a mysterious extension of the “life which today and for ever is named Jesus” (33).

28 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 116.
participate in Holy Communion is to get caught up in the kenotic action of the eternal Son of God. His incarnate life is the means of the institution of the new covenant; his life is the source by which the kingdom has been inaugurated. The extension of this life in bread and wine becomes the means by which a covenant people receive this divine action that has come into the world.

Williams’s suggestion to hear Jesus saying, “This *too* is my body,” helpfully captures the extension of Jesus’ life and action into the bread and wine. Just as his person and ministry were eschatological, the extension of his person into the sacrament carries this dynamic. If Jesus was inaugurating and announcing the kingdom of God in his life and showing signs of its presence, then this action continues in the sacramental life of the Church. The Eastern Church, which has influenced the thought of Williams extensively, robustly holds onto the eschatological dimension of the sacraments in its liturgical life. The Eastern Church’s liturgy is an example of celebratory theology at its finest. A celebration of Holy Eucharist is an inauguration of the kingdom because it is the extension of Christ’s action and life lived to the Father in our midst. Jesus’ life continues to be lived to God as he is seated at the right hand of the Father. His eternal action has been disclosed in time, on earth, through the incarnation. His life lived in the earthly realm narrated human life fully alive to God. All of this life is extended into the sacrament of Holy Communion. The eternal action is made present in the midst of the worshipping community through the extension of the life of the incarnate one in the bread and the wine.
To be baptized, for Williams, is to be “soaked in the life of Jesus by the coming into our lives of the Spirit.” So the prayer of the Church gathered for Holy Eucharist is in a real sense dropped into Jesus’ prayer that the bread and the wine become his body and blood for his people. Because he is the perfect channel of the Spirit, his prayer that we receive the bread and wine transformed into him is efficacious. Williams writes,

When we receive the bread and wine at Communion, we are nearest the very heart of what it is to be a Christian and to be the Church. We stand in the power of his prayer; we stand there because we have been invited by the risen Jesus, just as he invited sinners to eat with him in his life on earth; we pray in the Holy Spirit and we receive gifts that the Holy Spirit has made to be vehicles of this life.

Again, the eschatological dimension is fully in view. Where all things are headed shows up when the Church is gathered around the risen Christ offering himself to humanity through the extension of his life in the bread and wine. This is in fact the Church at its very best, realizing its calling and vocation to be caught up in the prayer of Jesus, and as such, to show forth the glory of God in the world. Williams points out that the “showing forth of what the Church is (in Holy Communion) gives us a clear standard by which we can judge ourselves as a Church.” He continues,

This is what God means the Church to be—a community gathered into one because it prays Jesus’ prayer and is fed by his life and power; a community in which all are equal because everyone is equally an underserving and surprising guest; and so a community that displays God’s freedom in loving and forgiving, and is at peace with creation as well as Creator.

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29 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 117. See also, Rowan Williams, “Richard Hooker: Contemplative Pragmatism,” in Anglican Identities (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2003). “Receive the gift of divine action and the effects of divine action follow—in Christ’s humanity, in the bread and wine, in the holy person” (29).

30 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 117.

31 Williams, Tokens of Trust, 120. See also, Rowan Williams, Teresa of Avila (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1991). “Christianity is a faith marked in its very origins by unsettling new perspectives on human unity and equality, on the nature of community and the exercise of power” (171).
The baptized community gathered around the risen Christ in Eucharistic worship becomes the means by which the Church is kept honest and where it is healed. In other words the sacramental act “tells us that where we habitually are is not, after all, a neutral space but a place of loss or need.”\textsuperscript{32} A sacramental rite asks us to leave behind social constructs and identities that disfigure the divine image. The invitation is to be re-made and identified in the context of divine action.

To suppose that other identities (that fall short of the divine image) need to be left behind suggests that our identities and relationships are not neutral to begin with; they are somehow antagonistic to God. Williams highlights the penitential tone latent within the Eucharistic drama, prior to the reception of Holy Communion. “It seems that until we have actually received the tokens of the covenant we remain locked in sin, in the hostility to God and each other that flows from lack of assurance in God.”\textsuperscript{33} A lack of trust in God as the source of the world’s good fosters an enmeshed reality of sin that is socially and individually devastating. This place of entrapment has to be first named if it is to be transformed, rather than supposing that we are starting from a neutral place. Contrition—recognition of dis-integration and a desire to be made whole—is part of the hard examination that comes along with leaning into the new humanity and the new creation opened up through the life and action of Christ. It is God’s action that creates a new


\textsuperscript{33} Williams, “Sacraments of the New Society,” in \textit{On Christian Theology}, 215. See also, Rowan Williams, “The Forgiveness of Sins,” in \textit{A Ray of Darkness}, “Belief in forgiveness is just as much a matter of faith as anything else in the creed” (49). See also, Rowan Williams, “The Martyrdom of Thomas Cranmer, Sermon to Commemorate 450th Anniversary,” St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, March 21, 2006, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1599/the-martyrdom-of-thomas-cranmer-sermon-at-service-to-commemorate-the-450th-anniversary. “...just as the insistent reversion to penitence in the Communion Order is not neurotic uncertainty but the sober expression of the truth that we never ‘move on’ from being saved sinners, and our amazement at God’s free forgiveness has to be spoken out again and again. The edge of our resource: that is where faith belongs, and that is where the language of worship has to lead us.”
community and new possibility that is outside of the limits of human negotiation. “There is no promise that people will not be unfaithful and untrustful towards each other, but there is an assurance that the new humanity does not depend on constant goodwill and successful effort to survive: its roots are deeper.”

The trustworthy action comes from God in Christ, and the baptized, being united to their Lord and each other in the Eucharist, are always in the process of transformation—into an acceptance that it is God’s action that heals and renews, and is for the sake of the whole world.

Theo Hobson pushes Williams’s articulation of the Church’s universal vocation, suggesting that he does not take seriously the fragility of such a claim. Hobson points out that many theologians might assert that Christianity is meant to overcome divisions and aim at human unity, but he senses that Williams goes further than most. Williams, in Hobson’s opinion, wants to suggest that the truth of Christianity consists in creating a universal society. He draws on Williams’s claim that the church must stand apart from all communities and kinships whose limits fall short of the human race. The Church’s primitive and angular separateness...is meant to be a protest on behalf of a unified world... [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.

Hobson argues that Williams’s insistence on a form of separateness is paradoxically intrinsic to becoming universal. Hobson describes Williams’s ecclesiology—founded on a Christology that asserts that the divinity of Christ as exercised through his humanity has

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36 Theo Hobson, Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church, 58.

the capacity to create a new human society—as utopian. The question that Hobson wants to put to Williams is whether or not conventional ecclesiology, which he believes Williams defends, can actually properly articulate the universal vision that Williams advocates. Can Williams say that the actual Christian community called the Church is the means to a universal human society and that the Church too often understands itself as a replacement for the Kingdom? Are these claims mutually exclusive? Hobson is not convinced that Williams can magisterially claim a traditional ecclesiology while simultaneously pointing to this tension. Hobson wants to suggest that there is a sort of Protestantism within Williams’s Catholicism, “in that he attempts to articulate a principle by which the church’s authenticity may be tested.” Can Williams make the assurance that the Church is the universalist society, despite its tragic flaw? Hobson wants to make clear that Williams’s assurance is very fragile at best.

Rhys Bezzant suggests that for Williams the last word on the shape of the Church has not been spoken. A Church growing in the Spirit through the eschatological dimensionality of the sacraments is by definition a work in progress. Bezzant is critical of Williams’s apparent evasion of the topic of the atonement. Favoring the language of the vision of God over the reign of God, and union with Christ over justification by Christ, Bezzant glimpses a deficiency in the sacramental theology of Williams. Bezzant argues that the “church’s distinctness is not expressed through its unique and privileged status as

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39 Theo Hobson, *Anarchy, Church and Utopia: Rowan Williams on Church*, 82.

a result of divine justification.”

Bezzant is concerned that Williams’s ecclesiology, and sacramental theology, is left too incomplete. If in fact the Church is in a process of becoming as Williams wants to suggest, it has nevertheless received the final declaration of no condemnation, according to Bezzant. With a focus on the atonement and divine justification, Bezzant is uneasy with an ecclesiology that emphasizes growth and participation. The Christ event (incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension) is decisive for Williams, and the sacraments are the means of grace that are not lacking in any way. However, Williams wants to leave room for the process of theosis in the life of the Church. The Church is complete, and an eschatological sign, in the sense that it is participating in the life of the God-man. Because Christ is the head of the Church and because he sits at the right hand of the Father, the Church is a result of divine justification. It is incomplete in the sense that the people who make up the body of Christ are always called to grow into a fuller participation in the eternal life of the Trinity. Bezzant’s evangelical emphasis on the atonement and the final declaration of no condemnation seem to leave little room for an ecclesiology that can at once claim a divine institution while simultaneously leaving space for continued growth through divine participation. Union with Christ entails union with his sacrifice and participating in the vision of God is to allow God’s inauguration of the kingdom through Christ to take form on earth as it is in heaven.

