

The Nature and Limits of Theology: A Response to Rowan Williams

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Abstract

Theology is both a human endeavor and something of Divine origin, insofar as it is a human attempt to make sense of certain Divinely revealed propositions. How does one reconcile these two elements? One attempt to do so was on the part of the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams. In sections I and II of chapter 1 of his work ‘On Christian Theology’, Williams speaks of the nature of authentic theological discourse, that is, theological discourse that has integrity. In his work on theological integrity, Williams explores how human intentions or hidden agendas can potentially warp our attempt to make sense of the truths contained within Divine Revelation. He then goes on to speak of how to avoid such pitfalls. In this article, I will respond to the epistemological implications of William’s thoughts on this topic. I will use various ideas from Catholic theology, including the development of doctrines and the notion that faith has both a subjective and objective element, to explore both the strengths and weaknesses of Williams’s thought.

Keywords

Epistemology, Development of Doctrine, Rowan Williams, John Henry, ‘On Christian Theology’, Integrity

An important and necessary first step in the study of any field is a proper understanding of the subject(s) under consideration in that field. A proper understanding of this determines the methods, nature and limit of that field. Insofar as there is debate among theologians concerning the existence of God, there is also debate among theologians concerning the nature and extent of theology, with a general division taking place between those who affirm and those who deny the existence of God. Among theologians of a more agnostic or atheistic outlook, the purpose or scope of theology is painted in humanistic terms. But even this allows for a certain diversity of thought. In an interview with the atheist YouTuber, Cosmic Skeptic, Richard Dawkins

presented theology as a subset of anthropology (i.e., as the study of the religious or spiritual beliefs of various cultures, movements, or institutions, thereby making it more akin to history or cultural analysis), whereas the host of the interview presented theology in a manner more akin to philosophy (i.e., analyzing different claims with the intention of proving or disproving them).¹

Among those who affirm the existence of God, no less diversity of thought concerning the nature and limits of theology exist. Theology uses as its starting point certain Divinely revealed truths; yet, most of what is said in theology is humans attempting to make sense of, define the proper meaning of, these Divine precepts. Theology is thus, in some sense, a Divine endeavor *as well as* a human endeavor. Debate among believers concerning the nature, limits, and proper methodology of theology is therefore centered on the question of how to reconcile the Divine and human elements of theology.

One example of the attempt to approach this dilemma, from a Christian perspective, is found in Rowan Williams's work *On Christian Theology*. This article, more specifically, will include a description of Williams's thoughts as articulated in sections I and II of the first chapter of this work, in which Williams speaks on the nature of integrity and authenticity within the context of theological discourse. This will then be followed by a brief reflection on Williams's writings from the perspective of Catholic theology, the theological perspective of the one writing this article.

In the opening sections of *On Christian Theology*, Williams suggests that any discourse has integrity if it is transparent about its proper intentions or agenda. Dishonesty about the true intentions of one's discourse makes it difficult to directly address the true crux of one's argument. This, in turn, is a subtle way of maintaining a particular set of power dynamics, and protecting these power dynamics, in discourse that isn't entirely transparent, becomes the true purpose or intention of this discourse rather than the pursuit of truth. All discourse, including of a theological nature, must therefore maintain a certain level of self-reflectiveness in order to ensure that it is remaining true to its stated intentions and is not falling into duplicity. One way to ensure this end, Williams suggests, is by avoiding what he calls a 'totalizing perspective', a God's-eye perspective on the nature of reality. Such views claim to be absolute or final, and therefore are beyond all critique. Such an attitude, by nature, embodies dishonest, power-driven discourse to the utmost degree. The mindset which Williams suggests for theological discourse is to see theology as being ultimately responsible to something outside of itself. No theological system should claim to be a

¹ Cosmic Clips, 'Richard Dawkins Tells Theology Student Why His Degree Is Useless', YouTube, December 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHoK6ohqNo4>.

perfect, God's-eye view of reality, but rather as a working out of the basic truths revealed by God to humanity in a way that sees itself as ultimately accountable to something higher than itself, namely Divine Revelation. It is only when we see the God's-eye view of reality as something to which we are held accountable in our theological discourse, and not as something identical to our own personal theological systems, can we allow our theological discourse to be truly authentic.

In this article, the validity of Williams's concerns are noted, but it is also argued that there is a subtle distinction between his view and a theological method rooted in a relativistic view. It will therefore be argued that Catholic theologians have many conceptual tools to draw from in maintaining this balance. This includes the epistemological distinction between the subjective principles governing theological discourse and the objective content of the deposit of faith, a distinction made by some of the manualists and articulated with particular depth in the writings on the development of doctrines.

Some of the manualist scholastic thinkers have suggested that the term 'faith' can have two levels of meaning: first, as a subjective principle, namely, that whereby humanity assents to a particular set of truth claims; secondly, to an objective series of claims to which we assent. With this distinction in mind, humans can admit that there is an element of theology that can be thought of in terms of humans responding to and accepting that which God has revealed. Cardinal Newman's theory of doctrinal development can be seen as applying this to the level of the Church as a community of believers: what individuals do in attempting to make sense of the Christian faith, the Church does in attempting to define the proper interpretation of its doctrines. Humans debate, they discuss, they struggle with, they attempt to make sense of; in the process of doing so, there is something that the Church as a whole agrees to be the objective standard of spiritual truth, against which one can compare their spiritual and intellectual efforts.

It appears as if Williams would support such a view. The theological distinctions that I have pointed to would help one to avoid a misinterpretation of Williams's thought that leads one to reject any sort of absolute truth claim in theology. In this article I will examine how certain ideas from Catholic theology can explicate or supplement certain elements of Williams's own thought, while also spending a brief period comparing the traditional Catholic view on the nature of theological discourse and theological orthodoxy with that of Williams.

