

Rowan williams' theology of god



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Choose one or more of the theologians we have studied, describe and analyse their theology of God.

Introduction

Rowan Williams is one of the most celebrated public intellectuals of the last century. Having been the Archbishop of Canterbury, nowadays, his writings are mentioned in both theological writings and popular culture. He is often applauded for his clarity, orthodoxy - while at the same time - his nuance and acumen. Williams was a prolific writer who, at times, seemed to successfully simplify his complex theological ideas. However, although his thoughts are often seemingly simple, upon further analysis, his articulation of these ideas is opaque and obscure.[1]As a result, his statements can appear full of contradictions. (Anthony, 2008)[2]

What is Williams' theology of God? Surprisingly, this question has received less detailed attention in secondary literature when compared to other theologians of the past century. Perhaps this is because he continues to work and to write, or perhaps because his work is so far-reaching. Either way, an analysis of the theology of Williams is a difficult task to undertake. Theology has been defined as '*the science of God*' and this seems true to a certain extent.[3]However, I will elaborate some more - since God relates to everything one can, therefore, widen this to a '*science of the whole of reality, insofar as it stands in the light of God*'. Bearing this in mind then, Williams' theology could be described as his view on anything, insofar as it stands in the light of God.

Ultimately, if Williams is to be read wisely he must be read widely and always in context. One commentator of the former Archbishop has described the difficulty of this task by saying that Williams is;

“ Imaginative and articulate, when reading him one has the feeling of walking into the ocean: for a while the ground remains flat, even, and predictable, but then it drops off suddenly and precipitously, revealing depths that weren't visible when viewed from the shore.” (Daniels, n. d.)

I will not be able to exhaust all avenues of Williams' thought, but I do believe I can, at the very least, analyse some key areas of his work. It is also important to clarify that for this paper when speaking about Williams' '*theology of God*', I am defining it as the '*understanding of the nature of God*'. I do this only to keep parameters on such a broad concept. I will discuss Williams' understanding of the nature of God and then, some comments on his theology in general.

Williams' understanding of who ' God' is.

To begin an analysis of Williams' theology of God it may be easiest to start at the beginning. This may seem obvious until one reads the words of Williams himself;

“ I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things... The theologian emerges as a distinct and identifiable figure... when there is a felt tension between images and practices.” (Williams, 1986)

Despite the assertion that theologians and, by extension, those who write about theology, are beginning in the middle of things, I wish, for clarity, to <https://assignbuster.com/rowan-williams-theology-of-god/>

contradict this and begin at the foundation First and foremost, it seems safe to assume that as the former head of the Church of England, Williams' understanding of God would be in line with the basic view of God as per the tradition of that Church.[4]That is; belief in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a belief that Jesus is God's Son and that Jesus reveals to mankind that God is our Father, and that God is available to us through the Holy Spirit. Evidently, Williams' understanding of the nature of God is that of a Trinity - a thought I will return to in more detail later.

Elaborating on the fundamentals then, Williams has been directly asked the question; '*Who is God?*' in an interview by Gay Byrne in 2015. His response was the following;

" The God I believe in is not an object inside the universe, not a being among others, but an energy and action of love and intelligence that saturates everything, that is the source of everything, that sustains everything moment by moment, that is always in the depth of every situation capable of turning things around and making a difference precisely because this God is not just part of the system but the context of it all" (Williams, 2015)

From the quote above one can clearly see that he believes God is the intelligence and energy behind the creation of the world and that because of this, God is outside of the known world and beyond human comprehension or understanding. However, he goes beyond that by saying that God is also a part *of* the world, that God did become man and dwell among us. He did this in the form of Jesus of Nazareth - who is made known to us by the actions of

the Holy Spirit. This God, so says Williams, is present in every moment of life and therefore is both within the world and outside of the world.

It seems that Williams believes in the triune nature of God as one may have expected. This is foundational, and it seems then, that I must investigate his view of the Trinity if I am to describe Williams' theology of God.

Williams on the Triune Nature of God.