As we concluded Chapter One, so it seems appropriate to bring to closure this chapter with remarks concerning human beings becoming holy. What are the sacraments for? They are for human beings to be made holy. They are not just some kind of sacred

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thing 'out there'. Instead they draw near and are enmeshed with the material of this world: water and oil, wine and bread. Their purpose is to saturate and overwhelm the human life with the action of God in Jesus of Nazareth. In some sense, proof of the efficacy of the sacraments is to be found in the lives of the saints. The Church makes room in history for a humanity made in the image of God to grow into the likeness of God. As extensions of Christ, and his eschatological kingdom, the sacraments change where we stand. In the sacramental life a new geography is opened up and a new atmosphere is inhabited. "To talk about the coherence of the Christian faith isn’t just to lay out a system of doctrine and say, ‘That’s what it looks like.’ It’s to look at how lives cohere, how a vision gives a shape to a life."43 At once the baptized Christian is firmly planted in the bosom of God and called to the desperate places of a fallen world that is always in the process of being transfigured and opened up to the outpouring love of Christ that is before and after the foundation of the world.

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43 Rupert Shortt, God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), 4. As a part of the doctrine that Williams is mentioning, it is helpful to think through the Church’s teaching on Eucharist and Baptism. A sacramental theology cannot be fully articulated in isolation from the vision the sacraments make possible.
CHAPTER III

The Church in the World

Part of what comes with the territory of being the Archbishop of Canterbury is an expectation that the office holder will elucidate the ways in which the Church is to be in the world at a particular time and in a certain place. Given the academic credentials of Rowan Williams, and his reputation as a public intellectual, the expectations placed on him were quite extraordinary. The sheer volume of the speeches, lectures, sermons, interviews, articles, books, and the like, written during his tenure on the cathedra at Canterbury is staggering. The purpose of this chapter is to assess Williams’s view of the Church engaged in the life of the public square. In his last published book during his archiepiscopate Williams writes, “If it is true that the world depends entirely on the free gift of God, and that the direct act and presence of God has uniquely appeared in history in the shape of a human life two millennia ago, this has implications for how we think about the world and about human life.”¹ I would emphasize that for Williams this means all of the world and all of humanity. It does us well to remember the dictum of Chapter One, that the Catholic is to tell the whole truth about God and humanity. Given the space constraints of a single chapter, I will focus on the topics of the environment, the economy, and the secular.

i. The Environment

Let us begin with a look at Williams engaging the environment. Appropriately, given Williams’s methodology, we should start with a bit of scripture. The twenty-fourth Psalm reads, “the earth is the Lord’s.” Williams takes this as “primarily an assertion of God’s glory and overall sovereignty. And it affirms a relation between God that is

independent of what we as human beings think about the world or do to the world." In other words, the world is only because God is. Evelyn Underhill, an insightful Anglo-Catholic mystic, writes, "There is a sense in which we may think of the whole life of the universe, conscious and unconscious, as an act of worship, glorifying its Origin, Sustainer, and end... In this great sanctus, all things justify their being and have their place. God alone matters, God alone is, creation only matters because of God."  

The environment, or creation, exists because of God’s creativity and generosity. By way of its constitution, creation cannot be fully in the control of humans because it belongs to an-other. "We can’t as humans oblige the environment to follow our agenda in all things, however much we can bend certain natural forces to our will; we can’t control the weather system or the succession of the seasons." Williams pushes this to its logical conclusion: to think that the world will always adapt to human control is hubris; it is other, and as the Psalmist has it, it is the Lord’s. To assume that the created world will continually adjust to meet our needs and maintain our relationship to it is illusory. The earth is the Lord’s, it can go on existing with humans or not.  

Another biblical example is Leviticus 25:23, which points out that humans are simply temporary lessees of a land owned by God. Williams here gives a scholarly tip-of-the-cap to the Old Testament scholar, and Episcopalian, Ellen Davis and her work

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2 Williams, _Faith in the Public Square_, 185.


4 Williams, _Faith in the Public Square_, 185.

5 Williams, _Faith in the Public Square_, 186.

6 Williams often quips that he is an old-fashioned bible-believing Christian.
Scripture, Culture and Agriculture. In it, she points out that Leviticus 25 is an argument about enslavement and misuse in several contexts. She suggests that Leviticus is getting at the point that so called ‘ownership’ of another person (slavery) is as jarring of a notion as land ownership. The argument is that a relationship between God and the land, or another human, is antecedent to any type of ownership or category that humanity creates. The Israelites, to whom Leviticus is concerned, have a calling to imitate the holiness of God, and as such they “will be seeking to save both persons and property from being alienated for ever from their primary and defining relation to the God of the Exodus.” A relationship that is non-negotiable and a priori is at the center of a biblical ethic of responsibility for the environment. At the center of humanity and the material world is a fundamental mystery that cannot be controlled, manipulated, or manufactured. As we pointed out above, if creatures (human and non-human) are reliant on the loving attention of a generative and mysterious God, then there is necessarily latent within the creature a kind of excess. In other words, the creature is somehow participating in the transcendent nature of a God who is inexhaustible. This part of the creature, the most essential component of its being, cannot be controlled or owned.

In a sermon preached in Copenhagen Cathedral, Williams stresses that we cannot show the right kind of love to our fellow-humans unless we are working to keep the earth

7 Ellen Davis, Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

8 Williams, Faith in the Public Square, 186.

9 A recurring theme in much of Williams’s work is this notion that before we encounter another, God is already active. This, he suggests, should give us a posture of humility and even caution in the presence of another. There is an inexhaustible mystery at the core of all things because of an inherent relationship with the divine built into the structure of created reality.
secure for all people and future generations.\textsuperscript{10} The earth is good because God has made it (and God is goodness, truth, and beauty), and it exists because God is constantly turned toward it in loving relation. Williams has remarked in several different circumstances that if God were to turn his ‘face’ from creation for just a second, everything that is would cease to exist. Another way to make the point is to say that creation is a persistent divine action. Williams puts it this way, “There is indeed a beginning point, but it is the beginning of an active relationship that never stops. For God to create is for God to ‘commit’ his action, his life, to sustaining a reality that is different from him...”\textsuperscript{11} To neglect the created environment would be analogous to dishonoring the divinity latent within humanity, what the theological tradition has called the \textit{imago Dei}. Williams remarks that the “deepest religious basis for our commitment to the environment in which God has placed us is this recognition that we are called to be, and are enabled to be, the place where God’s love for the world comes through.”\textsuperscript{12} This gets at a crucial point for Williams, namely that humanity does not have some kind of dreary relationship to the world, but is instead meant to delight and rejoice in the created order. Delight in the material world would be the result of God’s love for creation coming through humanity, not some sense of an inanimate obligation. A great deal of the current environmental crisis is due to what Williams suggests are the “consequences of generations of failure to love the earth as we should; and we are also faced with the choices that might make those

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\textsuperscript{11} Williams, \textit{Tokens of Trust}, 34-5.
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\textsuperscript{12} Williams, \textit{Faith in the Public Square}, 188.
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consequences less destructive then they would otherwise be.”\textsuperscript{13} The appropriate place to begin, according to Williams, is to learn again what it is to delight in the wonder and gift of God’s creation. “We are not doomed to carry on in a downward spiral of the greedy, addictive, loveless behaviour that has helped to bring us to this point. Yet it seems that fear still rules our hearts and imaginations.”\textsuperscript{14}

Williams is quick to point out that delight in the created world is not a passive gesture. He suggests, “The ‘redemption’ of people and material life in general is not a matter of resigning from the business of labour and of transformation, but the search for a form of action that will preserve and nourish an interconnected development of humanity and its environment.”\textsuperscript{15} This is to suggest that delight and the hard work of transformation are inextricably linked together. Allowing the creation to be ‘other’ gives the appropriate distance for delight, which has the capacity to lead to a deep care for the flourishing of the created order. Williams links this care to Jesus’ “Great Commission” at the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel: “We are to be the bearers of good news for the world that God has made. Not for any one little bit of it, for any one community at the expense of others. Not even it seems for humanity at the expense of everything else in the universe. Good news for all creation.”\textsuperscript{16} Origen suggests that the Church is meant to be the cosmos of the cosmos. This seems to get at the universal significance of the

\textsuperscript{13} Williams, \textit{Act for the Sake of Love}.

\textsuperscript{14} Williams, \textit{Act for the Sake of Love}.

\textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{Faith in the Public Square}, 188.