Williams on Integrity and Theological Discourse

In April of 1989, Rowan Williams - then serving as a canon at Christ Church, Oxford, as well as a canon theologian at Leicester Cathedral, and a professor of Divinity at Oxford - delivered a lecture at the Center

for the Study of Theology titled, 'Prayer and Theological Integrity'. This lecture was then published as an article in the March 1991 publication of *New Blackfriars*. This lecture was later included as the first chapter of Williams's 2000 book, *On Christian Theology*.

Williams begins this work with a definition of integrity. Integrity, within the context of discourse, is defined as 'whether such a discourse is really talking about what it *says* it is talking about'.² Whether or not a particular discourse has *integrity* is different from whether or not the speaker is sincere in what they say. Williams demonstrates this with an example from Marxist social and cultural critique. For Marxists, art reflects the power dynamics that define a particular place or historical period. Yet, this isn't always clearly evident from the perspective of people who live at a particular historical period. On the other hand, if a person, living in a later point in history, were to defend the aesthetic of a prior historical period, knowing what we now know about the underlying socio-political or socio-economic implications of a particular aesthetic, then such discourse, while still sincere, would lack integrity. That is, one may genuinely admire a particular aesthetic, but they lack the sense of historical innocence that people in that prior period had.³ Integrity of discourse also says nothing about whether or not something said within a particular discourse is true. Discourse that includes true statements or ideas can still be used as a means to assert one's dominance. Integrity has nothing to do with the structure or content of what one says, but rather concerns the intentions and mindset of the one speaking.⁴

What is central for discourse to have integrity, Williams argues, is clarity concerning 'the objective direction, the *interest* in fact served by the discourse'.⁵ Williams goes on to explain why integrity, in this sense, is important:

Discourse that conceals is discourse that (consciously or not) sets out to foreclose the possibility of a genuine response. By operating on two different levels, one acknowledged and the other not, it presents the hearer with a set of positions and arguments other than those that are finally determinative of its working.⁶

Authentic discourse, discourse with integrity, is discourse that allows for 'genuine response', that is, a response that touches at the core of what an argument is all about. Discourse that allows for genuine response is thus discourse that keeps open the possibility of two things:

² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), pg. 3

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*

firstly, the recognition that there is a certain amount of incompleteness to what is said on either side, and, secondly, an openness to correction.⁷

Thus, any discourse that has integrity is discourse that ‘allows for answers’. That is, each side recognizes that they have only part of the picture, and in fact they may be wrong. Discourse is therefore collaborative in nature, since neither side claims to be the end-all-and-be-all. As Williams writes, ‘Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in itself, final. It does not seek to prescribe the tone, or even the vocabulary of a response’.⁸ Discourse with integrity does not claim exclusivity; it does not claim to put forward unquestionable answers, beyond which development is impossible. Discourse that does not have integrity is discourse that does not allow one’s ideological opponents to question, or even recognize, the true core of one’s argument.

One difficulty that Williams points out is maintaining integrity specifically within theological discourse. Religion makes certain broad, all-encompassing claims about the fundamental nature of reality, which, in turn, proceed from certain authorities which are seen as absolute or final. As Williams writes,

Religious talk is in an odd position. On the one hand, it is making claims about the context of the whole moral universe, claims of crucial concern for the right leading of human life; it is thus not likely, *prima facie*, to be content with provisional statements. On the other hand, if it really purports to be about the context of the moral universe, it declares itself to be uniquely ‘under judgment’, and to be dealing with what supremely *resists* the urge to finish and close what is being said.⁹

The object of theology is the moral universe, that is, the fundamental moral, spiritual, existential and metaphysical principles governing reality. Claims about the moral universe, being as important as they are, are subject to analysis and critique even more than other claims; and yet, claims about the moral universe also claim to carry with them a level of authority that places them beyond all critique and judgment.

Can discourse rooted in such claims truly have integrity? How one answers this question is rooted, Williams asserts, in how we answer another question, ‘How is the context of the moral universe to appear in our speech without distortion?’¹⁰ Williams goes on to write that there are two problems with making claims about the nature of the moral universe. The first of these is that, on some level, it presupposes that humans are distinct from the moral universe, as if we are looking at it from a distance. Discourse rooted in such an attitude overlooks the fact

⁷ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

that humans themselves are a part of the same moral universe they are attempting to analyze. The second challenge in maintaining integrity in theological discourse is that the qualities that define the moral universe transcend historical or cultural boundaries; yet, human language is defined by certain culturally and historically-contingent factors. How can something that is shaped and molded by the contingencies of human life sufficiently describe that which transcends these same contingencies?¹¹

Given all of these challenges to maintaining integrity in theological discourse, Williams suggests that the way to uphold integrity is by recognizing the limits of our theological language. This is accomplished, to a large degree, by recognizing a fact that Williams points out, namely that there are two general ways of understanding worldviews. The first is as attempts to connect all the different parts of reality (and, in the case of religious worldviews, to connect all the different parts of reality to a Higher Source outside of the created realm) in such a way so as to understand the inner logic of reality, to map out a specific vision of how things are or how things ought to be. The second way of envisioning worldviews is in terms of attempts to create morally and logically consistent responses to the order or structure of reality. This manner of seeing worldviews allows us to understand the finite and incomplete nature of such perspectives, and therefore entails an openness to growth and correction.¹² Worldviews, according to such a vision, ‘commonly work as *strategies* for responding consistently and intelligibly to the world’s complexity rather than as exhaustive interpretations...’¹³