I have established above that Williams believes that ' God' is name of a sort-of life – immutable and self-sustaining – that is perpetually engaged in the ordinary every day and is lived in three ways. This God has made himself known to us through both His revelation to the Jewish people and by His coming in the form of Christ. God, argues Williams, is the source of life, the expression of life and the sharing of life.[5]In a speech he delivered in Cairo in 2004, he said;

“ In human language we say, ' Father, Son and Holy Spirit', but we do not mean one God with two beings alongside him, or three gods of limited power. Just as we say, ' Here is my hand, and these are the actions my one hand performs', but it is not different from the actions of my five fingers, so with God: this is God, the One, the Living and Self-subsistent, but what God does is not different from the life which is eternally at the same time a source and an expression and a sharing of life. (Williams, 2006)

It is evident, then, that Williams believes that God's life is intelligent and purposeful. This life can be thought of as a centre of mind and love; but this

does not mean that God ‘ contains’ three different individuals, separate from each other as people are.

What is the practical conclusion of such a belief? Williams once wrote that;

“ A doctrine like that of the Trinity tells us that the very life of God is a yielding or giving-over into the life of an Other, a ‘ negation’ in the sense of refusing to settle for the idea that normative life or personal identity is to be conceived in terms of self-enclosed and self-sufficient units. The negative is associated with the ‘ ek-static’, the discovery of identity in self-transcending relation.” ^[6] (Williams, 2007)

For the former Archbishop, the very nature or life of God is an invitation to give oneself over into the life of another. Therefore, his understanding of the nature of God, or his theology of God, was not simply a theological ideal that he held as an intellectual or an academic understanding, but at the same time, the response to the ideal. Understanding God in this way requires Williams to give himself, or at least try to give himself, to the service of others. It is, in relationship to others, that one truly comes to understand and witness God. It calls to mind a sermon I heard recently, in which the priest argued that those who freely give their time to volunteerism, ‘ empty themselves of their talents’ and, yet it is in this emptying, that those very same people are fulfilled. It could be argued that this is Williams’ fundamental theology of God – it is an awareness that – the triune nature of God – is an invitation and an action. God as the trinity is not simply a complex philosophical concept.[7]

‘ Christ the Stranger’ – A Brief Description of Williams’ Theology in General
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As I have mentioned, I cannot hope to explore everything that Williams has written or spoken of. Instead, however, I can examine his theology in a broader sense. For this, I will comment on Benjamin Myers illuminating work, '*Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*'. Not only is it expansive and accessible but is also full of wit and metaphorical language which helps the reader to stay interested in the key motifs of Williams theological thought (M Delport, 2015). For example;

" Theologians often invoke metaphors of building to describe their work: the scholar as a grand architect, a wise foreman, an honest bricklayer. But for Williams, theology is less like a construction site than like a friendship... (Myers 2012)

Williams' view of theology is described by Myers not as '*a private table for one*' rather it is a '*a rowdy banquet for those who gather, famished and thirsty, around Christ*'. Theology for Williams, according to Myers, is not a singular endeavour but rather it is a discourse amongst many, described as '*personal relationships of loving opposition*'. Two ideas come to mind from this. Firstly, that communion amongst those who worship God and, secondly, the importance of appropriate discourse - both of which are fundamental to the theology of Williams and in a sense, to his theology of God - I will briefly examine both below.

Theology, for Williams, could be described as an experience amongst those that have faith in God, who come together in communion.[8]It seems important to note that for Williams this coming together offers a glimpse into

the true nature of reality. This idea comes to the fore once more in Myers work toward the end;

‘...theology is not so much an orderly arrangement of themes as an assemblage of discrete textual performances... experiments with the imaginative possibilities of a living spiritual tradition’. (Myers 2012)

It is not only a coming together in communion that is important, but it is the dialogue that takes place. “ *We go on saying God*” – Williams famously exclaimed (Williams, 1986). The question remains however, how should we do it? Doing so, with integrity is vital.[9]He has denounced any discourse, but in particular, theological discourse that is not completely honest in its pronouncements. If any theologian was to maintain a hidden agenda, then their theology would eliminate the possibility of reciprocal conversation;