\textsuperscript{16} Williams, Environmental Service at Westminster Hall, December 5, 2009, http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/852/environment-service-at-westminster-central-hall-london (accessed August 4, 2013). This notion pushes the definition of catholicity as spelled out in Chapter One. Not only is the catholic vision to tell the whole truth about God and humanity, but about the created world as well.
incarnation and its recapitulation of all created things, or at least a restored relationship between all things created. If much of our history in the last couple of centuries has seemed like it has not been very good news for the rest of creation, this is due to a failure to take seriously the risen Lord’s commission. The thriving of humanity must be seen in the context of a world that is cared for. Any attempt to muster some kind of argument that a choice needs to be made—either humanity or the earth (not to mention God)—should be avoided and declared false.

Human beings are meant to share in the glory that is the goal of all things. The redemptive action of God in Christ sets humans beings free from sin, anxiety, fear, and greed. This kind of liberation has implications for restored relationships between humanity and God, humans to one another, and humanity to all created things. God’s words to Job, “have you understood the expanse of the earth? Declare if you know all of this?” (Job 38:18) are quite a striking reminder that we are creatures bound up with other created things. This question necessitates a profound gesture of humility before the creator of all things, seen and unseen. Humility, delight in difference, and care, capture a great deal of Williams’s teaching concerning the Christian obligation to properly relate to the environment.

Having established a foundation for why humans should take care of creation we are left with a question: how is it that humanity is meant to care for the environment? Williams points out that this is a question that necessitates careful and wise discernment. In some instances the task may be to preserve nature, to allow it its proper space to get on doing what it does. Especially in an atmosphere of aggressive behavior toward creation, the Church is called to advocate for protection of a natural habitat. On the other hand,

17 Williams, *Act for the Sake of Love*. 

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wisdom concerning how to use the natural order for human sustenance is essential. The language of sustainability captures what this kind of usage might look like. Williams makes the case that built into the natural order is a capacity for self-healing or self-correction, and an unsustainable relationship would look like humans debilitating this ability.\(^\text{18}\)

To tell the truth about the created world is to admit that it has limitations, just as humanity does. A human relationship to the earth that seeks to simply reap a profit or quickly turn things over, despite their long-term effect, is a hubristic suspension of limitation. Take the example of fossil fuels. Much of the world’s economic machinery is utterly reliant on a resource that is finite. Nevertheless, business is conducted as if this were not so. This is obviously a distortion of the truth and its long-term consequences are potentially quite grave, not to mention the violence already unleashed. Human intelligence, fostered through a process of wise discernment, cannot leave room for such blatant distortion of fact. Nevertheless, it seems that at issue is not so much a question of clear facts and isolated reasoning, as it is the far more difficult arena of humanity we call the will. Intelligence, seen from this angle, is in need of redemption so that a restored moral vision is made possible. St. Thomas Aquinas suggested that intelligence is sharing in the Providence of God, which is to say that it is concerned with the good of all.\(^\text{19}\) Any claim that a choice must be made between the good of humanity and the good of the earth is thereby unintelligent. The negotiation of the relationship between humanity and creation can obviously be far from straightforward and obvious. Nevertheless, if the

\(^{18}\) Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 193.

\(^{19}\) Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 187.
difficult questions are not asked and engaged then the level of risk exponentially rises.\textsuperscript{20}

A view of limitless material growth undergirds a great deal of economic activity in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century, and such a narrative is simply not sustainable in the strictest of senses.

Williams notes that some people will want to stop this line of thought in its tracks, not least some Christians who will want to claim that God has pledged his faithfulness to creation and humanity. Proof that Williams can be very direct can be found in his response to this fuzzy notion:

I think to suggest that God might intervene to protect us from the corporate folly of our practices is as unchristian and unbiblical as to suggest that he protects us from the results of our individual folly or sin. This is not a creation in which there are no real risks; our faith has always held that the inexhaustible love of God cannot compel justice or virtue; we are capable of doing immeasurable damage to ourselves as individuals, and it seems clear that we have the same terrible freedom as a human race.\textsuperscript{21}

In order for creation to exist at all (including humanity) requires that it be ‘other’, that it has the space to be different enough from God that it can be deemed a creation in the first place. What Williams is getting at is that this kind of creation, which is not simply a puppet of divine will, is inherently risky. In other words, what has been classically called free will is at once packed with enormous potential for holy action and just the opposite. With this in mind let us turn to the topic of the economy.

\textit{ii. The Economy}

In the face of the international economic downturn of the last decade, which coincided with Williams’s time as Archbishop of Canterbury, he stated on multiple

\textsuperscript{20} Williams, \textit{Faith in the Public Square}, 191.

\textsuperscript{21} Williams, \textit{Faith in the Public Square}, 190.
occasions that the crisis had more to do with pride than with greed.\textsuperscript{22} In other words, blaming bankers, and the like, for the whole mess is too simple of a response to a system that has made space for bankers’ actions to be rewarded. This does not erase personal culpability, but it does issue in questions of how the overarching structure envisions accountability. If in the United States and the United Kingdom deregulation was the platform, and advocates thereof were consistently re-elected, then to suppose that the crisis rests solely on the greed of bankers and brokers is to miss the larger picture. It would be akin to looking at a painting and failing to realize that the canvas and the paint were essential to the task of creation. The appropriate question to ask, according to Williams, is what is it that allowed for the judgment of a whole society to be skewed?

The way for Williams to get into this question shows his characteristic approach of drawing on bits of the Christian theological tradition in imaginative ways so as to shed light on our current challenges. In this instance he turns to the monastic tradition of the Church. He points out that acquisitiveness (closely associated with pride), as understood in the ascetical tradition, is the root of all human error and failure.\textsuperscript{23} Williams stresses that from this line of reasoning, pride is a “refusal to acknowledge my lack of control over my environment, my illusion that I can shape the world according to my will.”\textsuperscript{24} This insight is foundational to Williams’s analysis and critique of the economic climate.

An illusory vision of the world that refuses to accept limitation creates a climate, a worldview, which fosters pride. An acceptance of vulnerability and shared


\textsuperscript{23} Williams, \textit{Ethics, Economics, and Global Justice}.

\textsuperscript{24} Williams, \textit{Ethics, Economics, and Global Justice}.
responsibility in a world of limits and processes is the opposite of an erroneous notion of the individual or collective will being able to secure control. For Williams, the point is not only to decide to be less greedy—as if this is a decision to be made in some kind of vacuum—but to have the imagination and symbolic world converted in such a way that we recognize ourselves as creatures who grow and change and therefore share in risk.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps another remark will clarify what he is after: “Ethical behaviour is behaviour that respects what is at risk in the life of another and works on behalf of the other’s need.”\textsuperscript{26} To look at humanity truthfully is to recognize that change and growth, and therefore risk, can only be swept aside through a manipulation made possible by the trickery of a controlling pride. A society that acts ethically is one that cares for the most vulnerable: children, the disabled, and the elderly. This kind of care and commitment can only come from a place of recognized and accepted vulnerability—a clear-headed acknowledgment that I may fail or be made weak and that I might be guilty of harm and damage to another.\textsuperscript{27}

Williams finds the historical tracing of capitalism gone awry to be convincing in its case that capitalism’s ties to colonialism began to vanquish proper notions of limitation and risk. With bountifully unearthed resources and a cheap labor source (slavery), the intimate relationship between colonialism and capitalism presented an unethical and illusory depiction of risk. As noted by Rupert Shortt, the uncoupling of the social and the economic is the root of the issue for Williams.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{25} Williams, \textit{Ethics, Economics, and Global Justice}.

\textsuperscript{26} Williams, \textit{Ethics, Economics, and Global Justice}.

\textsuperscript{27} Williams, \textit{Ethics, Economics, and Global Justice}.

\textsuperscript{28} Shortt, \textit{Rowan Williams: An Introduction}, 121.
project of capitalism, the social injustice of slavery, and an aggressive exploitation of resources, created an economic security that simply did not take into account the social underbelly or the natural world. As Williams put it in an article for The Guardian newspaper, “Endless trajectories of growth are not realistic; and our own rising ‘oceans’ of food and fuel prices are a stark reminder that scarcity is not someone else’s problem in today’s and tomorrow’s world.” 29 Unfortunately, it seems that it takes economic instability to open the discourse to the consideration of the social impact of an unsustainable economic model that attempts to whitewash risk.

The exchange of money and goods is but one important mode of how humans make sense of how to share space and determine what is due to each other. What this presupposes is that there is a vision of the world and humanity that orients such topical consideration. One of the decisive and crippling effects of the discourse concerning contemporary economics and capitalism is that it is not seen to be just one mode of how humans make sense, but has taken on the role of a meta-narrative. If it is understood that some sort of vision of what it means to be a human being drives all human action, what is the dominant idea driving western culture? Williams is suggesting that the story of modern capitalism has won the imagination of the day. Economic discourse has become our shared language, while the privatization of religious language (which tends to become sentimental or rooted in personal myth) has led to a “spirituality” rooted in the economic discourse of consumer and product; whatever product best suits your private interests is on the market and available for your consumption. Without the public imagination being captured by the charity implicit in the doctrine of grace “the idea of a

rhythm that controls competition by subversive egalitarian rituals becomes more and more inaccessible."