When one sees theological systems or religious worldviews in these terms, they avoid the pitfalls associated with a totalizing worldview. More to the point, Williams states that ‘[T]heological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God’s point of view* (i.e., a “total perspective”)’.¹⁴ A theological worldview with integrity recognizes God as the Source of all reality and, therefore, attempts to view all things through the lens of the Divine Judgment, including its own efforts. In seeing all things as subject to Divine Judgment, it avoids a totalizing (and therefore power-driven) view of discourse by not seeing itself as something equal to or identical with this Divine Judgment. The only way to maintain integrity in theology, Williams writes, is ‘by showing *in* its workings what is involved in bringing the complexity of its human world to judgment before God; not by seeking to articulate or to complete this judgment’.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 6.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Yet, the attaining (and maintaining) of integrity in theological discourse is not merely a matter of maintaining a certain intellectual disposition, but also rests in the accepting of certain spiritual realities. Human life comes forth from God as its Source, is ordered back towards God as its End, and, in some sense, presupposes God as the ‘context’ of its life. Yet, as a result of sin, humans cannot respond to God’s call to communion as they should. Williams thus asserts that theology is just as much a reflection upon our response to God as it is a reflection on God Himself: ‘...[T]he God perceived in the life of Israel is constantly addressed as much as talked *about*’.¹⁶ Theology is a matter of finding ways of perfecting our response to God. This can be seen, Williams suggests, as the leitmotif of salvation history: Scripture is a ‘record’ in which is ‘shown...the way in which imperfect, distorting responses to God generate their own re-formation, as they seek to conform to the reality of what it is and was that called them forth, that they may finally issue in a response wholly transparent to the reality of their calling...’.¹⁷

This thus showcases the centrality of prayer in theology. In prayer, we constantly communicate with God, and therefore are constantly growing, both as persons and in our response to God. Insofar as this is the cornerstone of the Biblical narrative, what makes Scripture unique is that it ‘weaves together history and liturgy’.¹⁸ The way in which the authors of Scripture speak of God is rooted in the mentality associated with prayer and worship, which ‘ascribes supreme value, supreme resource or power, to something other than the worshiper...’. Worship thus includes ‘a “giving over” of our words to God (as opposed to speaking in a way that attempts to retain distance or control over what is being spoken of...’.¹⁹ The language of worship can become ideological, it can be abused so as to undermine its own purposes; nonetheless, when such language allows individuals and communities to think more deeply about, to perfect or refine - to, in the words of Williams, ‘reimagine’ - their essential identity and their relationship with God, then that is when it is most effective.²⁰

The language of prayer and worship is, in turn, rooted in a spirit of repentance. Theological discourse that has, at its root, a spirit of repentance recognizes its own insufficiencies, its own failures, and therefore allows itself to be constantly exposed to the Judgments of God. The task of theology is therefore not only to make or analyze statements about God, but also to analyze itself, its own limitations and temptations. There are two essential elements in doing this, both

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

of which revolve around attempts to avoid reductionism in theology. Firstly, theologians must not suppose that there is a normative style of doing theology or expressing theological truths. Williams is not here stating that truth is relative; rather, Williams states that theology must reject what he calls a ‘self-indulgent or uncritical devotional or liturgical language’, which seeks to conform all other forms of theological self-expression to itself. Each form of theological self-expression recognizes its own strengths and weaknesses and, thus, permits a certain level of diversity in theological self-expression. Thus, in order for theology to have true integrity, it must be what Williams calls ‘collaborative’.²¹

Together with the collaborative nature of theological discourse, such discourse must be sacrificial in nature. The Scriptural concept of worship being a ‘sacrifice of praise’ implies that ‘ascribing worth, beauty and desirability to God represented some sort of *cost* to us’.²² What is the cost of doing theology with integrity? Williams articulates it in the following manner: ‘...[P]raise is nothing if not the struggle to voice how the directedness of my regard depends on, is moulded by, something irreducibly other than myself’.²³ Theology uses as its starting point the realization that our existence is dependent on God as its Source; yet, as the Source of all being and existence, God cannot be reduced to a created reality. Theology is thus an attempt to describe, as well as an attempt to be in relation with (and therefore respond to) such a Reality. While all praise or worship-based language, to some degree, strikes directly at the heart of theological discourse, and in a sense keeps theological discourse grounded to that which makes it authentic, it is easy for an overly formalistic view on worship to have the same effect as a totalizing view more generally: an over-emphasis on pre-made prayers and responses creates a mindset that the object of worship can somehow be dragged down to our level; to praise God in such a way that brings about the ‘disappearance of the praised object into existing patterns of words, foreordained responses’. We must not view God as something which language, even the language of praise, can ‘absorb into itself’, nor should we see God as ‘embedded into the conventions of speech’. God must be seen as One ‘pre-existing [any] human idiom’.²⁴

In a word, theological discourse maintains its integrity when it recognizes its own incompleteness, which is itself rooted in a recognition of the finitude and corruption of the human race, our utter dependence on God, and the radical transcendence of God. One of the highest expressions of this reality is prayer and worship. Thus, theological discourse

²¹ Ibid., pp. 8-9.

²² Ibid., p. 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

must maintain a close relation to the life of prayer and worship. Yet, when worship becomes preoccupied with its own orderliness, completeness, and intelligibility to the believer - in Williams's words, when worship attempts to 'direct our attention...to the smooth and finished quality of its own surface'²⁵ - it fails to live up to its proper purpose.

There are a few examples Williams uses to showcase the true spirit and purpose of praise on display. Without getting bogged down by the exegetical, historical, and doctrinal debates between continuationists/charismatics and cessationists, Williams states that glossolalia serves as such an example. Glossolalia is, at its core, the believer speaking in a Divine or angelic language that is directed towards God. It 'has no "relevance" to the human' and has 'as its central aspect...address to God'.²⁶ Another example of the true spirit of praise is in the Book of Job. In the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, it emphasizes how wisdom reaches its epitome in God, and wisdom in the created rational being reaches its epitome in the search for God. Further, there is an emphasis on how Divine Wisdom entails a certain orderliness or rationality to God's act of creation, and to God's Plan more generally. Yet, in response to this, the last few chapters of the Book of Job emphasize the utter transcendence of God's ways, and of the inability of the human mind to fully grasp the Mind of God.²⁷ In the history of the Church, one sees a similar mindset encapsulated in the spirituality of the Carmelite Order, as well as in the spirituality of the early Jesuits: in such spiritual systems, we take time to reflect upon the spiritual implications of our day-to-day life, rather than blindly accepting or being driven by them. There is also a strong emphasis on asceticism, which is meant to lead to a detachment from all material or earthly things. All of this thus leads to a general suspicion of the normative modes of speaking and acting, which extends even to prayer: there is an understanding of the finite though useful nature of traditional devotions; a realization that humans are finite, and thus are prone to failure in the process of attempting to come to terms with the various truths of the faith; thus, there is an understanding that nothing humans do in this world, even spiritually, is an end in itself, but is a part of the continual process of purification by which we grow closer to God.²⁸

