

# Being for the other: The asymmetrical Christology of Rowan Williams

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What does it mean for the Christian Church to proclaim that God revealed Godself in Jesus Christ? This article tries to capture the answer given to this question by Rowan Williams, who defines and understands Christ as the 'heart of creation'. The problem at the heart of Williams' thought is the relationship between the finite and the infinite. If God is merely a being amongst others, the finite and infinite disintegrate into identity. If God is totally other to creation, we end up with a duality between God and creation. For Williams, the answer lies in the non-competitive union of the eternal Logos and the human individual in Jesus Christ, in whom the finite entirely and asymmetrically depends on the infinite, whilst retaining its own integrity. In clarifying Williams' answer to the question above, firstly, I will illuminate his philosophical and metaphysical assumptions to shed light on his interpretation of Christ as the logic (logos) of creation. Secondly, Williams' reading of the history of Christology, steering between identity and duality, will be narrated; and, thirdly, the political and ethical implications of his Christology will be discussed for the Church today.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This philosophical and dogma-historical study into Christology as narrated by Rowan Williams claims that God reveals Godself in a non-competitive relationship between the infinite and the finite, between God and the human individual in the person of Jesus Christ. This asymmetrical relationship challenges our modernistic competitive view of history, societies and human beings as consumers.

**Keywords:** Christology; Rowan Williams; Christ the Heart of Creation; identity; duality.

## Introduction

The Christian Church confesses that to remain in the vagueness of some distant transcendence, God makes Godself known in the person and life of Jesus Christ (Welker 2013:12). How can this reality be conceived today? How is it possible to speak about a creature as both human and divine? Was Jesus an incomplete human being into whom God entered to become a component part, replacing aspects of his human nature? Or was he just a super human being upon whom God has incomparable influence so that he becomes a channel for the communication of divine truth. For Williams, we should not conceive of infinite agency as another instance of finite agency and we must refrain from adding them together, as if 'more of one means less of the other' (Williams 2018a:11; cf. Williams 2018a:227). For Williams, divine action and created action could never stand alongside each other as rivals. God makes the world to be itself, to have its own integrity and completeness. At the same time, God makes the world open to a relation between finite and infinite, Creator and creation. The fullness and flourishing of creation is not something that has to be won at the Creator's expense. In this sense (Williams 2018a):

Jesus Christ is the heart of creation ... as the one in whom the movement or energy of filial love and understanding is fully active in and as finite substance and energy. (p. 223)

The purpose of the present article is to illuminate the relationship between the Word and Jesus and by implication the divine and the human, between finite and infinite, between Creator and creation, in Williams's thought, in order to help the Church be Church in our late modern, sometimes inhuman, societies. The intention of this article is to explore how the doctrine of Christ enriches for Williams the doctrine of creation,<sup>1</sup> helping us in growing towards a *new way of being in the world*, a new way of being human and understanding our humanity as being-for-the-other, standing-in-for-the-other (Williams 2000a:81; 2018a:207; 2018b:42–48).

1. In his article 'On being creatures' Williams (2000) criticises the proposals made by Matthew Fox, Rosemary Ruether and Sallie McFague to bridge the Creator–creation dualism in modern theology as inadequate. Williams tries to show that a deep engagement with the tradition of theological thought and language is more trustworthy and helpful.

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In the preface of his book, *Christ the Heart of Creation*,<sup>2</sup> Williams makes three formal claims that are important in understanding his interpretation of Christ:

- He claims that Christology is always an exercise that clarifies the grammar of how we speak about and live within the mystery of Christ.<sup>3</sup> For Williams, we can only cognise our world and our lives through the reality of Christ if we clarify the language used by the Church – eastern and western – about Christ.
- He claims that what has been said about Jesus over the centuries is shaped by our thinking about the relationship between God and God's creation. This is because 'in both creation and incarnation, God has elected to life within the created order without ceasing to be what God eternally is' (Williams 2018a:107).
- His claim is 'that if God is the action or agency that makes everything else active, then [*sic*] God cannot be added to the action of some other agent in order to make it a more effective [*sic*] force. And this also means that God's action is never in competition with any particular activity inside the universe' (Williams 2018a:xii).

It will become clear in the rest of the article how these three claims are central in his attempt to understand Christ as the heart of creation, of reality, of life, of the Church and by implication politics and ethics.

## Analogy: Between identity and duality

In an attempt to steer between thinking the Jesus–Word, world–God and finite–infinite relations as not simply identical with each other or totally different from each other, it is necessary to illuminate Williams's fundamental metaphysical assumptions. These are a result of his engagement with Nicholas of Cusa, Austin Farrer, Erich Przywara and Soren Kierkegaard.