In what is often considered a post-Christian West, the cultural resources that can cultivate a human anthropology rooted in the language of gift seem to be in flux. The recent economic breakdown poses questions pertaining to the definition of wealth, and more generally the shortcomings of economic phraseology and its ability to adequately conceive of our shared humanity. The human conceived of as *homo economicus* seems to have overtaken any notion of the *homo eucharisticus*. Economics is not seen as a mode of how humans negotiate space, but the mode. Let us take the topic of the built environment as an example of the way that a prevailing capitalistic meta-narrative shapes discourse and imagination about what it is to be human.

The built environment has suffered from the dominant conception of what it is to be human. As John de Gruchy has it, "the theological problem with modern architecture has been that it was too vulnerable to ideological manipulation by those opposed to the common good." Profit maximization and utilitarian considerations almost always drive the aesthetic of our modern dislocated built landscape. "To make profit the only consideration meant the inexorable wiping out of all the natural features that delight and fortify the human soul in its daily rounds." Take for instance an exit off of Interstate 24, en route to Sewanee. What is discovered is a conglomeration of gas stations and fast-food eateries that are designed to fill you and your car up as quickly as possible and get you on

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to the next exit. Moving a slight distance from the highway and into the town we typically discover a place in the process of gentrification or settled economic polarities. Public space is the first thing to be compromised and often times the town lacks a coherent layout. The built environment is indicative of the spiritual ethos of the community. A robust public square, with the interchange of ideas, is radically hindered by the disappearance of public space and an attitude that the cultural aesthetic is less than a result of the town’s intentional endeavors and desires. As the Anglican theologian Timothy Gorringe has it, “The problems associated with the built environment are not primarily technical but spiritual, that is to say, they are fundamentally a question of values, of our understanding of the whole human project.”\textsuperscript{33} Gorringe, Mumford, and de Gruchy underline the spiritual and social underpinning of a proper conception of the built environment and the human. Their work on the built environment is as an example of telling the whole truth about humanity. These authors share Williams’s definition of catholicity, and the necessary social underpinnings of economics, and demonstrate how it informs a properly human vision of the built environment. Williams’s Catholic vision has implications on all manner of human endeavor. Even the built environment must be made sense of within the framework of a Catholic humanism.\textsuperscript{34} For Williams, the economy and the built environment must be subservient to a larger vision of what it is to be human. In a pluralistic, and generally secular world, this vision necessitates patience and dialogue, and the conversation must be deeply informed by religious conviction if it is to remain properly human.


\textsuperscript{34} See page 35 above.
iii. The Secular

In 2004, Williams was invited to give a lecture at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences in Rome on the past and future place of religion in Western society and the deficiencies of a secular worldview. Williams launches into the lecture by pointing out that the secular position supposes that there is such a thing as ‘public reason’. Any form of reasoning that is shaped by religious tradition must be considered unreasonable in the sense that it is reliant upon revelation and is therefore outside of the purview of the Enlightenment’s conception of reason.\(^{35}\) However, Williams’s chief argument against a certain kind of secularism has to do with its definition of freedom, which he deems deficient. He presents an inadequate form of secularism as defining freedom in this way: “what you have in a society where government allows a maximal level of individual choice and does not seek to prescribe moral priorities.”\(^{36}\) This suggests that the government is to take what individuals want at face value and guarantee that they can pursue this desire without interference as long as they do not harm another group in the process. This is a long way from any notion of the common good.

Williams suggests that this definition of freedom is defective in that it does not fully honor what it is to be human. He challenges the notion that this form of secularism can present a ‘public reason’ that can properly arbitrate different visions of being human. For example, he points out that the debate concerning the embryo in relation to genetic research pushes beyond overly simplified notions of individual or group freedom.

Therefore, he suggests,


\(^{36}\) Williams, *Secularism, Faith, and Freedom*. 71
political freedom is more complex than the license to pursue a set of individual or group projects with minimal interference. It also needs to be the freedom to ask some fundamental questions about the climate and direction of a society as shown in its policy decisions, to raise in the public sphere concerns about those issues that are irreducibly to do with collaboration, the goods that are necessarily common.\textsuperscript{37}

If political freedom necessitates the space to ask fundamental questions about the course a society is taking, then that freedom must be something fuller and greater than individual and group freedom. In other words, a state understood as allowing for maximal individual choice—the secular state in its most truncated form in Williams's view—shows itself to be lacking the resources to adequately engage with the full scope of the political landscape. There must be a broader vision of what political humanity looks like. This opens up a massive question for 'programmatic secularism':\textsuperscript{38} how is a prescriptive approach that dictates a singular view of human flourishing to be avoided?

This form of secularism supposes that any religious or ideological system that demands a hearing in the public sphere is aiming “to seize control of the political realm and to override and nullify opposing convictions. It [programmatic secularism] finds specific views of the human good outside a minimal account of material security and relative social stability unsettling, and concludes that they need to be relegated to the purely private sphere.”\textsuperscript{39} This form of secularism supposes that religious or other ideological conviction is simply a private and seemingly arbitrary lifestyle choice, akin to choosing to buy a Prada purse or a Toyota Prius. What this kind of attitude results in, according to Williams, is a massive flattening out of difference. By way of relegateing

\textsuperscript{37} Williams, \textit{Secularism, Faith, and Freedom}.

\textsuperscript{38} As opposed to the version of secularism he calls procedural. I define these terms in the body of the text.

\textsuperscript{39} Williams, \textit{Secularism, Faith, and Freedom}. 
deeply held beliefs and worldviews to the realm of the private, programmatic secularism imposes a kind of bland uniformity that does not at all honor the seriousness of difference. What this does in the public realm is rather startling: specific convictions are deemed to be out of order in the public sphere, so the public square becomes purely instrumental and no longer has anything fundamental to argue about.\textsuperscript{40}

Williams differentiates the value-free public square of programmatic secularism with that of procedural secularism: “It is the distinction between the empty public square of a merely instrumental liberalism, which allows maximal private licence, and a crowded and argumentative public square which acknowledges the authority of a legal mediator or broker whose job it is to balance and manage real difference.”\textsuperscript{41} Williams grants that this public square will admittedly be louder and more active, but it does honor difference and conviction. Moreover, the development of policy and law would necessitate persuasion and a harmony that must be labored after, by religious and non-religious people figuring out what it is to share life and space. This procedural secularism seems to honor the kind of political freedom Williams is concerned with preserving in a liberal democracy.

After defining and exploring the outcomes of these two forms of secularism, and establishing which of the two best promises a secure future for political freedom, Williams suggests that procedural secularism is in fact an outworking of a religious

\textsuperscript{40} Williams, \textit{Secularism, Faith, and Freedom}. The purely functional nature of public discourse has resulted in an inability to place current debates and concerns into a larger framework that honors both the past and the future. It would be worth exploring the ways in which the intolerance of much of current American politics comes out of an unrealized frustration with the inevitable culture crisis brought on by programmatic secularism—or what some scholars have called the ‘naked public square.’ See Richard John Neuhaus, \textit{The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

\textsuperscript{41} Williams, \textit{Secularism, Faith, and Freedom}. 
principle. The Christian Church began as a reconstruction of what it meant to be the people of God:

It claimed to make real a pattern of common life lived in the fullest possible accord with the nature and will of God—a life in which each member’s flourishing depended closely and strictly on the flourishing of every other and in which every specific gift or advantage had to be understood as a gift offered to the common life.\(^{42}\)

Because this pattern of communal life is made possible through the Spirit of the risen Christ, it cannot be expunged by any kind of political machination. At once the Church is irreducibly political but its integrity is not reliant upon some kind of sacred political order for its existence.

Early Christian allegiance to an ascended Lord of history naturally shifted the notion of a sacred obedience to the state. As it related to taxes and roadwork, the Christians could naturally oblige, but when the question was about fundamental commitment the Church pledged allegiance to the creator God who has acted in Christ. As Williams points out, ordinary legality would most often not prove to be controversial, but “the disturbing thing was that Christians believed that there were circumstances in which loyalty to God trumped the demands of the civitas.”\(^{43}\) Faith is the bedrock for true freedom, not a programmatic secularism, as the Christian presence announced in the Roman Empire: solidarities existed independent of the Empire and therefore survived despite political transition.\(^{44}\) Williams’s main point is that a supposedly liberal society that flattens out difference and does not take seriously the moral and spiritual convictions of its citizens is destined to convince itself that the only solidarities that matter are of the

\(^{42}\) Williams, *Secularism, Faith, and Freedom*.

\(^{43}\) Williams, *Secularism, Faith, and Freedom*.

