

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rowan Williams' Theology of Revelation

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore two main areas of Rowan Williams' theology of revelation. The former is his reflections on the silence of God – God's reticence to clarify himself to us amid our theological and spiritual confusion. I argue that he is not denying that God has genuinely revealed himself to us, but rather Williams is grappling with – and exhorting us to grapple with – the limits of that revelation. The second area I explore is his theory of revelation as generative phenomena, and how his theory underwrites his understanding of church tradition and, mainly, scripture. Williams argues that there is a division within scripture between the parts containing true divine revelation and the parts containing humanity's broken response to that revelation. I argue that this view, while it is very well formulated and has some merits, cannot surmount the epistemological obstacle of how biased and interested humans can adequately differentiate between these parts within scripture.

Keywords: apophatic; Bible; epistemology; Rowan Williams; scepticism; scripture; theology; theology of revelation

Introduction

This essay will describe and evaluate Rowan Williams' theology of revelation in two main sections. The first will cover an aspect of Williams' theology of revelation that I wish to defend and celebrate – his reflections on the 'silence of Christ'. The second will explore the more theoretical foundations of his theology of revelation and how they impact his view of scripture and church. Here I will argue that his theory is sophisticated and insightful but has important epistemological problems. It must be noted, before any evaluation begins, that there are many reasons why the former task of *describing* Rowan Williams' theology of revelation is in itself complex. Williams' thought and writing has frequently been noted specifically for its subtlety.¹ This subtlety, in writings on various subjects across multiple genres,

¹Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), x; Geoffrey Wainwright, "Rowan Williams on Christian Doctrine," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 56.1 (2003): 73; Charles E. Raven, *Shadow Gospel: Rowan Williams and the Anglican Communion Crisis* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2010), 13.



comes with a risk of misinterpretation. And accordingly Williams is not always interpreted in the same way. Further, Williams is a sophisticated and complex thinker who has a strong affinity with the apophatic tradition, often preferring to speak in negations rather than affirmations. It can take some investigation to uncover what he positively thinks. Thus, much of this essay will be devoted to elucidating Williams' theology.

The Silence of Christ

Rowan Williams is well documented as a proponent of apophatic theology, which he calls 'one of the most basic forms of critical theology'.² There is a scepticism that pervades much of his thought. Not a scepticism of anything in particular, but a pure epistemological scepticism, a hesitancy to know anything. In engagement with Panikkar regarding the Trinity, he states, 'Trinitarian theology becomes not so much an attempt to say the last word about the divine nature as a prohibition against would-be final accounts of divine nature and action. . . . What we know, if we claim to be Christians, is as much as anything a set of negations'.³

This apophatic emphasis comes into practice in some of his pastoral writings. In addressing students at a theological college concerning Christological disagreements, far from bringing reassuring clarity, Williams instead meditates on the frustrating silence of Christ in our questioning:

' . . . yes, and there is our Christ, the totally enigmatic face on the wall, the cross, the bread and wine. *Silent* signs, as silent as he was before Pilate, consistently refusing a straight and simple answer. We can't feed him questions like a computer and receive tidy, systematic replies. He won't let on: we can shout and wave our arms at that icon, and it stays the same, a dark expressionless face that gives nothing but itself to think about. . . . Christ can bear all sorts of interpretations, and we can't expect him to tell us which he likes'.⁴

And if Christ has anything to say at all, it is not answers but questions that he gives us. Elsewhere, Williams is again intrigued by Jesus' silence on trial:

'And his kingship, so John's Gospel most powerfully insists, is at last shown in the refusal to answer the questions of his judges and the silence of his death, which, because of its aftermath, remains the most disturbing and interrupting question of all. . . . Christ's is the kingship of a riddler, the one who makes us strangers to what we think we know'.⁵

Quotations like these lead Garry Williams to describe Rowan Williams' theology as *radically* apophatic, and thus inadequate. That, in Rowan Williams, 'we do not have

²Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford, UK ; Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), xv.

³Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 178.

⁴Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1994), 107.

⁵Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 131.

a theology which God reveals to us. Or rather, he reveals only that there is no revelation, that we cannot claim to have access to God's own truth'.⁶ But I am not sure that this is a fair assessment of this aspect of Williams' theology, for a number of reasons. For one thing, as I will discuss later, Williams does elsewhere explicitly affirm divinely initiated revelation in the Bible, and so it is not possible that Williams is categorically ruling out any disclosure on God's part of himself to the world.