The one writer that Williams does not pay much attention to, but who is fundamental to his thought, is the great 15th-century genius Nicholas of Cusa (1997), who characterises God as *non aliud* – 'not another thing' in relation to the world. Williams translates the *non aliud* principle as 'non-dual non-identity', which is for him at the heart of the relationship between infinite and finite (Williams 2018a:xiv). It creates for

2. Rowan Williams' theological works range widely, beginning with *The Wound of Knowledge* (1979), a condensation of Christian thinking about spirituality from the New Testament through the mystical writings of St. John of the Cross. In terms of spirituality, his study of the Desert Fathers of Ancient Egypt called in the British edition, *Silence and Honeycakes* (2003), or the expanded American edition, *Where God happens* (2005), can be recommended. In addition, he has written many other important works of theology, including influential studies on Arius (2001), Teresa of Avila (1991) and Dostoevsky (2008). There are also two highly technical academic compendiums of his most influential articles and lectures: *On Christian Theology* (2000a) and *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology* (2007b). His Gifford lectures are available under the title *The Edge of Words: God and the Habit of Language* (2014), and more recently, he published an erudite collection of essays on Saint Augustine, with the title *On Augustine* (2016). *Christ: The Heart of Creation* (2018a) may well be his most important book, where he draws together many aspects from his previous writings to make a contribution to Christology.

3. The concept 'grammar' is not innocent for Williams. He is deeply influenced by St. Augustine's and Wittgenstein's understanding of language, how language 'works' and how the use of language shapes reality, our theology and our spirituality, making us uniquely human. See, for example, Williams (2007:41–59).

him the opportunity to think God and the world not as two separated identities, but as unity in difference – in other words, analogical (Williams 2018a:230).

For Williams, Austin Farrer is the greatest Anglican theologian of the 20th century and he gets his key insight from Farrer that God and the world do not occupy the same space, and are not wrestling each other for room.<sup>4</sup> Williams builds on Farrer's insight that God is not an item inside the universe, the universe rather depends on an infinite energy, present in and actively sustaining every agency within the world, and because of that, there cannot be a simple contradiction between the agencies in the world and the agency of God.<sup>5</sup> If you understand this for Farrer and Williams, you understand the doctrine of Christ (Chalcedon 451), perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity; Christ is unequivocally one of us and unequivocally the presence of God amongst us.

To relate the finite and the infinite, the Word and Jesus, Creator and creation, in a theological appropriate and intellectually credible way, Williams returns to the *analogia entis* of the Jesuit theologian Przywara (2014). In his remembering of the past, the tensions between the history of Israel and the Church, the old and the new covenants, theological discourse and philosophy, faith and reason, Williams identifies the contours of an analogical vision of God in and beyond creation.<sup>6</sup> The analogy of being between God and creatures was the fundamental form of thought of Catholicism in the early 20th century, going back to Thomas Aquinas. As an ecumenical theologian, Williams incorporates the dialectical way of thinking about Calvin, Luther and Barth in the *analogia entis* as a dialectical moment within the analogical interval itself. The element of negation that underlies the analogy between God and creatures is interpreted as a principle of dialectic or difference with vital implications for what is remembered and non-identically repeated from the Christian past (McGlinchey 2019:3). As we will see in the next section of this article, this makes it

4. For an overview of the finite and infinite in Farrer's thought, see ed. MacSwain (2013).

5. For Farrer, infinite agency can never be prayed in aid to fill a gap in finite causal chains. To use an infinite agency to close a gap is to rob it from its infinite character. 'What infinite agency causes simply is the system of secondary causality within which we finite agents act'. The irony is that we could not conceive infinite agency unless we lived in a world of finite causes and agencies that is complete in its own terms. For Farrer, 'supernatural' reality represents finite agents transformed by participating in the infinite. The world of interlocking finite causes is not closed in a mechanical way: 'finite agencies may bring about effects greater than the sum of their parts through their relatedness to an infinite act' (Farrer cited in Williams 2018a:2–3). In other words, God may bring about through second effect that does not rise from the natural powers of those causes. Finite agencies going about its business are open to possibilities more than their own immanent capacities for a genuine new event that could not be predicted from the analysis of casual patterns alone. Revelation is not God-interrupting processes in the world to insert something alien in a gap, rather activities that recognise and act in tune with dimensions, purposes and possibilities in the world that are not simply obvious to the natural observer. The paradox to grasp is that for a supernatural act to be truly supernatural, it cannot simply stand alongside other 'natural acts', rather it has to be an action of another order. We cannot say that the finite excludes the infinite in the sense that one finite agent excludes another finite agent. Finite and infinite are 'exclusive' because of the absence of actual contingent limitation, but precisely because of this, the infinite cannot be 'excluded' from the finite in virtue of the fact of any specific property that is incompatible with some other property. Infinite agency is not a something added to the sum of finite causality.