Yet, in the life of the Church, the greatest example of the spirit of praise is in the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, which can be seen as an 'enactment of the paschal movement'. Being submerged into and taken out of the waters of the Baptismal font represents being united to Christ in His Death and Resurrection, which represents, in turn, 'a loss, a disappearance...a submergence of identity' into that

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

of Christ. In the Eucharist, the believers identify themselves with the Apostles at the Last Supper, and in the Eucharistic celebrations themselves, we encounter the effects of the central act of salvation, whereby we, like the Apostles, undergo a 'restoration to wholeness'.²⁹

In the Sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism, the purpose is 'not simply...euphoric fluency', but rather 'an attempt to speak to and of the reality of God' in a manner that does not cause our language to 'collapse back upon itself'. If it does the latter, then the language of praise - and therefore the whole of theological discourse - becomes less a matter of speaking of and to God as much as 'a mere articulation of religious emotion'.³⁰ Williams thus suggests, 'Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns in on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders itself to God...'.³¹ Theological discourse must always maintain a level of self-awareness about its proper intentions: is it truly attempting to direct itself to God, or articulate some truth about God, or is it simply a form of self-expression on the part of humans? As it struggles with this reality, it also comes to terms with another reality: namely, an understanding of its own finitude. As it struggles with its own finite and imperfect nature, it offers itself to God, that is, our speech undergoes an 'opening...to God's [speech]', an understanding that that of which we are speaking is distinct from us, a realization that leads to a desire to subject our speculations, our judgments, to the judgments of God.³² And this attempt to perfect or refine human theological discourse points towards the Christocentric nature of theology: Christ on the Cross experienced ultimate dispossession; yet, in rising from the dead, Jesus did not overcome fleshliness, but rather overcame the dispossession that defines the creaturely state. Jesus in His risen state continued to maintain the union of body, soul, and Divinity. Jesus therefore purifies creatureliness; He does not do away with it. The Christian life is therefore 'a sharing in Jesus' risen life', in which the faithful experience or have communicated to them 'the Divine liberty in their fleshly and historical lives'. It is not that the Christian seeks to escape the created realm, but rather seeks to identify and overcome all that corrupts it, including on the level of language and truth-seeking.³³

A Response from Catholic Epistemology

One who attempts to reflect upon or respond to Williams' views on integrity in theological discourse may respond in one of several ways. In

²⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 8.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 12.

this article, I hope to respond mainly from the perspective of the epistemological presuppositions commonly found among Catholic theologians and in the magisterial documents of the Church.

In popular theological discourse, a distinction is made which is subtle, though important, when understanding the nature and limits of theology, namely a distinction between faith and *the faith*. The latter refers to the contents of the Christian religion; the former refers to the assent of the mind, an intellectual movement whereby the mind, illuminated by faith, accepts and adheres to the principles and precepts of the Christian religion. Fr. Michaelae Nicolau, in his *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, writes,

The object of [theological] investigation is the doctrine of faith; the objective principle from which the investigation begins is the doctrine revealed by God, which can be received only by faith; finally, the subjective principle of the investigation is reason illuminated by faith.³⁴

Nicolau states that the object of theological investigation is those truths held by the Christian faith. Nicolau, citing the First Vatican Council, makes a distinction between those truths of the faith which can be affirmed through reason alone, apart from Divine Revelation, and those which transcend the capacity of reason to realize by its own power, and thus can only be known through Divine Revelation and affirmed by reason guided by the light of faith.³⁵ Nonetheless, what is important to note here is that Nicolau makes a distinction between an ‘objective principle’ and a ‘subjective principle’, which both serve to guide theology. Nicolau is using the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ in the strict, epistemological sense: subjective here means ‘concerning the subject, that is, the one perceiving, knowing or believing’; objective here means ‘concerning the object, that is, that which is perceived, known or believed’.

Insofar as there is a distinction between subject and object, thus understood, the object of belief or knowledge is distinct from the one perceiving it, and therefore one could make the argument from this that perception is not determinative of reality, nor can reality be reduced to that which is perceived, known, or believed. While this is often used as a basis for the belief in objective reality, it can also be used as the basis for the intellectual and spiritual humility called for by Williams: the personal theological systems of individual theologians are not identifiable with the deposit of faith itself. Each theologian must hold himself or herself accountable to a specific and definite standard, which contains within it an authority not held by individual theologians, namely Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium.

³⁴ Michaelae Nicolau SJ, *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, third edition, volume IA, Treatise I, chapter 1, no. 4, trans. by Kenneth Baker SJ (Keep the Faith, Inc., 2015), p. 13.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, no 5, pp. 13-14.

Ludwig Ott explicates this point in his celebrated work on dogmatic theology, writing, ‘Theology is a science of faith. It is concerned with faith in the objective sense (*fides quae creditur*, that which is believed), and in the subjective sense (*fides qua creditur*, that by which we believe)’.³⁶ Ott explicitly states that the term ‘faith’ can be used to refer both to the sum total of beliefs or doctrines held by the Church, as well as that by which we assent to or accept such truths. Theology includes an analysis or reflection upon faith in both senses.