It is also important to note that Rowan Williams, in his sermons and addresses of *Open to Judgement*, is operating in a different genre than in his academic writing, with different goals and means. He is being an artist and poet as much as a theoretician, seeking to provoke the reader's soul to grapple with reality, whether or not the words used to do the provoking themselves accurately represent that reality. In his own terms, he is engaging in *celebratory* theology.⁷ And so, when he says, 'the first thing I know is that I *don't* "know" – and never did',⁸ this is not necessarily a total denial of any theological knowledge, as Garry Williams seems to suggest.⁹

Revelation's Limits

What I think Rowan Williams is postulating in these passages is not the absence of revelation, but its limits, its self-restraint, its frustrating finality, as well as the human tendency to be unsatisfied with this, and to thus seek to go beyond revelation, to add to and complexify it. When he says that 'Christ can bear all sorts of interpretations, and we can't expect him to tell us which he likes',¹⁰ clearly he is talking about *interpretations*, not imaginations or speculations. There is, for Williams, a revealed Christ to interpret. The trouble is that this revelation comes to us a certain distance and then stops short. It is final in the sense that God has said what he has said and provides no Q&A session afterwards. Revelation is as unbending as a statue on the wall to our perceived theological needs, left for us to interpret it without further feedback.

Or, if there is any divine feedback, it is revelation responding to our questions not with answers but with questions. As quoted above, he refers to the resurrection as, 'the most disturbing and interrupting *question* of all'.¹¹ Williams explains that part of what it means for God's revelation to have binding authority in the Christian community is precisely that it doesn't answer our questions but it asks us its own. It is not the 'object of our investigation' but rather something that interrogates *us*. This, after all, is how we are able to be changed by it.¹² Revelation is not something to be acted upon by us as interpreters; it is something that, first and foremost, acts upon us.

⁶Garry J. Williams, *The Theology of Rowan Williams: An Outline, Critique and Consideration of its Consequences* (London: Latimer Trust, 2002), 9, 21.

⁷Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiii–xiv.

⁸Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 120.

⁹Williams, *The Theology Of Rowan Williams*, 7.

¹⁰Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 107.

¹¹Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 131 (emphasis added).

¹²Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 109–10.

Williams at various points uses the figure of the baby Jesus, who communicates only in cries, inarticulate laughter, and silence, as a motif of God's communication with us. But, importantly, in one of his Christmas reflections Williams brings clarifying context in stipulating the kind of silence, the kind of inarticulateness, he is talking about, that is, what kinds of thing it is that God refrains from telling us. 'Ask a baby about the ordination of women, about divorce legislation, violence on television, who will win the election: it is not a fruitful experience'.¹³ Later, he refers to people's misattribution of God's blessing upon certain violent atrocities or certain sides in a war, or of God's judicial activity in the outbreak of AIDS in homosexual communities.¹⁴ The kind of 'effort to be right' that God's silence passes 'annihilating judgement' upon is not the effort to draw any sure theological conclusions at all from the revelation we have received, but is to presumptuously go beyond what has been revealed, to say on God's behalf more than we can be sure he has said, to equate *our* interpretation of revelation with revelation itself.

This appears to be, at least part of, what Williams is referring to by a 'total perspective', which he defines in opposition to theological integrity, saying, 'theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God's point of view*'.¹⁵ He warns that there is no disinterested theological discourse,¹⁶ and that, in particular, purporting to have a total perspective betrays a 'dominative interest', that is, an interest in the retention of power.¹⁷ We can observe this dominative interest in many of the above examples of claims to God's perspective, wielding a total perspective to meet one's own ends, political or otherwise.

If an illustration can be permitted (or forgiven; after all it is impossible in the current weeks to hold in one's mind thoughts about a former Archbishop of Canterbury without also thinking about the British Monarchy¹⁸): There is a striking and memorable passage of dialogue in the Netflix series *The Crown*, fictionalising a conversation between a newly instated Queen Elizabeth II and her staunchly patriotic grandmother, Queen Mary. Elizabeth begins conflicted by her duty to remain silent and impartial as Head of State in moments of weighty political contention:

Queen Elizabeth II: It doesn't feel right, as Head of State, to do nothing.

Queen Mary: It is exactly right.

Queen Elizabeth II: Is it? But surely doing nothing is no job at all?