6. Analogy is characterised by Przywara as the 'in and beyond' relationship between two terms. One term is thought of in terms of another, not as identification, but in a way that recognises the irreducibly layered character of finite reality, and the ultimate layering that grounds the finite in the infinite. X can be understood for what it is because it presupposes Y that is infinite of it, but to which its particularity cannot be reduced (Williams 2018a:240).

possible for Williams to include in his historical construction of Christology not only the Greek Fathers, St. Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, Aquinas, but also other more dialectical and paradoxical tensions of Christian thought regarded as remote to analogical thinking, for example, a Catholic Calvin, a Lutheran Catholic Bonhoeffer and even someone like the philosopher Kierkegaard.

In relating Creator and creation in terms of Jesus Christ, Williams (2018a:228) explored a very complex and highly original discussion by Przywara in an essay of 1958, entitled 'Between metaphysics and Christianity'. Metaphysics is never a matter of something to which an argument concludes; it is what is presupposed as the ground of any discourse. Thus, a *meta* can never appear as an object. It is a formal category that is difficult to bring into focus like the seeing of one's own eye. What makes the meta visible is a method of speaking. For Przywara, we have no language between the finite and infinite; we can only articulate the *rhythm*, the reciprocal movement between the two. Meta is speech as method, or analogy of method, in which we state the formal truth of an analogy of being (cf. Williams 2018a:229). We cannot produce a concept for the relationship between them: what is the complex of difference-in-continuity that shapes the way we speak. It is not possible to find a single principle of pure self-identity, something that is just itself and unfolds in a linear way. The transcendent is always 'transcendent as immanent' (cf. Williams 2018a:230). We can say that the infinite is in the finite. Forget the myth of innocent unmediated sense perception. There is always more than what meets the eye.

For Przywara, Christ is the paradox of paradoxes; there is not a linear connection between finite and infinite, like two comparable kinds of life or being (Williams 2018a:235). God in Christ is above and beyond even paradox. For Przywara (and Williams), we see this in the Crucified One (cf. Williams 2018a:236). The crucifixion is more than a rhetorical shock; it is an affirmation of the transforming coincidence of the finite and the infinite in the detail of *this* finite life, including and especially its humiliation and powerlessness.

Przywara's analogical understanding of the relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity and in relationship with creation is fundamental to Williams' theological thinking. Przywara in his understanding of the Trinity targets what he calls 'linear' accounts of the relation between finite and infinite, between formal and material, universal and particular. God repeats God self as non-identically in the Trinity. God repeats God in another kind of non-duality, in and as the finite creation that lives from the divine Word and Wisdom; creation repeats God in the analogical tension between intelligible form and diverse historical specificity. Not one of these relationships allows a deduction of one term from the other, because they are different levels of a single ontological fact, 'non-dual non-identity' – which is at the root of all beings in the form of the Word's and the Spirit's relationship with the Father (Williams 2000:79–92, 2018a:236–237).

Kierkegaard is also important for Williams (2018a:186–187, 266–269) because it helps him to dismantle the old polarity of a 'Jesus of history' over a 'Christ of faith'. The embodied narrative of Jesus displays God's action rather than a naked demand for the obedience of truth (Bultmann). It is important to understand that the Jesus we meet in Scripture is already heavily interpreted, comprehended as an object of commitment. The task of Christology is not to advance supposedly neutral evidence to justify a conclusion. Williams argues with Hans Frei in his book, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (1975), that in reading the gospel, we have to accept Jesus for who the gospel say he is, we read him as a character, Jesus, as he is identified by the text, not as the version of some imagined more 'accurate' or innocent account.<sup>7</sup> On this point, Kierkegaard is important because he was the first to see that it is a mistake to think that we can arrive at some kind of perspective-free, unlearned vision of primary 'evidence' for ascribing divinity to Jesus. The notion of evidence does not fit well whether we believe in the resurrection of Jesus or the confession of Jesus as Lord. The ground of Christological thinking is not primary on any reconstruction of Jesus' historical mission, but the Biblical narratives and the language of the Church about Christ.