\(^{44}\) Williams, *Secularism, Faith, and Freedom*. 
state. The language can then easily drift into shaping those outside the bonds of solidarity created by the state as enemies and somehow outside of the scope of the state’s limited and anti-catholic solidarity.

In conclusion, Williams’s contribution to the debate just might be that a proper secularism necessitates faith.\(^45\) In order for a procedural secularism to flourish it need not limit the moral and religious conviction, but rather allow these allegiances to shape the dialogue of what humans can imagine in the *civitas*. In order for a reductive and restrictive functionalism to be avoided in the polity of late-capitalism it is the theological and religious voice represented by Williams that just might inspire future thinkers to resist anti-humanist tendencies and foster a faith-filled secularism. If his commentaries on the environment, economics, and the secular have one thing in common it is a persistent claim that the Christian religious voice animates a humanism that is proper to the divine freedom inherent in all of God’s creatures.

\(^{45}\) What he has defined as procedural secularism as opposed to a programmatic secularism that flattens out difference.
CHAPTER IV

Prayer

To begin to understand Williams as a thinker requires some awareness that he is an intellectual who soaking himself in the prayer of the Church. He has written and spoken frequently about the contours of a life of prayer, with all of its attendant challenges and gifts. Benjamin Myers appropriately pointed out in his book Christ the Stranger that Williams has been deeply influenced by the spirituality and religious practice of Russian Orthodoxy. 1 As noted above, he wrote his dissertation on Vladimir Lossky and frequently cites the likes of Alexander Schmemann and Sergei Bulgakov. With this spiritual and intellectual trajectory in mind, I want to enter into Williams’s thought on prayer by highlighting his work on praying with icons.

Kallistos Ware, in the Foreword to Williams’s book on praying with icons of the Virgin Mary, writes that “We [in the Orthodox Church] do more than just look at icons or talk about them; we pray with them. In fresh and unexpected ways this book indicates how this can be done.” 2 Williams is a poet, and has a deep allegiance to art and its capacity to expand and illumine what it is to be human. In many ways the role of the icon shapes the theological disposition that Williams embodies, what we might call the word (the logos) made strange. 3

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1 Benjamin Myers, Christ the Stranger, 16.

2 Rowan Williams, Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin, (Brewster: Paraclete, 2006), ix. Ware was raised an Anglican and converted to Eastern Orthodoxy at the age of 24.

For Williams, the life of prayer is not about control and analytical capacity to neatly categorize. Instead, in a posture of receptivity and openness to the divine, we are, in a sense, worked on. It is not so much that rationality or reason is scorned, it is rather put in its proper place and set free so as to ultimately become reasonable. This posture and understanding of prayer suggests that we are not so much looking at God as turning ourselves to be looked at by God. This has obvious exegetical significance in the sense that an exploration of biblical text, or other texts of spiritual weight, are meant to explore us before we go on exploring and parsing. Williams would use the language of interrogation. In his book Christ on Trial, he poignantly explores this theme through a careful reading of the scriptural narrative of Christ’s passion. In analogous fashion to his work on iconography, he pays close attention to the shape of the text and attempts to draw out the multifaceted theological and spiritual insights.

Williams, like many great Anglican thinkers, has a deep love of the Gospel of John. It has been noted that John’s Gospel is the only one of the four gospels that does not have an account of the Transfiguration of Christ. Some suggest that this is because John’s story is best seen as an announcement and depiction of transfiguration throughout. If prayer is a posture of receptivity to God, a gesture that attempts to let God be God and get to work on us, then the ultimate result is to begin to see things from a different angle and through a new lens. Prayer in this way is the “basis for a transformed vision of the

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4 Rowan Williams, Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettle our Judgment (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003).

5 The text of the icon (you write an icon), scripture, or any other text is approached with a willingness to be interrogated so as to discover the inexhaustibility of its spiritual depth.

world in the transfigured and transfiguring reality of Jesus.” With this in mind let us explore Williams’s thoughts on praying with the icon of the Transfiguration.

The icon above is called *The Transfiguration*, and is from the fifteenth century out of the Novgorod School. The Eastern iconography of this event has been nearly the same for around a thousand years, and is one of the most central, if not the most central, images of the Church. Eastern Orthodox spirituality is deeply shaped by the incarnation of the

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8 The Novgorod School was a Russian movement that was active in iconography and murals in the 12th-16th century in Novgorod.

9 See David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37 ff. Building on his earlier two volumes: *Tradition and Imagination* and
eternal Logos, and the effect of this enfleshment on material reality. It would be an error to suppose that the Orthodox view of the Divine Liturgy is solely otherworldly. As a matter of fact, God is necessarily otherworldly, but has created (and goes on creating) this world and has wonderfully redeemed it by way of taking on flesh and re-narrating the act of creation. \(^{10}\) Seen from this perspective of recapitulation, the humanity of Christ is the proper articulation of created reality being fully receptive to the action of God. Williams would want to say that in Christ, God’s action and freedom come through without interruption. This is to say that if we are to look on Christ as the artwork (εἰκόνα) of God, what we see is God himself. The Transfiguration becomes a moment in time when the timelessness of God’s action comes through without a veil; God’s intention and purpose (eternal love) quite literally shine through. “Belief in Jesus is seeing him as the gateway to an endless journey into God’s love.”\(^{11}\) This gateway is not simply a life that points in the direction of the divine—Williams would say that any number of human lives do that—nor is it a disembodied matter of supernatural visitation. The life and person of Jesus is “shot through with God’s, he is carried on the tide of God’s eternal life, and borne towards us on that tide, bringing with him all the fullness of the creator.”\(^{12}\)

We should step back a moment and point out that this is the foundation for Williams and his view of the Church. Jesus is trustworthy, and his promise to stay with the Church and to continually invite people to receive his Spirit and share in the relation

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_discipleship and imagination_, Brown offers an important critique of the dominant Orthodox emphasis on transcendence and not allowing space for change and development within icon writing.

\(^{10}\) In relation to the incarnation as a re-narration of creation, see David Bentley Hart, _The Beauty of the Infinite_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 318 ff.

\(^{11}\) Williams, _The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ_, 5.

\(^{12}\) Williams, _The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ_, 6-7.
he has to the Father is the point.\textsuperscript{13} Seen in this way, the Church is a divine gift that is
dependent not on the successes and faithfulness of humans, but is instead utterly reliant
on the action of God. Obviously this does not negate the urgent necessity the world has
for holy lives. It is to say that the Church is about God in Christ, and the sharing in the
unbreakable bond of affection and delight that the Father and the Son share from before
time and throughout all ages. The Church is the space opened up in history by the action
of God coming perfectly and without interruption in the life, death, resurrection, and
ascension of Jesus and his call for humanity to share in the life he lives to the Father (life
in the Spirit).

Let us return to the icon of Transfiguration and engage the theological movements
made by Williams in the celebratory mode. Moses and Elijah flank Jesus on the left and
the right. Our eye is drawn into the weight of the glory coming out of the depths of
eternity (note the backdrop of Christ). Williams points out that Moses and Elijah come at
the person praying with the icon \textit{from} and \textit{by} the same energy, yet Jesus stands alone in
the very heart of the energy. It is the light radiating from him that radiates the robes of his
companions. Despite living centuries before Jesus, what makes Moses and Elijah radiant
in the icon is the light pouring forth from Jesus. The icon, like the Transfiguration itself,
disorients our sense of time.\textsuperscript{14} Williams notes that Matthew and Mark present the story of
the Transfiguration with the apparently innocent words, “after six days.” Many
commentators have since noted that this is a reference to the days of creation. Williams
gleans that this suggests that the Transfiguration is the “climax of the creative work of

\textsuperscript{13} Rowan Williams, \textit{Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another} (Boston: New Seeds, 2005),
xiii.

\textsuperscript{14} Williams, \textit{The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ}, 7-8.
God...In Jesus, the world of ordinary prosaic time is not destroyed, but it is broken up
and reconnected, it works no longer just in straight lines but in layers and spirals of
meaning."¹⁵ So, it is not just the climax of creation, but also a "brief glimpse of the end of
all things—the world aflame with God’s light."¹⁶ This is to suggest that the
Transfiguration must be seen within its eschatological dimensionality. Creation’s
fulfillment in Christ is the eschatological telos that creation strains after. In Christ, the
action comes through without interruption and the end is brought into the middle of
history, leaving nothing unchanged.