It is therefore reasonable to say that different theological systems are in line with these authoritative Sources to various degrees. Thus, the mindset of the theologian must be one of openness to dialogue, openness to the possibility that their theological system is not in line with the objective contents of Divine Revelation or the Magisterium as much as they initially thought. Theological discourse, like all discourse, requires an openness to correction and incorporating the best of other theological systems. Nonetheless, there is a nuanced point which must be made. The general sentiment behind Williams’s thought (that theologians should not see themselves as capable of making smooth, well-defined theological systems that are, in essence, viewed as immutable but need to be open to seeing their theological systems grow and develop as their either communal or personal relationship with God deepens) can easily be misinterpreted by some as implying that there is or can be no definite right or wrong in the process of theological discourse. What separates integrity in theological discourse, as defined by Williams, from complete pandemonium in the realm of discourse - in which state there is no objective measure by which to determine personal or communal growth in spiritual wisdom - is the fact that there is an objective standard to which individuals and ecclesial and academic communities are held. If one interprets integrity in theological discourse in terms of a relativistic view on the nature of truth, then the question inevitably arises as to why one *should not* let their discourse be motivated by power or asserting one’s individuality.

It seems as if the best manner in which to attain that end which Williams sought to bring about is precisely in recognizing that there is truth beyond the self. One historico-theological construct that may be of use in attaining integrity in theological discourse that also remains loyal to the objective truth of the deposit of faith is that which was presented by one of the greatest Anglophone Catholic writers of the past 200 years, John Henry Newman. Newman begins his treatment on the development of doctrines by writing:

It is the characteristic of our minds to be ever engaged in passing judgment on the things that come before us. No sooner do we apprehend

³⁶ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, ed. by James Canon Bastible, trans. by Patrick Lynch (London: Baronius Press, 2018), p. 3.

than we judge; we allow nothing to stand by itself...The idea which represents an object or a supposed object is commensurate with the sum total of its possible aspects...There is no one aspect deep enough to exhaust the contents of a real idea, no one term or proposition which will serve to define it; though of course one representation of it is more just and exact than another...[The] process...by which the aspects of an idea are brought into consistency and form, I call its development, being the germination and maturation of some truth or apparent truth on a large mental field.³⁷

For Newman, an idea is a mental representation of some object perceived by the individual. No one element of an object's existence, no one way of explaining or describing an object, is sufficient to create an idea of a thing that can exhaust the fullness of what an object is. The more we contemplate a thing, the more we reflect upon it, the fuller our understanding of it becomes, and, therefore, the more complete our knowledge of that thing. As our mental phenomena become more precise, our ideas develop.

Newman eventually goes on to note the distinction between development and corruption. Newman writes, 'Corruption, on the contrary, is the breaking up of life, preparatory to its termination. Taking this analogy as a guide, I venture...to discriminate healthy developments of an idea from its state of corruption, as follows: - there is no corruption if it retains one and the same type, the same principles, the same organization; if its beginnings anticipate its subsequent phases, and its later phenomena protect and subserve its earlier; if it has a power of assimilation and revival, and a vigorous action from first to last'. Newman goes on to provide an in-depth analysis of each of these criteria, but ultimately the core of Newman's thought here is that for there to be authentic development, there must be a level of continuity, and therefore an organic connection, between an idea as it existed in its earlier stages and the same idea as its later stages. Just as an organic substance grows, changes, or matures, and yet, there is some core of its being that remains the same even amidst all other changes, so too with ideas.³⁸

Newman applies this concept to the development of doctrine. He asserts that there is an 'intimate connexion, or rather oneness, with primitive Apostolic teaching, with the body of doctrine known at this day by the name of Catholic, and professed substantially both by Eastern and Western Christendom. That faith is undeniably the historical continuation of that religious system, which bore the name Catholic in the eighteenth century, in the seventeenth, in the sixteenth, and so back in every preceding century, till we arrive at the first; - undeniably the successor, the representative, the heir of the religion of Cyprian, Basil,

³⁷ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (New York City: Cosimo Classics, 2009), pp. 33, 34, 35, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

Ambrose and Augustine'.³⁹ He summarizes this sentiment much later when he says, 'It appears as if there has been a certain general type of Christianity in every age, by which it is known at first sight, differing from itself only as what is young differs from what is mature...'.⁴⁰ An interpretation of the Christian faith is catholic - that is, universal - if it retains or is in continuity with that same ideological core that has been found in every generation of Christianity since the time of the Apostles. What separates Christian theology in any given era from Christian theology in any other era is the level of depth with which we understand this faith.

Ultimately, the entire theory of the development of doctrines, as articulated by Newman, presupposes a specific view on the nature of faith: as he wrote in a sermon on Luke 2:19 delivered on the Feast of the Purification,

Little is told us in Scripture concerning the Blessed Virgin, but there is one grace of which the Evangelists make her the pattern, in a few simple sentences - faith. ... But Mary's faith did not end with a mere acquiescence in Divine providence and revelations: as the text informs us, she 'pondered' them. ... She does not think it enough to accept, she dwells on it; ... not enough to assent, she develops it; not enough to submit the Reason, she reasons upon it...⁴¹

Newman goes on to say that the initial consent of faith takes place independently of the understanding of reason, but reason helps us to understand what we affirm through faith, which in turn takes place out of a sense of reverence and love for what we believe.⁴²

Although Newman explicitly states that ideas can develop regardless of their level of truth content, he does assert that there is still some object, whether real or imagined, against which we judge the development of ideas. For an idea to develop is for it to more thoroughly exhaust, to greater degrees, the realities of the object it claims to represent. Thus, one could easily argue that an implicit, though important, part of Newman's thought is the distinction between subject and object. Insofar as this distinction exists, there can be a distinction between objects and our idea of them; if this is the case, then one can also argue both that perception and object are not identical and that there is something independent of our perceptions against which we can compare or judge our perceptions. And, since this is the case, doctrines (and personal theological systems) can develop.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 169.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 323.

⁴¹ John Henry Newman, 'Sermon XV: The Theory of Development in Religious Doctrine', in *Newman's University Sermons: Fifteen Sermons Preached before the University of Oxford 1826-43*, by John Henry Newman (London: SPCK, 1970), pp. 312 & 313.