## An asymmetrical, non-competitive Christology

Williams (2018a:7–40) answers the question, 'who is Christ?', with a synthesis of Jesus Christ as it was formulated by Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas (and perhaps Bonhoeffer) is (are) the hero(s) in Williams's (2018a:12) historical construction of Christ. He begins to list all the difficult questions that Aquinas asked about Christ and the Incarnation, such as 'could all three persons of the Trinity become incarnated at the same time?', 'could any divine person be incarnate?', 'could there be more than one human incarnation of God?' and 'did Christ as a human being experienced faith, hope and love in the way we do?' For Rowan Williams, all of these very complicated questions boil down to the problem as formulated by Austin Farrer, namely, how to clarify the fact that the difference between God and creation is totally different from the differences between creatures, for God and creation do not occupy the same space. The important insight from Aquinas is that when one looks at anything in the world, there is a set of things that tells one what kind of thing it is. Moreover, there is another set of things that tells one what this particular agent or subject is. For example, dogs have certain trademarks: four legs and they bark, which tell you what kind of thing it is, but this does not tell you the difference between Fido and Rover (Williams 2018a:27). Therefore, you need to differentiate between the essence that makes something the kind of thing it is and what it is that makes something mysteriously the sheer 'this-ness', that which makes something unique.

<sup>7</sup>For an illustration of how Williams read the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ as biblical narratives, see his books: Williams 2000b and Williams 1982.

For the latter, Aquinas uses the word *esse*, meaning ‘the act of being’ (Williams 2018a:16f.)<sup>8</sup> – the active reality by which something is *this*, rather than *that*. For Aquinas, the unity of Christ is a unity of *esse*. *Esse* is not a thing, but an active existence; it is about the impact of a presence in the world. For Aquinas, if we talk about Jesus, what makes Jesus Jesus, this person rather than that person, is absolutely bound up with and inseparable from what makes God the Word, the second person of the Trinity, the creative reality in which all things exist, be the Word. For Aquinas to say that the humanity of Jesus is one with the *esse* of the Word, and has no *esse* apart from the divine personal *esse*, is to make the point that the active human presence of Jesus in the world is indistinguishable from the active presence of eternal Word in the World (Williams 2018a:2018b:31). The union of divine and human in Jesus is in no way the fusion of two comparable metaphysical subjects. While the Word’s personal *esse* is what and who it is from all eternity, it is the very same essence that makes the man Jesus to exist and to bear the unique character of the Son’s eternal filiation (cf. Williams 2018a:34–35). Williams (2018a:35; cf. Williams 2018a:89–90) describes his Christology as asymmetrical<sup>9</sup> because Jesus cannot be adequately grasped without reference to his subsistence in the divine Word, but this same life does not contribute something extra to the identifying *esse* of the Word. We can say that the relationship of filial love between the Father and the Son is exactly the same kind of life or relationship that exists between Jesus and the Word.

The point for Williams is that Christians do not believe that somebody living in heaven started living on earth. It does not mean for Jesus to be divine, that he did not had real human freedom or real human feelings. Aquinas wanted us to see that for anything we want to affirm about Jesus we had to hold onto the idea of a divine action that animates and finds expression in a unique human identity that is Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, we do not have to ask what do we have to leave out from God in order to become human, and we do not have to ask what do we have to leave out of human nature of Jesus to be divine (Williams 2018a:2018b:36). For Williams, the Word is the divine agency whereby the created order is sustained in coherence. Therefore, the union of *esse*, which gives the humanity of Jesus its distinct finite character, its own internal coherence and continuity of purpose, is identical with what gives all things their cohesion (Col 1:15–17). The life that lives in Jesus is the active source of all relations in the world (cf. Col 1:38).

For Williams (2018a:43–56), this synthesis of Aquinas is already expressed in the New Testament. The unity of Jesus Christ is presupposed in the writings of the New Testament. Williams uses Paul’s first letter to the Corinth as an example of this unity. Paul tells us in the first couple of chapters that

8. With his understanding of *esse*, Aquinas tried to mediate between Monophysitism, the belief that Christ has no independent human nature and Nestorianism, the view of the incarnation as two subsistent agents bound together in a single outward form of history.