To pray with the icon of the Transfiguration is to be drawn into the divine life and
make space for God to be God. That, for Williams, is the purpose of prayer. It is not
magic, it is not easy, it is a desire for the living God, necessitating a disposition of
openness to let that God get to work on us. Williams often remarks that the role of the
person of faith in the world is to take responsibility for God. It is only through the
practice and habit of prayer that we can safely assume that we are making room for God’s
action to come through. A life that Williams is particularly intrigued by is that of Etty
Hillesum:

It is plain that she saw her belief as a matter of deciding to occupy a
certain place in the world, a place where others could somehow
connect with God through her—and this not in any self-congratulatory
spirit or with any sense of being exceptionally holy or virtuous, but
simply because she had agreed to take responsibility for God’s
believability.¹⁷


¹⁷ Williams, Tokens of Trust, 23. An anecdote: Recently at Magdalene College, Cambridge, Williams met
with my very own tenth grade English teacher who has left Princeton Day School to produce and act in her
play about Hillesum.
This is a staggering sentence and gets right to the heart of the matter for Williams. To be a person of prayer is to yearn to be a person where God’s action comes through and to daringly take responsibility for God in your own time and place. For Hillesum, the place became Auschwitz, and much to her surprise, and I suppose her terror, she sensed the call that God’s believability had to come through her in a place of desolation and evil.

Williams is quick to point out, not least due to his close reading of Thomas Merton, that a life of prayer propels ‘action’. Contemplation is about receptivity to the action and energy of God. Human action, to be properly human, must be open to the action of God, which is to say that it must come out of contemplation. Within this line of thought we can get a sense of how the life of the coenobitic religious is not about some kind of flight into the starry realm leaving the ‘real’ world behind, but just the opposite. The hard work of patiently sitting with God in prayer properly orients human action and creates a space for God’s freedom, welcome, and generosity to come through. For example, according to Williams, the Benedictine practice of hospitality comes not from a place of merely human kindness, but from the generative grace and hospitality of God. It is because the community prays the Divine Office and celebrates daily Mass and spends time in private devotion that they act in a way that is gracious and world shifting. To enter the grounds of a monastery is indeed one of the most palpable ways to make sense of what Williams supposes to be the ‘purpose’ of prayer. Granted ‘purpose’ is an odd way to speak of prayer, as it is anything but utilitarian or simply a means to an end. The end of prayer is communion with God, participation in the life of the Trinity, which is received as pure gift. Nevertheless, prayer changes us and therefore has an effect on people in concrete places and in real time. Another way to make the point is to say that

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18 See Rupert Shortt, Rowan’s Rule, 157-8.
holiness impacts the ordinary. With the monastery in mind, and prayer and ordinariness
the topic, we will explore a lecture on Benedictine spirituality given at the Trinity
Institute by Williams.

The holiness of life made possible through prayer often looks quite ordinary.
Williams puts it like this:

The prosaic settledness of some marriages, the ease of an old priest
celebrating the Eucharist, the musician’s relation to a familiar
instrument playing a familiar piece – these belong to the same family
of experience as the kind of sanctity that Benedict evokes here;
undemonstrative... because there is nothing to prove.19

What does that look like in a world of individuals setting out with something constantly
to prove? Are we not schooled from a young age to step out and be different and prove a
point? What if the point to prove is that God is God, and that we are his beloved
creatures? Does this not disarm violent competition and a desire to control the outcome?
Williams fleshes out some of the implications of the Rule of St. Benedict and suggests
that its spirituality and down-to-earth ordinariness reminds the Church of what it is:

The product of the workshop is people who are really there; perhaps
it’s as simple as that. What Benedict is interested in producing is
people who have the skills to diagnose all inside them that prompts
them to escape from themselves in the here and now. Just as much as
in the literature of the desert – despite his insistence that he is working
on a different and lower level – Benedict regards monastic life as a
discipline for being where you are, rather than taking refuge in the
infinite smallness of your own fantasies.20

Prayer, in Williams’s view, is about being where you are. Flight from the ordinary is
delusion and does not leave room for God’s action to transfigure the space inhabited.

19 Rowan Williams, Shaping Holy Lives, April 29, 2003,

20 Williams, Shaping Holy Lives.
Something about the stability and prayerful habits of the Benedictine monastery show forth, in communal action, what it looks like to be where you are and allow God to enter in. In this way the monastery is a profound teacher for the parish church. It is a reminder that the purpose of the parish is to be a sacramental community that prays and learns what it means to be located in their particular place, with all of its attendant ordinariness, and not seek to flee, but to engage more deeply. The group of people called together is not up to us but up to God. The life that is to be shared is to be open and honest, and to be disciplined in avoiding delusion, so that the action of God might come through a shared life that has the resources to combat the tendency to flee and escape the ordinary. To learn the habits of holiness, following this logic, is to learn to engage where we are, and as people of contemplation, to take responsibility for God in our own place and time.

Near the end of Williams’s archiepiscopate, he was invited by the Bishop of Rome to address a synod of bishops, the first time an (Anglican) Archbishop of Canterbury has been invited to do so. The topic of the address was quintessentially Williams: contemplation and the task of evangelization. I want to explore the address in detail as I think it is as an excellent depiction of his thought on prayer and action.

Let us begin with his own words, which could very well be the abstract of all of Williams’s thought:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn
what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.21

Contemplation, not so much a form of prayer but the key to prayer, is at the heart of Williams’s thinking, and is the practice that he writes about not as a distant observer, but as a Christian who takes the habit quite seriously. In a world that is trapped in unreality under the auspices of getting on with ‘real’ work, counteracting this by contemplation becomes a matter of profound import. To go along with ‘business as usual’ is to collude in a fantasy world that is doing a great deal of harm to the created environment, not to mention the atmosphere of the soul. Contemplation, like spirituality, is therefore anything but a flight from reality. It is rather a flight from the unreality of so much of the noise that vies to be taken seriously. In a culture infatuated with the white noise of remaking identity through consumerism, the contemplative stance is indeed one of resistance and has the capacity to create a counter-polis centered on the freedom of the gospel.

The result of a contemplative life is to show forth the face of a new humanity made possible by the action of God in Christ. In his speech, Williams celebrated the Second Vatican Council’s recovery of a Christian anthropology through the likes of Henri de Lubac and Yves Congar. The neo-scholastic dryness of textbook theology was overturned by the early and medieval Christian accounts of grace perfecting and transfiguring the imago Dei at the core of the human. In this way, going public with the gospel is to announce that it is “at last possible to be properly human: the Catholic and Christian faith is a ‘true humanism’, to borrow a phrase from another genius of the last

century, Jacques Maritain. 22 To follow Christ, then, is to enter into the way of becoming more fully human. Irenaeus’s well known dictum, the glory of God is a human being fully alive, makes a great deal of sense when seen from this angle.

Lest it sound like Williams is articulating contemplation as the way into some kind of amorphous humanism, he is quick to point out that the Christian faith—and the habit of contemplation—is the way into a true humanism. Christianity is not something that can be tacked on after the humanizing task is complete; instead it is integral to the task in the first place. As he puts it,

it is the faith itself that shapes the work of humanizing and the humanizing enterprise will be empty without the definition of humanity given in the Second Adam. Evangelization, old or new, must be rooted in a profound confidence that we have a distinctive human destiny to show and share with the world. 23

The shape of a restored humanity is a sharing in the form of the eternal life shared between the Father and the Son, a life of adoration and delight, a perpetual pouring out of life to the other. Again, it is the practice of contemplation that allows for the recreation of the human in Christ to take place:

To be contemplative as Christ is contemplative is to be open to all the fullness that the Father wishes to pour into our hearts. With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow. And the face we need to show to our world is the face of a humanity in endless growth towards love, a humanity so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end to find our way more deeply into it, into the heart of the trinitarian life. 24

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22 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
23 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
24 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
Christ is the perfect contemplative in the sense that his life is completely receptive to the will of the Father. Christian contemplation is to share in Jesus’s contemplative stance before the Father. It is the work of the Spirit that transfigures and elevates our humanity as it more closely conforms to Christ. It is the contemplative stance—the key, as Williams puts it, to prayer, liturgy, art, and ethics—that makes possible the deification of our humanity, as the divine image is restored through our participation in the life of the new Adam. Williams points to St. Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians and suggests that with our unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, we are transfigured with a radiance that our fellow human beings need to see (3.18). The point of theosis and growing in the image of Christ is not about having some kind of personal religious experience that is to be protected and guarded for the sake of our own holiness. Nor is it to show to other humans that we have achieved some level of sanctity that is meant to impress. Instead, Christians seek to show the face of Christ to the world so that a new form of humanity can be seen, and a new form of communal life can take shape.

In Chapter III we discussed the patterns of environmental and economic justice. Perhaps it comes into focus here how contemplation plays a crucial role in any articulation of true justice. Williams, in characteristic fashion, draws on St. Augustine to suggest that it is only through the disposition of contemplation that we come “to love human beings in a human way” (Confessions, IV.7). Williams takes this to mean that we love humans not based on what they can do for us, but rather we love humans “as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of God.”25 It is from here, in Williams’s view, that true justice and true love have their roots.