⁴² Ibid., p. 313.

Newman's opinions on this subject are not unknown to Williams. In his discussion of Newman's historiographical approach to the debates surrounding Arianism, Williams suggests that Newman's thought was born out of the basic principles and ethos of the Oxford movement. Williams states that the Oxford movement 'works with a clear and normative definition of Christian faith and practice, in which ascetical discipline goes hand-in-hand with the repudiation of Protestant biblicism (and Protestant rejection of post-scriptural development in teaching and devotion)'.⁴³ In a word, Newman and other like-minded figures believe that deep spiritual truths could be contained beneath the surface of ordinary words or stories. Since many of the stories and teachings of Scripture symbolically point towards these deeper spiritual realities, it is the duty of the exegete to unpack what these deeper spiritual meanings are. Each generation does this to various degrees and in specific ways; this is the development of doctrines.⁴⁴

Newman was essentially fighting against the more Evangelical view of Scripture, which believed that the meaning of Scripture of primary importance was the plain meaning of the text. Such a view could be seen as historically naïve, separating the current state of theology from the doctrinal history of the Church. Newman, on the other hand, Williams notes, was also motivated by a desire to counteract some of the extremes within the critical method, which, in interpreting Scripture, came to conclusions different than and even at odds with those contained in the traditional credal and confessional statements of the Church.⁴⁵

What Williams seems to be getting at is that Newman has a very specific view of what the Christian faith is and how it is to be properly interpreted; Newman is also acting within the realization that no one reads Scripture in a vacuum, but rather is acting in the shadow of certain earlier theological controversies, and thus, to some degree, whether knowingly or unknowingly, is assuming arguments made by theologians of previous generations. Newman wants to root the normative beliefs and practices of contemporary Christianity in a larger historical framework, but also seems to reject the view that the larger historical framework of Christianity is something 'added' to Scripture, but rather wants to see the development of Christian theology as an 'unfolding' of Scripture. Nonetheless, Williams seems to suggest that there is a certain amount of anachronism in Newman's thought – he begins with a very specific view of what is standard Christian belief and practice, and reads that back into the historical data – and asserts that there are undertones of clericalism to Newman's view – that is,

⁴³ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Newman works with a very high view of the teaching authority of the Church in the interpretation of Scripture (as Williams put it, Newman's approach 'naturally supports a high view of priestly authority'⁴⁶).

My purpose here is not to speak of the strength of Newman's theory of the development of doctrines as a historiographic method of approaching theology, nor of the strength of Williams's critiques of Newman. Rather, my purpose is to look to the broader *theological* implications of Newman's thought, and to examine how Newman's thought can nuance and strengthen Williams's own view. The point I would like to emphasize is that what is true of individuals is also true of history, or of the Church as a community. Theology can be seen, from a Christian perspective, as human persons attempting to make sense of or work out the implications of what God has revealed. What individual theologians, clergyman, or believers are doing at particular points in time, the Church has done throughout history. Scripture is seen by believers as the basis of what we believe; yet, the Church did not go suddenly from the words of Scripture to the current state of Christian theology as articulated in the current creeds and confessions of Christendom. The fact that centuries of debate separate the former from the latter shows that the Church, as a community of believers, as well as individual theologians or believers, are attempting to actively engage Scripture and the deposit of faith as it is handed on to them. This leads us back to the importance of the distinction between *faith* and *the faith*: one is the objective data of the Christian religion, the latter is that whereby we assent to the former. One pertains to subjects, the other is distinct from them.

Recognizing this difference is an important tool when interpreting Williams's view that theological discourse loses its integrity when one assumes a God's-eye perspective of reality. That sentiment, central to Williams's thought, can be interpreted in two manners. The first is one that shows a certain distrust of any absolute theological claims, and sees a seemingly unbridgeable gap between human theological claims and the truths in the Divine Mind. The other sees theology as being born out of a subjective response to objective truths disclosed by God. That is, there is a distinction between the object of belief, as something revealed by God, and that whereby we, His creatures, assent to it. Because of this distinction, one can admit that there is a larger process by which individuals or communities attempt to make sense of what God has revealed. The understanding of what God reveals does, in fact, develop. Hence the historical reality of theological debates preceding major doctrinal decisions. Yet, because there is an objective standard by which we judge our subjective responses, we can determine that certain

⁴⁶ Ibid.

conclusions are more correct than others, in that they are more in line with what God has revealed.

Such a view allows us to maintain theological integrity, as outlined by Williams. We admit that there is a distinction between what God has revealed and our attempts to make sense of this revelation, and by admitting of this distinction, we can admit that our theological views are the result of our personal spiritual development being at a specific point, a reality influenced by a variety of different factors. Yet, making a distinction between the objective deposit of faith and our subjective response to it allows us to remain within the framework of traditional Catholic epistemology, which rejects a relativistic view of theology, or that there is a distinction between the development of doctrines and the notion of their substantial meaning changing as the intellectual and social setting the Church finds itself in changes.

Williams seems to acknowledge this reality. Williams sees human theological pronouncements, or the attempt on the part of believers to make sense of the content of the Christian faith, as being subject to a Higher Standard. Recognizing that everything we say within theological discourse is subject to a Higher Standard without thinking that what we say *is* that higher standard allows us to avoid a relativistic view on theology while still maintaining integrity in theological discourse.

Williams and the Catholic Church on Language, Theology, and the Nature of Orthodoxy

Williams's views on the nature of integrity in theological discourse presupposes a very specific set of views on the nature of theological orthodoxy, which in turn presupposes a very specific view on the philosophical and theological implications of language. A theological response to Williams must include both a response to Williams's thought, as well as the presuppositions or context of his system.