9. Williams’ identifying of the relationship between Word and Jesus, Creation and Creator, as asymmetrical is not without problems. For a careful critique of Williams’ asymmetrical Christology, see Wood (2019).

the anointed Jesus is the Power and the Wisdom of God. For the perspective of the Jewish Scriptures, this is the immediate outpouring of divine life, the divine Wisdom that arouses from the life of God (1 Cor 1.24). Elsewhere Christ is said to be ‘alive’ in Paul (Gl 2.20) (Williams 2018a:48). But then a few chapters later Paul says that Jesus took bread, broke it and shared it the night before he died. Paul nowhere tries to explain this strange transition to us. It does not worry Paul that somebody once sat at the table with his friends, breaking a piece of bread and passing it around, knowing that he would be prosecuted the next day, and calling that person the outpouring of the divine nature, connected to God ‘like steam rising from boiling water’.<sup>10</sup>

Williams also identifies two other elements in Paul’s thought that are crucial for the later development of Christology, namely, the concept of *Church* and *kenosis*. Paul is understood by Augustine,<sup>11</sup> and therefore later by Aquinas, Calvin and Bonhoeffer, as generating a ‘linage’, a communal identity that allows his members to see themselves as gifted with the same mode of activity that belongs to Jesus. Jesus is not simply an individual of the past; he is not only currently active, but also the ‘kingship group’ which is defined by his identity here and now open to his agency and growing into another kind of existence as a result of this agency (Williams 2018a:54–55). Paul was also trying to say, Jesus’ human narrative identity includes his death as divine action – it is as human passivity freely accepted that his death become divine agency. This coincides with the human act of self-surrender, which requires human decision and resource (cf. Williams 2018a:56).

For Williams, theology in the next couple of centuries involved theologians trying to fill the gap in the story of Paul. One school of thought was those intellectuals who saw Jesus as an incredible, powerful heavenly being who temporally resides in Galilea. The heavenly power model is repeatedly resisted in need to affirm the vulnerability of Jesus to suffering, a theme already stressed by Ignatius of Antioch at the start of the 2nd century.<sup>12</sup> Other intellectuals would say that there was a human being who was so impressive that he

10. Rowan Williams uses this image in a talk called Williams 2019.

11. St. Augustine’s contribution on this point is crucial, especially the Church in the West, because he explored the phenomenon of the incarnate Christ in terms of what would be meant by thinking the Word speaking in, as and through the humanity of Jesus. Jesus’ humanity becomes wholly a vehicle of communication for the divine Word. This basic model helps Augustine to develop a theology of the ‘the Whole Christ’ [*totus Christus*], which allows for a sophisticated account of how we both combine and distinguish between speaking about the Word in its eternal selfhood, the Word incarnate in Jesus and the Word as the actively unifying principle of the believing community. Augustine uses the word *persona* to denote ‘what there is one of’ in Christ (Williams 2018a:71).

12. Central to resisting the model of Jesus as a powerful heavenly being on earth is the range of schemes utilising the notion of *logos*. For the Stoics, it was the physical principle describing the pattern of interconnections in the universe as an ideal state of harmony or balance. For Philo, the Logos became flesh in Jesus, breaking with a mythological world, anchoring the identity of Jesus firmly in the heavens and allowing him to be embodying the power and wisdom of God. For Origen, the Logos is the Life of God condensed or concentrated into a form that could be communicated to the finite universe. The Logos is God generating a mode of divine life that can be shared with finite existence. The invulnerable and stable *nous* that is one with the Logos is the medium by which the Logos can unite with the body and also with the unstable world of fallen spirits. The goal of this is that we can be restored to our proper place as completeness of the Saviour (Williams 2018a:56–60).

reminded Paul much about God.<sup>13</sup> But for the Church, this is not exactly what the New Testament says. After a great deal of discarded theories, a few important Church councils, especially the Council of Nicaea (381) and the Council of Chalcedon (451),<sup>14</sup> finally lay down the rules for speaking about Jesus Christ (Williams 2018a:56–70). Whatever you want to say about Jesus, you have to say nothing less than God is at work here, and nothing less than he is complete human. Further refinements of the concept ‘hypostasis’ amongst Byzantine thinkers, such as Leontius of Byzantine, Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus, provided a crucial bridge to the medieval synthesis achieved by Thomas Aquinas (Williams 2018a:92–117).

Therefore, after the decisions of the Church councils in the 4th and 5th centuries and debates about detail and the refining of terminology and you are on your way to the syntheses of Aquinas. For Williams, it means a whole new way of Christian thinking that is closer to the original meaning of the New Testament than many of the earlier attempts in the tradition of the Church to sort out the balance between God and humanity in Jesus. In the end, everything rests for him on the basic insight of Austin Farrer: it is possible to be part of the created finite world and yet for the immeasurable, infinite agency, energy of God to be in the heart of everything. Jesus of Nazareth is not only the presence of the Creator in the middle of the world, but also the ideal created being, allowing the Creator to make him what he is – to bring to absolute fulfilment and freedom to what he is meant to be. In him, in Jesus, creation finds its focus, its centre and its climax.