25 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
As mentioned above, this kind of spiritual growth has to happen in real places and in real time. In other words, the theory behind contemplation is crucial, but it is ultimately useless unless it is practiced in the concrete. Williams notes that people who have little knowledge or care for the hierarchies of the Church are in fact challenged and intrigued by lives that show something of the fruit of contemplation. We often hear this spoken of as ‘authenticity’ in our culture. Perhaps we might hear this as lives that are taking responsibility for God, lives that are allowing God to be God, and lives that are creating space for God to get to work on them. Williams supposes that when the Christian history of our day is written it will be ecumenical communities such as Taizé and networks like the World Community for Christian Meditation that will be remembered as doing some of the evangelistic work of lasting value.

Provocatively, Williams stresses that unless the Church’s evangelization shows forth a transformed set of habits and virtues, a different way of inhabiting the ordinary, it will be of little to no value to a world that is in need of seeing something different. The self-anxious, competitive, busy and controlling attitudes of so many human institutions will continue to stymie the Church and fail to capture the imagination of people eager to inhabit a space of a deeper and abiding joy. The Church as a space cleared out for contemplation is the surest foundation of an evangelization that shows forth the transfigured humanity made possible in Christ. Importantly for Williams, the response to the Church being taken less seriously in society, or a Church not properly modeling contemplation, is not to try to answer the anxiety-producing questions of the day, because this will only make the Church more anxious. Instead, the Church has to ask with St.
Paul, where are we looking? If the Church is turned to the icon of God in Christ then it is able to reflect that glory to the world. To be anxiously engaged with trying to solve the Church’s credibility issues would be to fall prey to the greatest enemy of Gospel proclamation: self-consciousness. Self-forgetful love, immersed in the Spirit of Christ, is the contemplative antidote. As Williams puts it to the synod of Bishops in Rome, “In our considerations of how we are once again to make the Gospel of Christ compellingly attractive to men and women of our age, I hope we never lose sight of what makes it compelling to ourselves, to each one of us in our diverse ministries.” For Williams, contemplation is the key to a growing awareness of the renewed humanity that is opened up by the eternal Son who invites us to step into his (kenotic) reality and feel the landscape begin to open up as well.

Theologians such as Karl Barth and Bruce McCormack issue a challenge to Williams’s view on the mutually kenotic nature of the Father and the Son—a theological position that comes to the fore particularly when Williams is speaking of prayer. Barth wants to stress the obedience of the Son to the Father; so to speak of an equally kenotic nature might be to confuse persons. In a similar fashion, McCormack wants to argue that kenosis is the distinctive attribute of the Son. McCormack and Barth would be uncomfortable with Williams’s desire to speak of God’s creation as a kenotic action. Byron Smith argues that Williams’s mutually kenotic doctrine of the Trinity undermines

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26 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
27 Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome.
28 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1 Sec. 59.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark , 1956), 157-210.
his understanding of the monarchical nature of God the Father. In Smith’s estimation, “if the Son is not uniquely kenotic, the Father is not uniquely monarchical.”

Both Barth and Smith want to emphasize the monarchical quality of God the Father. In order for this characteristic of the Father not to be compromised they stress the obedience of the Son to the Father. To suppose that God the Father was at all emptied out in the creative act of calling the world into being (or sending the Son) would be to risk the immutability of the Father. The metaphysical vision of Williams allows for a pouring out of the life of the Father to the Son, and from the Son back to the Father in the action of the Spirit. I would argue that in God there is nothing that is not Christ-like. This is to say that if Jesus Christ emptied himself taking the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7) then this is characteristic of how God is in God’s being. The life shared between the Father and the Son can be too narrowly defined if the only key that the relationship is heard in is one of monarchy and servanthood. Some room needs to be made for a deeply shared life of indwelling and reciprocity within the Godhead.

Smith is also critical of Williams’s acceptance of death as a necessary means of being a creature. If prayer is a key to unlocking a truthful recognition of our contingency and creatureliness then certainly one aspect of growth is recognition of human mortality. However, Smith suggests that Williams goes too far in using the language of our accepting death. Smith points to scriptural examples of death being the final enemy of God and the consequence of sin (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Rom. 5:12-21). If spirituality is becoming a creature before a generous God, then is it not essential to move beyond a mere acceptance of sin and death? Should sin and death not be seen from a different angle given Christ’s resurrection from the dead? Smith fears that Williams comes

dangerously close to moving from recognition of death to welcoming it, and thus potentially diluting the Easter hope for the end of death.\textsuperscript{31}

It seems that Smith’s contention that Williams moves too close to welcoming death is pressing his language of acceptance a step too far. A proper recognition of finitude and creatureliness, and even the language of \textit{accepting} death, is not the same thing as cheerfully \textit{welcoming} death. An acceptance of death, with hope in a victory over the grave in Christ, is to trust that life changes but does not end. Thus the acceptance of death can be a holy action, demonstrating an abiding trust in the triune God to preserve life beyond death. If the process of prayer entails opening the self up to God, then it is a spiritual practice of realized eschatology in the sense that the soul learns to trust in the eternal nature of God and the promise of eternal life in Christ. An acceptance of death, seen from this theological angle, necessitates a profound trust in the paschal mystery.

“Putting yourself in a place where God can get to you,” is how Williams once explained prayer to the BBC.\textsuperscript{32} He goes on to describe prayer as a place where we sit in receptivity and almost feel our ears grow.\textsuperscript{33} Williams was pressed by the interviewer as to why we ought to get on with praying if we are already aware of God’s presence throughout the day. Williams supposes that it is something like a family being on holiday. He suggests that it would not be much of a time spent together if you did not take a deep breath, sit around the table, and explicitly draw out that it is good to be together.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} Smith, \textit{On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays}, 140.


\textsuperscript{33} Rowan Williams, Interview with the BBC, March 7, 2010.

\textsuperscript{34} Rowan Williams, Interview with the BBC, March 7, 2010.
other words, he affirms that indeed God is with us all the time—if he were not we would cease to exist—yet we have to carve out space and time to sit in communion with God and allow God the space to say “I am here.” It is from this place of prayerful attention that we learn to trust in God and take responsibility for God in our own ordinary places, with our own ordinary lives, receiving and enacting transfiguration.
CONCLUSION

The unfolding of the chapters above is meant to capture the essence of the baptized imagination of Rowan Williams. His careful thinking and contemplative posture launches him into a myriad of fields with a genuinely Catholic spirit. The sheer diversity of his published material, and its massive engagement with unlikely sources, makes him a thinker that you must take time with in order to begin to sense the rhythms and patterns of his idiom. Nevertheless, the multiplicity of his engagements is swept into what I want to call an ecclesial vision of Catholic humanism. His intellectual exploration is always exercised as a servant of the Church concerned with the project of truly human flourishing.

The first chapter above, on the topic of catholicity, fleshed out what it means for Williams to suggest that the Catholic vocation is to tell the whole truth about God and humanity. The chapter set the tone for the rest of the work. The chapter explained why Williams's interlocutors are necessarily as diverse as they are, for his commitment to the Catholic faith necessitates a genuine liberality of thought that does not turn away from the hard questions. The Catholic tradition, from this vantage point, is seen as living and exploratory and not as a static deposit that can be neatly summed up. Williams's Catholic vision throws light on all areas of human exploration, as it is tasked with telling the whole truth. Human sexuality or secularism is not deemed outside of the scope of Catholic investigation, as a shortsighted dogmatism might adjudicate. Because of the dynamism latent within this Catholic vision, Williams's thought comes across as traditioned and yet fresh. What he catches from St. Paul, St. Augustine, Teresa of Avila,
or Thomas Merton is the same Catholic spirit that yearns to tell the whole truth about God and humanity.

The second chapter, on the sacraments, moved between the celebratory, the communicative, and the critical modes of theology. Williams is critical of the Church’s tendency to view the sacraments in isolation, as if they can be pulled out of context and examined under the bright lights of the laboratory. He is concerned with rehabilitating St. Thomas Aquinas’s conviction that the right way to talk about the sacraments is to ask what they are for. The answer is rather obvious, but the implications of the approach are significant. Sacraments are for us, so that we might become participants in the reconciliatory drama of Jesus’s life being poured out to the Father for the life of the world. In baptism, the Christian is flooded into the life of Christ and sets out on scripting a story that will take a lifetime of repentance and courageous action. In the Eucharist, the baptized are drawn into a deeper participation in the action of the eternal Son, and are launched into the world as kingdom workers who labor to let God come through in their particular lives and places.

The third chapter, on the Church in the public square, engaged Williams’s thought on the environment, economics, and the secular, respectively, in the modes of communicative and critical theology. The section on the environment looked at howbiblical exegesis can be opened up to engage in the environmental crisis or debate. Drawing on prophetic literature and the doctrine of creation, Williams is able to articulate an environmental defense rooted in the sources of the Christian tradition. The section on the economy suggested that monastic insight into human pride has a great deal to offer to the conversation concerning the economic crisis and capitalistic tendencies that fail to
recognize limitation and vulnerability. The section on the secular traced a lecture given by Williams at a Pontifical Institute in Rome concerned with defending what he calls procedural secularism over and against an identified programmatic secularism. He is clear that what is at stake is the public square as such: it will either be a place that honors diversity and encourages dialogue, and recognizes that religious conviction is larger than what the state has to offer, or it will collapse in on itself and create an atmosphere that becomes purely functional, driven by whatever view of the human the market dictates.