Concerning the nature of theological orthodoxy, Williams's views are laid out with particular clarity in a lecture he delivered relatively early on in his career titled 'What is Catholic Orthodoxy?' Williams begins his lecture with a definition of 'orthodoxy': orthodoxy is a 'system of belief characterizing' those who identify as members of a particular movement or ideology, who are 'distinguishable by certain common modes of behavior and organization'.⁴⁷ Williams notes that this understanding of orthodoxy is often used by members of a larger group or movement who exist on the fringes of that group, or by those outside of

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, 'What is Catholic Orthodoxy', in *Essays Catholic and Radical: A Jubilee Group Symposium for the 150th Anniversary of the beginning of the Oxford Movement 1933-1983*, edited by Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (London: The Bowdlerdean Press, 1983), p. 11.

the group, to signify ‘a strongly and clearly determined set of ideas and responses, a comprehensive ideology’ which is clearly defined enough both in terms of its content and interpretation, and accepted by the majority. This ‘minimizes conflict or dialectic...and...resists fundamental challenges’.⁴⁸

Those who view orthodoxy in such a way, as Williams notes, tend to value ‘rational enquiry and flexibility of response’⁴⁹, and therefore see orthodoxy as something intellectually stifling. They therefore ‘come to think that opposition to “orthodoxy” is of itself a praiseworthy thing’, which in contemporary culture manifests itself in the form of a hesitancy to join or associate with organized religions, political parties, and other similar groups.⁵⁰

Yet, as Williams points out, such an approach is ‘naive about how things are known’.⁵¹ Those who oppose orthodoxy, hegemony, arguments from authority, or threats of punishment are ways of keeping people in line when arguments and evidence fail. Reason, on the other hand, is like a lighthouse, standing independent of any one individual, group, movement, or ideology, and which, when it shines upon a belief or ideology, reveals the truth about it. Williams calls such a view ‘seductive but hopelessly inadequate’, going on to summarize the thought of the British theologian and philosopher, Donald MacKinnon. MacKinnon was of the belief that such a view presupposes that we can be fully detached from, and in some sense ‘float above’ all ideologies, movements or groups or their influence, which in turn raises a series of philosophical, moral, and spiritual questions. ‘Rationality’ or ‘reasonableness’ are seen as the main antidote to orthodoxy, and yet each area of human discourse has its own standards for what is considered ‘rational’ or ‘reasonable’, and it is for this reason that each area of study has its own methodology, its own theoretical frame of reference, in a word, its own orthodoxy.⁵² It is for this reason that Williams writes the following:

We come to know because we have some idea of ‘how to know’ in diverse situations - or, in other words, we learn by learning what might be appropriate questions. And this involves an ability to discriminate between different sorts of enquiry, different areas of questioning: a discrimination which is never simply invented out of nothing but depends on traditions, ways of seeing and of speaking about the world. Traditions or languages in this sense are essentially communal matters, processes of sharing and transmission. And so we end up with the irreducibly social nature of knowing and learning, the bond between knowledge and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 11-12.

communities and their life. There is no need instantly to draw the drastic conclusion that therefore all we claim to know is absolutely determined by what our community allows us to know; full-scale relativism of this kind is actually quite difficult to state with any precision and coherence. But the basic point is unavoidable: knowing, discriminating, is learned by participating in communal life.⁵³

That is to say, each area of study has its own collectively agreed upon methods, a set of methods and questions seen as appropriate to a specific area of study, and these are passed from generation to generation. This is what constitutes ‘tradition’: a specific way of transmitting the knowledge (as well as the methods of obtaining said knowledge) to every generation. This does not, of course, mean that everything the community says, or its standards of coming to these conclusions, are always true, accurate or the best; nonetheless, Williams sees an inescapably communal element to how humans learn and therefore sees a certain dependence on orthodoxy as inevitable.

On the basis of this, Williams notes that what defines a community is ‘a tradition of discriminating, imagining and symbolizing - an ideology, if you like, or an “orthodoxy”’. Citing Paul Ricoeur’s article, ‘Science and ideology’, Williams notes that a community without an ideology is no community at all, since it has no vision of how things are or how things should be, no way of measuring the importance of events, and, therefore, no sense of self-identity.⁵⁴ Williams concludes from this that, ‘Only tradition makes thinking possible - an engagement, even struggle, with what is given, rather than a passive and meaningless observation. Paradoxically, it is only “orthodoxies” that make us critical, that enable us to ask questions’.⁵⁵ Adhering to a specific framework in which and through which we view or interpret things is what separates thinking from simply passively experiencing. In order to make sense of what happens to us, we need a larger framework or set of principles within which to do so.

Even though orthodoxy is a necessary for the intellectual life of both individuals and communities, the mindset of those who reject orthodoxy does have some merit to it. As Williams writes,

There can be no doubt that this kind of perception is pretty accurate in a wide range of contexts. What is seen to have happened is that a certain dimension of indeterminateness and candid self-appraisal has vanished from the group’s life – ‘indeterminateness’ in the sense of grasping that the group’s symbolic life and speech do not provide an absolutely comprehensive map of reality. The goal of the group has become a matter of internal adjustment, rather than fidelity to structures or constraints coming from beyond its language and mythology. You could say that such

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12

a group has lost its sense of being answerable to anything, it judges - and justifies - itself; or that its 'orthodoxy' has ceased to be a method for creation, discovery and a flexible and developing self-understanding. It no longer equips you to see, to discriminate for yourself. It expects you to not take part in a conversation but to repeat what is delivered to you by authoritative guardians of tradition. In short, ideology, the self-representation of a group, has become a phenomenon of power, the sign of dominance of an interested group.⁵⁶

In a word, orthodoxy becomes something repressive or intellectually stifling when those who lead a group or a movement lose the ability for critical self-reflection, and, therefore, lose sight of the 'incomplete' or 'indeterminate' nature of an ideology. You may believe that a particular framework or ideology is the best, but no framework or ideology constitutes a complete or comprehensive vision of reality. Every ideology, every framework, every 'orthodoxy', had room to grow, something we know must be the case if we accept that every human ideology, even those of a religious nature, are ultimately subject to a higher authority. This is something that Williams repeats in *On Christian Theology*: theological discourse has integrity when it sees itself as subject to some higher standard of truth; likewise, orthodoxy remains good and useful when it sees itself as subject to a higher standard of truth and becomes repressive when it denies any standard of truth outside of itself, seeing itself as the only standard of judging either itself or others. Orthodoxy, at its worst, is a way for those in power to 'justify, ground or explain existing relations of power, and so is used, consciously or not, as an instrument by one section of society for determining the destiny and the identity of those without power'.⁵⁷