Queen Mary: To do nothing is the hardest job of all. And it will take every ounce of energy that you have. To be impartial is not natural, not human. People will always want you to smile or agree or frown. And the minute you do, you will have declared a position. A point of view. And that is the one thing as sovereign that you are not entitled to do. The less you do, the less you say or agree or smile . . .

Queen Elizabeth II: Or think? Or feel? Or breathe? Or exist?

Queen Mary: The better.¹⁹

¹³Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 35.

¹⁴Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 37.

¹⁵Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 6.

¹⁶Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 8.

¹⁷Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 4–5.

¹⁸This essay was written in the weeks surrounding the coronation of King Charles III.

¹⁹*The Crown* (2016 –) Season 1 Episode 4, produced by Netflix.

Part of why Queen Mary's counter-intuitive politico-philosophical conviction is so fascinating is because it is founded on the politico-theological conviction that the sovereign is literally God's representative to the people of Great Britain. Because she represents God, she must take on certain characteristics of the divine, and the central of these is, strikingly, reticence. This seems to be grounded in the assumption that we know God to be silent on the global political stage; much as anyone would like to know God's perspective on particular political matters, he does not give it. And thus for the Queen to express an opinion or declare a position on such things would be for her to cease to represent God, or otherwise to express a merely human perspective with the pretence of divine authorisation – a human perspective whose inevitable interestedness and partiality will be damagingly smuggled into what purports to be a 'total perspective'. The monarch's duty to withhold opinion, grounded in a conviction about the limits of divine revelation, is one way of applying Williams' refusal to attempt to take God's point of view.

Williams' contribution on this matter is valuable and wise in my estimation. It is, at one level, a simple heeding of the warnings in Revelation 22:18 and Deuteronomy 4:2 against adding to God's word. But it is also a deep exploration into the character of God as he is often found in scripture. We find a God like this not least in the parable of the sower, where Jesus divulges that his parabolic teaching is intentionally obscure, even confusing, *in order that* people might hear but not understand.²⁰ He sends out the message only so far, and only so clearly. In order to understand it, one needs to approach with the right heart. This teaching of Jesus' lies at the centre of Mark's 'messianic secret', which culminates, as Williams alludes to, in Jesus' silence before his judges²¹ – by which he pronounces judgement on them: they do *not* have ears to hear.

In Job, we find a God of unflinching silence in the face of desperate human supplication. A God who, when he does eventually appear, declines to disclose to Job or his friends what has gone on behind the curtain, the heavenly cause behind Job's suffering. Instead he responds to Job's inquiry with almost nothing but questions.²² Or in the odd story of the call of the prophet Samuel, who three times mistakes God's voice for that of his mentor Eli, we see a God willing to be misinterpreted, coming close enough to be heard, but remaining distant enough to be misidentified, and declining to clarify himself upon misidentification.²³ All of this is to say, we do not always find in scripture that God is as plainly forthcoming as we might expect, or prefer.

The Two Scripts in Scripture

And so I would say that Williams rightly, and insightfully, embraces scripture's call to not add to it. But what about the call to not subtract from it? With this, it is very clear that Rowan Williams does not believe all of scripture to be divine revelation.

²⁰Mark 4:12

²¹Mark 14:61

²²Job 38-41

²³1 Samuel 3

Or, that is, he does not say that the Bible *is* revelation, but that it contains it, or perhaps is rather a response to it.

It should be said, first of all, that this is precisely why it is clear that Williams *does* affirm that there is revelation. One of the ways Williams defines revelation is as something divinely, and not humanly, *initiated*.²⁴ But, while he takes the Bible to be divinely initiated, he does not take it to be divinely completed. He is very clear in saying that we are not called to endorse all that the Bible says.²⁵ His view is that the Bible includes both revelation and human response. He is emphatic, for example, that there *is* a Word from God to be heard in the book of Revelation, but that word is to be heard in the tension between its 'two scripts'. One script he describes as words chiselled in stone, by which he denotes both their lasting nature, as words firmly enduring in the Christian imagination, as well as their intrinsic weightiness, their forceful, incisive quality, so powerful as to cut into stone. In this category, he lists many familiar verses in Revelation, from 'I am the first and the last and the living one' to 'Let him who desires take the water of life without price'.²⁶