After Aquinas, the story of Christology for Williams takes a bad turn with late medieval theologians, such as Scotus and Ockham, who weakened Aquinas’ delicate synthesis to the extent that they separated God and world, making the relation what Williams calls ‘extrinsic’ (Williams 2018a:123, 127–141; Wood 2019:6). They overemphasised the God–world and thereby Word–Jesus disjunction at the expense of Aquinas’s asymmetry.

In the second part of *Heart of Creation*, Williams (2018a:127–217) turns to the thought of the Reformation and more modern scholars. Williams is very critical of Luther. For him, Luther over-reacts to the late medieval cleavage between Christ’s humanity and divinity by simply asserting them as identical. Luther can say about Jesus: ‘[r]here goes God down the street!’ and ‘The man Christ created the world and is almighty!’ (Williams 2018a:138f.). For Williams, John Calvin

13. Arius is of course the most important figure in this regard. For Arius, the Logos cannot be described as divine in the same sense in which divinity is ascribed to the Father. The only option he sees is to make it clear that the Logos is a created substance, endowed by the true God with as much dignity and liberty as a creature can carry (Williams 2018a:61–64). See also Williams’s (2001) brilliant historical study of Arius.

14. For Williams, the heart of the bitter debates leading to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 has to do whether in Christ there are one or two centres of action. Some theologians argue for two ‘subjects’ in Christ – one capable of suffering and one not – ascribing certain actions of Jesus to a finite and others to an infinite. Cyril of Alexandria was the main opponent of this dualist model, arguing against any notion of implying ‘two Christ’. There was insistence on a single *hypostasis*, a single active subsistent as the ultimate source of action in Christ. Cyril also used the word *physis* [nature] for the same purpose (Williams 2018a:67–69).

is the one theologian, with Aquinas, without ever reading Aquinas himself (but both theologians knew the work of St. Augustine), that best formulates the synthesis of God and humanity in Christ. In Williams’ terms, there can be no simple identity between divinity and embodied humanity. ‘The unity we affirmed is an unity of action and person’. This is also how he interprets the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*<sup>15</sup> in Calvin: ‘there is no sense in which the embodied humanity can exhaust the single divine agency of the Word’ (Williams 2018a:152). For Williams, the importance of Calvin can be grasped in two themes: Christ’s absolute solidarity with the extremes of human loss and suffering, his endurance with the pain of the damned. Calvin stresses Christ participation in the deepest kind of human alienation from God. This linked with the second theme that Christ ‘merits’ nothing for himself and is entirely defined by his action and passion for the sake of the created order – humanity – which he transforms by the overflow of grace and glory from his fullness. The Son needs nothing for himself and so is free to give everything. The radical selflessness and other directedness of Christ identity are affirmed as a necessary corollary of what is said by the perfection of the Trinitarian life. Thus, Calvin ‘recovers’ Aquinas’s asymmetrical Christology, which confesses the utter dependence of Christ’s humanity upon his person, whilst denying any hint of some mutual conditioning between the Word’s eternal divine life and his earthly, temporal one (Wood 2019:6).

In the last chapters (2.2.1–2.2.3) of the book, Williams (2018a:169–217) picks up the thought of modern theologians, including Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Williams is quite critical towards the central claim underlying Barth’s entire theological project, namely, that God freely, from all eternity, elects to be the Word Incarnate (cf. Williams 2018a:174).<sup>16</sup> The transcendence of God is preserved by both Barth and Mc Cormack through an emphasis on divine freedom: God freely elects to be Jesus. For Williams, both thinkers can only secure the divine difference by opposing finite substance to infinite will. The problem is that in effect, denying God a nature prior to the divine will left unclear as