The final chapter explored Williams’s theology of prayer by way of his work on iconography and contemplation. Specifically, I engaged his work on the icon of the Transfiguration as a way to witness Williams in the mode of practicing celebratory theology. He narrates the icon with sophistication picking up details that the untrained eye would easily miss. The last part of the final chapter is meant to serve as a kind of bookend. If the exploration of Williams’s definition of catholicity started the conversation it seems appropriate that his thought concerning contemplation brings some closure. For Williams, contemplation is the key to prayer, liturgy, art, and ethics. It is the orientation necessary to properly embark on the theological journey, intellectually and spiritually (which cannot be pulled apart for him).

As the introduction highlighted, Williams moves between what he classifies the celebratory, the communicative, and the critical modes of theology. An important way to engage Williams (and any other theologian for that matter) is to be clear what mode he is operating in at any given time (recognizing that the modes are not mutually exclusive). Perhaps it is helpful for us to imagine that each mode is like a different instrument in a three-person ensemble. They each have their part to play and ideally feed off of each
other as if in a jazz ‘jam session’. Without a proper sense of these modes, and the role each plays, Williams might seem to be taking too much time or going down a path that does not at first glance seem necessary. But if the reader (hearer) is to stay with his line of argumentation, the journey often leads to an intriguing session that creates melodies and tunes that are at once deeply rooted in the tradition but equally original. Williams once remarked that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was best understood not only as a thinker who drew water out of the well of truth, but that he was in fact a well driver.¹ This is about as good of an image as we might conjure up in classifying Williams; he goes to new places sensing that water lies beneath and gets on with the labor of breaking ground.

An equally important point to go in tandem with his originality is his deep conviction that to be a theologian is to be a religious person with habits that strive after holiness of life. In other words, theology is not just about clever ideas or metaphysical insights; it is about a way of life that is opened up to the cruciform and transformative action of the risen Christ. A repeated refrain in his task is that the Christian theologian, as much as any other Christian, is a person who must perpetually practice the art of repentance: laying the soul bare before the living God in judgment and healing. Williams, the theologian, is always casting an ecclesial vision that is about living a holy life and it is from this place that he is deeply admired and respected. People are not simply searching after the right ideas, but holiness of life, what our culture often calls authenticity.

In the chapters of this thesis I have tried to offer a glimpse of this ecclesial vision. Williams finds a home in high church Anglicanism because he understands the theological task to be a bodily endeavor—it is a religious exercise. It is more to do with

desire than intellect.² To borrow a phrase from Etty Hillesum, as Williams often does, the task is about learning to kneel. Adoration and humility are not add-ons to the theological task, but are instead its starting points.³ As Chapter Four suggested, the key to theology, prayer, liturgy, art, and ethics is a contemplative stance. The religious life is one that takes responsibility for God’s appearing and learns to say ‘God’ from a place of freedom that bodily looks like dropping to your knees in the middle of your bedroom. In other words, to say ‘God’ is to be able to do so from a place of intimate trust.

Williams’s own theological work could not be distinguished from his life of discipleship and his attempt to become a trustworthy religious life that takes responsibility for God in our time. His thought and pattern of life cannot be examined as merely ‘interesting,’ and so his words and action have to be taken more seriously if he is to be heard in the right tune. And, he would be very quick to point out, his work is to be taken seriously because it points away from itself to God, exhibiting a sacramentality appropriate to the theological task. This is not to suggest that his work does not need to be judged and critically engaged, in fact the task of sitting with his corpus of text and entering into the conversation is something that his work presupposes.

Williams is a thinker who will prove to be deeply important for the future of the Church. He is an orthodox thinker rooted deeply in the theological inheritance who is informed by the same Spirit that has grasped theological luminaries of every era. Although he might articulate it differently at this point in his life, I have always greatly

² Augustine is the most influential thinker on Williams’s thought. This is true of Pope Benedict XVI as well, and they shared several theological conversations during their tenures as Bishops of Canterbury and Rome. This is not to suggest that the intellect is not crucial, obviously this cannot be argued if you take a look at Williams’s work, but rather it situates the intellect.

³ Williams, Religious Lives.
enjoyed the mission statement of a document produced by Williams and John Saward in Oxford in the 1970s. The two young scholars and churchmen met at the Horse and Jockey Pub on Woodstock Road. The pamphlet, not surprisingly, begins with a quote of the Russian theologian, Nikolai Fyodorov: “Our social programme is the dogma of the Holy Trinity.” The document goes on to say:

We are committed to the struggle of justice, liberty and peace, not because of some secondary interest in social theory, but because of the very foundation of the Catholic faith. We believe that man is made in the image of the triune God, and is therefore social; that in Christ he is restored to his social capacity for social being. We believe that man is called to share the life of the Holy Trinity, the life and love of communion. We cannot, therefore, feign neutrality, or remain uncritical, in the face of a society based upon the ruthless pursuit of private gain and unlimited consumption. The institutional egotism of all forms of capitalism, including the Soviet collectivised form, must be challenged by Catholic Christians, if we are to remain faithful to the whole Gospel of Christ...

We must above all revive the prophetic office of the Church. Now that we are in the death-throes of late capitalism, which threatens to inflict even greater violence on mankind than it has done before, we must make our stand with oppressed, with the movement for liberation throughout the world.⁴

This statement sums up what I suggest is the radical orthodoxy of Williams.⁵ It seems that it was fashionable for the Church after the 1960s to move as quickly as possible away from the ‘burden’ of tradition. It might be argued that this allowed for a new territory to be opened up so that the tradition could be re-learned and heard with new ears. Williams was fortunate to have Professor Donald MacKinnon at Cambridge, a progressive Anglo-Catholic scholar, whose work closely resembles the audacity of


⁵ It is noteworthy that Milbank studied under Williams as an undergraduate at Cambridge. Milbank (and others affiliated with Radical Orthodoxy) often point to Williams as an influential theologian and consider him to be loosely affiliated with the movement.
Williams’s. As discernible in the quotation above, Williams was clear that even early on he was a Catholic Christian deeply devoted to the Church across space and time, and his vocation as a teacher of the Church’s living tradition was clearly coming into focus.

What is equally discernible in the Oxbridge student’s manifesto is that his life was not only going to be about theoretical knowledge but about the active and living triune God. With this God as his subject, a safe distance of critical rationality is not an option. Williams has put into practice as a scholar and cleric a hermeneutics of investigation, less concerned with exerting his skill of investigation and more with allowing himself first to be examined, judged, and healed. Williams has in mind the biblical example of Simon Peter:

Simon has to recognize himself as betrayer: that is part of the past that makes him who he is. If he is to be called again, if he can again become a true apostle, the ‘Peter’ that he is in the purpose of Jesus rather than the Simon who runs back into the cosy obscurity of ‘ordinary’ life, his failure must be assimilated, lived through again and brought to good and not to destructive issue.\(^6\)

The point is that the theologian cannot keep a safe distance from the subject. Williams is necessarily involved in the contours of leading a repentant and holy life.

Given his highly public role as Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams was, and is, often written off on an ideological basis. Conservatives of the Anglican Communion have not found him conservative enough. At the same time liberals in the Communion have felt disappointed that he ‘abandoned’ positions he held as an academic when he took his seat in Canterbury. Both positions have their understandable concerns and queries, but ideological fundamentalism must be put aside and a genuine engagement, with one of the most profound theologians of our age, must take priority.

The Communion is obviously in a very tenuous position at the moment, as noted by Archbishop Justin Welby’s statement that the Church is dangerously close to walking off of a cliff as a drunk man might be inclined. Williams’s approach as Archbishop was unwaveringly to keep the body together. He is clear that certain issues can in fact be communion breaking if obedience to the gospel is compromised; think Bonhoeffer and Barth’s Confessing Church. However, as a Catholic Christian, visible unity is not a side project or a perfunctory matter. Unity is above all else a gift to be received, a sharing in the Spirit of the risen Christ. My main concern here is not to belabor points of Anglican contention, or even to defend or critique Williams’s archiepiscopate as much as it is to say that Christians, especially Anglican Christians, need to engage Williams as a profound thinker and not let the media’s hyperactive reporting color the way in which he is engaged. He is too important. His ecclesial vision of Catholic humanism is one that has the capacity to not only capture the imagination; it also calls for a transfigured gaze that is clear on what it looks to: the outpouring action of the eternal Son to the Father in a Spirit of self-giving that is the source of all that is seen and unseen. His is a vision that takes time and attempts to tell the whole truth about God and humanity. We could hardly ask for anything else.

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