The other script he describes as 'tightly written, pen driving into cheap paper', which is to characterise it as neither lasting nor terribly worthy of lasting. Here he lists several other lines, such as 'They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them', and 'The smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever'.²⁷ The written-in-stone script Williams considers to be revelatory, or at least the faithful part of the human response to revelation. The written-into-cheap-paper parts he considers to be the product of injured minds wrestling with a true vision of the divine. (And of course, this understanding of revelation is not limited for Williams to the book of Revelation; he has examples in the Gospels, the epistles, the Psalms, and others.²⁸)

Williams considers the more 'paranoid' or 'venomous' parts of scripture a *necessary* by-product of that which is genuinely divine, contained alongside them. It is the price paid for revelation. By revealing himself, God risks devastating misinterpretation:

'... the diseases and injuries of the mind that revealed religion seems so often to produce are the price paid for some perception of what is irreducibly beyond the whole world. ... The rantings of John the Divine about his theological rivals are part of the by-product of the very vision of the Living One that shows these ravings for what they are, by showing the radical and unconfined purpose of God in Jesus Christ'.²⁹

Because humanity is as it is, written revelation must come to us limping, as it were, bringing with itself a host of ugly human responses. Importantly, these misapprehensions are shown to be such by the true revelation they come along

²⁴Rowan Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," *Modern Theology* 2.3 (1986): 198, 200.

²⁵Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 116.

²⁶Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 112–13.

²⁷Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 112–13.

²⁸Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 158, 159, 160.

²⁹Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 115.

with. The stone-cutting, weighty, revelatory components of the authors' writings are what show the author's own misapprehensions for what they are. The divine is distinguished from the human by the manifest incongruity between the two on the page. This, it seems, is how it is that the Word of God is to be heard *in the tension* between these two scripts. In engagement with Paul Ricoeur, Williams writes of an overemphasis on revelatory *text*, arguing that interpretation itself is revelatory as well, that 'God "speaks" in the response as in the primary utterance'.³⁰ Importantly, this has profound consequences for how Williams views the continuing role of the church in revelation.

It is interesting that John Webster, in his recount of Williams' theology, refers to the 'superintendence' of the Holy Spirit as guiding *the church* into the truth,³¹ rather than the Spirit superintending the production of the words of scripture.³² Although texts are a kind of thing capable of being revelatory, the centre point of revelation for Williams is not the text of scripture: 'The integrity of theological utterance . . . does not lie in its correspondence to given structures of thought, its falling into line with an authoritative communication'.³³ The primary revelation for the church consists rather in certain revelatory events, of which the Christ event is central, but not the only (for example, he refers to the events of the Exodus and the Torah³⁴). '[T]o recognize a text, a tradition or an event as revelatory is to witness to its generative power'.³⁵ Here 'generative' – a concept intrinsically tied to God's exclusive creative power³⁶ – means having capacity or tendency to generate new language, new possibilities for life, or new ways of being human.³⁷ Revelation is an 'initiating phenomenon'³⁸ to which forms of freedom and life so new and interruptive that they can only be divine in origin can be traced.

Given the aforementioned role he gives to interpretation as part of the revelatory process, the theory naturally fosters a greater role for the church and its traditions as part of God's way of revealing himself: 'Radical generative power is ascribed to the life of Jesus, but it is also ascribable to those events in which, through the ages, the community learns and relearns to interpret itself by means of Jesus'.³⁹ Revelation no less generative, it seems, than scripture itself is something that continues in the contemporary era. And so, similarly to how he writes of God's word being found in the very tension and conflict within scripture, Williams also writes of orthodoxy being something that emerges through communal processes of theological conflict. He writes of the Arian controversy, and its Nicene conclusion, that the emerging

³⁰Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 210.

³¹John Webster, "Rowan Williams on Scripture," in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 121.

³²Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology, Second Edition: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: HarperCollins Religious US, 2021), 708.

³³Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 209.

³⁴Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 199.

³⁵Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 199.

³⁶Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 207.

³⁷Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 199, 200.

³⁸Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 199.