“ Discourse that conceals is discourse that (consciously or not) sets out to foreclose the possibility of a genuine response.” (Williams, 1995)

It is important that this does not occur. If it was, then a genuine conversation could not occur and thus, theology would fall apart. Integrity is key – it is the key which opens the door for God to be present. Williams’ *theology of God* is a theology that is based on communion and discourse and therefore theology must know; “ *when it has said what it can say and when it is time to shut up.*”

Conclusion

In concluding this work, I am aware that I have only scratched the surface of such a vast and deep mind. This work could be developed further – for

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example I have not explored Williams' moral theology - an area in which he is widely accepted as an expert, or his famous letter to a 6-year-old Scottish girl, Lulu, written from God's perspective explaining to her where He (God) came from. Similarly, his work on the Church Fathers, Christian spirituality, Orthodoxy, Ecclesiology, poetry and politics, to name but a few areas, have been completely disregarded. All of these could be connected to the former Archbishop's theology of God. Despite this however, I believe I have made some progress.

It was once said that writing about Rowan Williams was like riding a bicycle into the library; you know you probably won't get away with it, but it's exhilarating while it lasts (Myers, 2012). He is one of the exquisite and cunning Christian theologians of our time - he can be strikingly complex at times. While writing this paper I have felt moments of clarity followed by confusion, followed by clarity, and so forth.

It is true that Williams is complex and difficult at times. Yet, his theology of God, or understanding of the Nature of God as I have clarified, is simple. His theology is based on the triune nature of God. This view of the life, or nature of God, is an invitation to give oneself to another. Understanding this, allows us to understand something else - Williams' theology of God is based on communion and discourse. Being in communion with others shows us the very nature of God. Discourse with integrity allows us, in a sense, to hear God too.

Finally, it has been said that Williams does not want to tell us something new, but to draw our attention to things we have always known yet somehow

never seen. He wishes to capture the sheer oddness of Christian belief. His theology is full of imaginative oddness and organised chaos. Perhaps this is, as Williams puts it, why;

“ Christians will be found in the neighbourhood of Jesus – but Jesus is found in the neighbourhood of human confusion and suffering, defencelessly alongside those in need. If being baptized is being led to where Jesus is, then being baptized is being led towards the chaos and the neediness of a humanity that has forgotten its own destiny.” (Williams, 2014)

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[1]Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky (famed for his ‘ negative theology’ i. e. the idea that we speak about God by saying what God is not) has had a serious influence on the theology of Williams and thus, it is not uncommon to hear Williams described as a negative theologian, which adds to this seemingly complex thinker.

[2]In his article, Anthony describes, and provides samples, of such contradictions.

[3]This phrase became popular thanks to C. S Lewis’ *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins: London, 2012) p. 153.

[4]For my purpose, I take the official teachings of the Church of England on God, yet I am aware that the former Archbishop had a much more nuanced

thought. He has been described as ‘Anglo-Catholic’ and much of his writing is based around Christian Culture rather than Anglicanism specifically.

[5]See, for example, where Williams expands on such ideas by reading a sermon given to the International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan titled *What is Christianity?* Available at: <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1087/what-is-christianity>

[6]It could be argued that Lossky’s influence on Williams, as mentioned earlier, becomes evident here. For an expansion on these ideas, see Williams’ dissertation *The Theology of Vladimir Nikolayevich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique* written as part of his D. Phil from Oxford University.

[7]Williams develops his thoughts on Trinitarian theology throughout many other works. For example, he formulates the Trinitarian relations in terms of an ‘unceasing rhythm of kenosis.’ Williams develops Augustinian thought by suggesting a surplus of mutual desire between the Father and the Son. The Spirit is thus the ‘agon’ of divine love – that is, the reciprocation of love which sustains the distance between Father and Son. (Myers, 2012)

[8]I am using ‘God’ in this sense as; those of the Christian tradition who believe in the triune nature of God. I do this while remaining aware that it is not clear that Williams would place such boundaries on his theological discourse given his advocacy for inter-faith dialogue.

[9]This is such an important aspect of his theology – so important that is the subject of the essay he placed first in his collection of essays entitled ‘*On Christian Theology*’.