15. Williams (2018a:152) interprets the *extra calvinisticum* that there could be no simple identity between divinity and embodied humanity. ‘The unity we affirm is the unity of action and person’. In the theology of Luther, Jesus Christ is omnipresent, in divine and human nature, because the two natures cannot be separated. Reformers argued that the Word is fully united to but never contained within the human nature. Even the Incarnation is conceived as beyond or outside of (extra) to human nature. For this reason, Christ cannot be present corporeally (bodily) in the Lord Supper. For Williams, the point is that the embodied humanity cannot exhaust the single divine agency of the Word. The ascension of Christ to heaven for a kind of kingly rule and transforming power would be impossible if he was restricted to what his humanity could effect in its local and finite reality. The ‘extra’ functions to clarify two issues of Calvin’s Christology: (1) it identifies what humanity has to do with the Incarnation. The Word becomes flesh that human nature can be restored to its proper and natural relation with the eternal Father through the Son. This requires that the Word lives through the full penalty of sin, out of free and unconditional love. Christ’s wholly selfless obedience has created in this world a form of humanity that is capable of union with the Father that was always God’s purpose. The hypostatic union is about what God does in order to redeem – not as a quasi-natural process, not as a fusion of natures. Through the Incarnation, humanity becomes human in the way God intended. This is to become united with the divine nature by adoptive filiation. It does not become divine by acquiring the properties of the divine nature. (2) Secondly, for us to be truly incorporated into Christ, it requires that our relationship with Christ should be through his glorified humanity and the agency of the Spirit. The Word is never active without the Spirit. The kingly authority of Christ after ascension can become universal through the Spirit. It is by the gift of the Spirit that the promise that Christ is always with us can be fulfilled. The Spirit is what connects us with the ascended humanity that has restored our human capacity to be God’s children. The Spirit realises what the Incarnation made possible.

16. See also Williams (2007d:106–150) on the theology of Barth.

to what it is that humanity is united to in the Incarnation. According to Williams (2007d:106–115, 2018a:180), the emphasis on election in the theology of Barth, Jüngel and McCormack leaves out of the picture the assimilation of the creature to a real and eternal relation to the eternal Son's relation to the eternal Father, leaving humanity as simply the passive object of divine will, rather than a subject in its own right.

For Williams, Bonhoeffer as a Lutheran is the more important theologian in the fact that he continues Calvin's distinctive emphasis on Christ's 'solidarity' with humanity, God-for-us, unto the depths of hell and all hopelessness. In terms of the authority of Jesus, Bonhoeffer argues that it is not only the humanity of Jesus that conceals God but also the suffering and failure and ambiguity of this particular human being that is the issue, the fact that God exists in and as this specific human identity. According to Williams (2018a:189), 'Bonhoeffer stands close to Calvin in concentrating on the cumulate historical self-emptying of this particular historical humanity rather than some sort of a self-emptying of divine attributes'. The *kenosis* of the incarnation is not seen as taking on of human nature but as the living out of a humiliated and vulnerable life, the scandal, the 'stumbling-block', not humanity but this kind of humanity. For Bonhoeffer, we cannot isolate either the divine nature that is not bound up with the historical concreteness of Jesus or a human nature that is not suffused with divine agency. The way God is present is as the humiliated and suffering Jesus (cf. Williams 2018a:196). He does not treat the finite and infinite as comparable forms of a single reality, or threatens to reduce their relationship to one of difference on a scale. Bonhoeffer thus affirms for Williams the classical belief that God can have no territory or interest to defend over against the created order.

Bonhoeffer claims that '[i]n Jesus Christ the reality of God has entered into the reality of this world' (cited in Williams 2018a:200). As human beings, we participate in God's reality in and through participating in the world. The inter-relatedness of finite reality is always already related to God. In light of the unity of Jesus Christ, we cannot think about two parallel realities, crystallised in two parallel jurisdictions or institutional orders (Williams 2018a:201). Following Bonhoeffer on this point, the Church does not need a central position in the world, public life or the state for Williams. No part of the world, no matter how godless, that is not reconciled to God. The Church occupies space in public life solely for the sake of the world's eschatological solidarity (Bonhoeffer cited in Williams 2018a):

The space of the church is not there in order to fight with the world for a piece of its territory, but precisely to testify to the world that it is still the world, namely the world that is loved and reconciled by God. (p. 202)

The Church is not a subdivision of reality, 'but a locus from which the world can be seen as a whole and responded to with wholeness of service and compassion' (Williams 2018a:202). Being Church in the world and being

human we exercise is what Bonhoeffer calls *Stellvertretung*, which Williams translated as 'vicarious representative action' which is for him much more than just 'stewardship'. *Stellvertretung* is acting in or from the place of another, 'standing in' for the other, being actively there on behalf of the other, negotiating for the other (Williams 2018a:203). Christ's incarnate identity is nothing other than 'standing in' for us. Human life in essence is 'standing in' for one another. 'My life is another, a stranger, Jesus Christ', writes Bonhoeffer in *Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer means this in the literal sense of the word: we are to stand in the place where the other lives so that we are vulnerable to what the other is vulnerable (Williams 2018a:207).