³⁹Williams, "Trinity and Revelation," 204.

orthodoxy was not a victory of the conservative retention of pre-existing language – a 'deposit of faith' – against the threat of theological innovation. It was precisely the innovative construction of new language, forged in and necessitated by theological struggle, and emerging as the only adequate way forward in authentic continuity with the faith.⁴⁰

The Conflict of Interest

While there are myriad ways one might disagree with Williams' theology of revelation, the core that I wish to address is the division within scripture between authoritative and non-authoritative parts. The question is, how we are to tell the difference? How do we determine which parts of scripture are 'written in stone'? He appears to appeal to a certain aesthetic, self-evidently divine quality perceptible within the text:

'The average, the prosaic human mind cannot strike hard enough to cut so deeply in stone . . . Our language is not used to speaking for God – that is, speaking of some restoration and grace, some resource of beauty and transfiguring strength, . . . To speak like that is the result of having had one's own speech interrupted, having been thrown off course'.⁴¹

This approach may get us a certain distance, but by Williams' own reckoning, all theological and ethical thought is interested. We may approach scripture trusting, as he exhorts, that, 'Through the encounter and the contest . . . God will be victorious'.⁴² But how do we ensure that we are wrestling with scripture with the right attitude? How do we ensure that it is neither our cultural biases nor our personal dominative interest driving our moral assessment of the script? As described above, he says that the cut-in-stone parts of scripture show their accompanying broken, human responses for what they are, perhaps indicating that the method of differentiation might be a more dispassionate process of merely recognising moral divergence between two passages without necessarily passing our own moral judgements upon them. But, given that most of ethical reasoning amounts to argument by analogy – recognising moral equivalence between different actions – it is not so clear that perceiving two passages' moral divergence is not itself an act of moral assessment. And once the divergence is recognised, it is even less clear how we could decide which script is divine and which is human without ultimately passing moral judgement. Has the human condition not shown itself so corrupt and misguided as to be capable of mistaking the work of God for evil and vice versa?⁴³

⁴⁰Benjamin Myers, "Disruptive History: Rowan Williams on Heresy and Orthodoxy," in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2009), 53–54.

⁴¹Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 113.

⁴²Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 160.

⁴³See Mark 3:22-30

To be clear, the kind of moral assessment of the biblical text Williams employs and commends is not a self-righteous one. Far from passing judgement on the malicious tendencies of the Biblical authors, Williams calls us to identify with them:

‘We read neither with a kind of blind and thoughtless obedience to every word of scripture, as if it simply represented the mind of God, nor do we read with that rather priggish sensibility that desires to look down on the authors of scripture as benighted savages. We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God’s gift, and our solidarity with those writers of scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God’s gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it’.⁴⁴

But for all its moral decency, the theory’s epistemological problem is not resolved. It is Williams’ own contention that revelation interrogates *us*, questions and judges us, shapes and changes us. It is not clear how God’s revelation to us can be fully released to do this when we are the ones who have selected the texts according to what seems right in our eyes. As Michael Jensen asks, ‘Can we begin as the judge and end as the judged?’⁴⁵

And finally, for all Williams’ love of tension, his theory of revelation fails to encourage us to fully grapple with and embrace the theological tensions inherent within a Christian worldview. By expelling certain passages or ideas from the canon because they seem contrary to what we judge to be scripture’s more excellent teachings, we may be closing the door to a truth found somewhere in that tension. It can be in the wrestle to fit two seemingly incompatible yet independently seemingly true propositions together that we open ourselves to exponentially more complex, multifaceted, multidimensional ideas. Perhaps God has judged that there are certain truths that are better expressed by proposing both one extreme and its opposite than by attempting to directly express the balanced middle position. After all, at the centre of the central revelation to us, the Christ event, is the paradox that God became human – a claim that appears positively contradictory to many who do not approach with ears to hear.

Conclusion

Rowan Williams’ contribution to the theology of revelation is thoughtful and thought provoking and has much to teach us. His meditations on the silence of Christ provide helpful language to grasp the reality of the restraint of God’s revelation to us and are not, in my view, excessively apophatic or sceptical. There is also much wisdom to be gained from considering his theory of revelation as a generative phenomenon, and his way of wrestling with the complexities within scripture. Here Williams must be credited for his sophistication, subtlety, sincerity, humility, and earnestness in his formulation of this theology of revelation. But ultimately I find the theory to be inadequate in that, if every scriptural texts’

⁴⁴Williams, *Open to Judgement*, 159.

⁴⁵Michael Jensen, “Krisis? Kritik?: Judgement and Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams,” in *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, ed. Matheson Russell (Eugene, Or: Cascade Books, 2009), 84.

authority is to be discerned individually by process of our own subjective assessment of it, rather than by external authenticating evidence, we inevitably meet the problem of having to pass moral judgement on that on which we are dependent for our own moral formation.

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