## Conclusion: Theological, political and ethical implications

Williams read the life of Christ as a paradox. The paradox of Jesus's life is a simultaneous affirmation of prayerful dependence and divine initiative (Williams 2007:66–76).<sup>17</sup> When the word 'God' is used in the Nicene creed for the source of all things and for the eternal response to that outpouring, as it is embodied in Jesus, we mean exactly the same kind of life. The concept of *homoousion* of Nicaea allows us to imagine an 'analogue of createdness' within divine life – a form of living of the divine life in the mode of reception and response, which is not less truly divine than its source. Its embodied reality in Jesus thus has the effect of divinity within the finite world: it 'creates out of nothing'. It restores the divine image in creation and binds human persons in a holy community with each other.

The second step for the Church was to figure out what does it mean to embody this dimension of divine life in a single finite being. This means at least that any embodiment of divine agency in the finite world must be in the form of genuinely finite action (Farrer). God cannot act directly in the world as one agent amongst others. The claim for the presence of divine action must be 'coincided' with an uninterrupted finite action whose effects are into such extent that it cannot adequately be spoken of exclusively in terms of finite action. For Williams (2018a):

The post-Chalcedonian model of the composite hypostasis of the eternal Word offers a structure which allows us to say that God is literally and personally acting within the world but does so only in the sense that the particular finite agent acts in such unbroken alignment with the Word's way of being God. (p. 221)

The life of the Word in relation to the Father and the embodiment of this life in Jesus is the same life. According to Williams (2018a), it is life:

[I]n contemplative dependence, unrestricted response, unbroken and unconditional filial love and self-giving, that the effect of this action is completely continuous with the effect of divine action in Israel's history and ultimately with the divine liberty in the act of creation itself. (p. 221)

<sup>17</sup>For a more popular overview of Williams' understanding of Christ through the lenses of the Nicene and Apostolic Creeds, see Williams (2007a:57–80).

The concept of analogia makes it possible for Williams to interpret the relationship between Creator and creation in much the same way as the relationship between the eternal hypostasis of the Word and Jesus. Jesus's life depends wholly on the Word, but if we want to speak about the Word in action, then we have to speak about Jesus above all else. In neither context can we talk about the items that could be added together. This implies that creation is most fully itself when sharing in the kind of dependency which the Son has towards the Father (Williams 2018a:222). The paradox of our lives as creatures is that in radical dependence on God and responsiveness towards God and the rest of creation, we become fully ourselves.

If it is true that in Jesus there is an absolute harmony coming together, a coincidence of God and humanity without contradiction, we can never think that God wants us to be less than human.<sup>18</sup> God is not in some way jealous of us for being human, as if our flourishing, our growth can be an offence to God. The narrative of Jesus tells us rather, that in Jesus, the whole of creation (Rm 8) comes to glorious fulfilment because of Jesus – it arrives at its full potential. The more God is present in our midst, the more human we become. God does not want us to be less human. God does not want from us to cut off some area of our humanness. Over the ages, different parts of our humanity were judged unwelcome in the name of God. We can just think of the attitudes of Christians towards money, sexuality and justice or our approach today towards the environment around us. God is not only interested in our spiritual lives or our souls. God is not a threatening rival to certain parts of our humanity, and parts of our humanity are not threatening rivals for God. To serve God is not to set a part of our humanity apart. To serve God is to grow into the full human being that God wants us to be. God is rather concerned about the flourishing of our humanity (Williams 2018a:2018b:42).<sup>19</sup> God is not out to diminish us.

For Williams, God and humanity in Jesus are a non-competitive pair. For Jesus to live in that abundance of divine life without conflict and rivalry releases into the world the possibility of not regarding competition between human beings as our final reality. There is something more fundamental to human relationships than competition and our struggle for living space. The same God is acting in all of us and sustains every living human being and every part of creation. The doctrine of creation is not about something that happened a long time ago, but about something that is happening now in all of us. There is more in us than the struggle for winning and losing.

There is another implication of Williams' Christ that he got from Bonhoeffer. Just as Christ is not in competition with the world, trying to conquer the world, so the Church, the body of Christ, does not have to spend all its energy and resources protecting itself. The reality of the Church is not about the

18. Listen to a talk by Williams (2019).

19. For a more detailed analysis of his handling of the theme 'human flourishing', see Williams (2018b).

visible buildings and visible communities, but to rather take responsibility for the well-being of God's creation, being for the other. If the Church exists to protect itself, it risks losing its true identity.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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