Yet, orthodoxy is capable of being much more, Williams claims. Orthodoxy is not just *an* attempt to map out the nature of reality, but can provide us with a framework within which we can see the 'deeper connections and patterns', and thus 'actively uncover and restore the working of such patterns'. Yet, orthodoxy, in allowing us to see the inner structure of reality (or some specific part of it), also allows us to see the imperfect or incomplete nature of reality, and thus also allows us to create a 'proposal for remolding it'.⁵⁸ Orthodoxy, when it operates in this manner, serves as 'a tool rather than as an end in itself, a tool for discovery rather than control'.⁵⁹ When orthodoxy operates in this way, it can, in fact, serve as a means of limiting abuses of power, for it holds those in positions of authority responsible to a higher set of standards. As Williams writes,

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 12-13.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

And when it operates in this way, ideology/orthodoxy is not and cannot be static and uncritical. It should be prepared to question and test the working of its own power structures. Unless it becomes rigidified, it should represent a self-limitation of present authority, allowing the possibility of error or distortion in transmission and exercise. It may indicate the nature of appropriate questions, but will not regard itself as a system of final and satisfactory answers.⁶⁰

Williams's thought on orthodoxy can be seen as presupposing a specific view on the philosophical or theological implications of language. As some commentators have pointed out, there are many similarities between Williams's thought and that of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argued that philosophers should live by the motto, 'Don't think, but look!', implying that the primary basis of philosophical considerations is not abstract argumentation but rather an observation of the concrete conditions of life. In his earlier work, most notably in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein stated that there is a specific structure to language which imposes onto language certain limits. One of the limits of language is the fact that there are certain parts of reality, most notably those of a logical, metaphysical, ethical, or aesthetical nature, which cannot be communicated via language. Williams, similarly, asserted that the starting point of discourse is our experience of reality, and the attempt to determine how or to what extent language can communicate or express what we experience.

Parallel to Wittgenstein's notion that there are some truths that language cannot articulate is Williams's view that there is a certain indeterminate or incomplete element to language, since humans are in a perpetual process of learning new things, of making connections between things, and discovering new realities that go beyond our capacity to understand. Whereas Wittgenstein is firm about the fact that language has certain limits to it, and is very clear about what those limits are, and thus asserts that we cannot and should not attempt to say that which is unsayable, in opposition to this was Theodor Adorno, who asserted that the purpose of philosophy is to give expression to that which is not yet expressed or inexpressible. Williams's view on the nature of language is not an attempt to say that which is unsayable, nor to caution against such attempts, but rather to reflect upon the nature of language. More specifically, Williams desires to look at both what language can say, and what goes beyond the ability of language to say, and determine what this tells us about human nature, the nature of reality, and its relationship to God.⁶¹ 'He seeks the meaning of what is not being

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Brian McKinlay, 'Ludwig Wittgenstein in Rowan Williams's Theological Account of Language', in *New Blackfriars* vol. 98, no. 1075 (May 2017), pp. 328-329, 332, 334-335.

said and what cannot be said', one commentator on Williams's work notes.⁶²

Language more generally, like orthodox interpretations of an ideology in specific, are communal in nature. Language is a product of communities, and the meaning we attach to words is derived from language. (This is something which Williams also shares in common with Wittgenstein, who states that language is meaningful only insofar as it expresses some commonly accepted sense of meaning.) The communal nature of language showcases that each individual is finite. The finite nature of the individual leaves us open to the possibility of mystery, of the transcendent, and therefore moments of silence, in which we encounter a reality that goes beyond our ability to fully articulate, are just as meaningful as moments of speech.⁶³

This, of course, does not mean that it is impossible to speak of God. The fact that we can speak of God at all says volumes about both human nature, its place in the cosmos, and its relation to God. Thus, in the introduction to *The Edge of Words*, Williams asserts that 'talking about God is not a marginal eccentricity in human language but something congruent with the more familiar and less noticed oddities of how we speak'.⁶⁴ Certain characteristics of human speech reflect certain elements of God's relationship to man. For example, human language is not limited merely to descriptions of reality as it is. Humans are capable of using the brute facts of our existence, both actual and potential, to create new things, a reality that points towards the fact that human language is not something culturally or biologically determined. This shows how there is a creative intelligence behind human language. Yet, in theological discourse, the fact that our reality is one that can produce such creative intelligences points towards the fact that all of reality is itself a product of 'an unbounded creative intelligence', 'whose own life may be reflected in bounded things'.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, Williams, referencing Meister Eckhart, notes how God is 'the terminus of all acts of naming but also that which is incapable of being named'.⁶⁶ What we see in God is a Reality that serves as the culmination of human language as well as a Reality beyond all language. Human intelligence is thus 'ordered or oriented to the unknown'.⁶⁷

The realities of human language say much about the nature of humanity and of the universe and, by extension, God's larger plan in creation. Yet, language derives its meaning from the larger community,

⁶² Ibid., pp. 334-335.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 330-331, 334.

⁶⁴ Rowan Williams, 'Introduction', in *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2014), p. x.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 62-64.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 185.

and the meanings attached to words can never fully or completely explain reality. We are in a constant state of learning from others, of learning about the world around us, and of making connections between all that we know. Yet, humans were also created for the sake of union with God. Human life is thus oriented towards an end that is, by its nature, inexpressible. And as humans encounter God in their lives, they struggle to express that which they experience. That which they experience in the spiritual life is sometimes inexpressible. Since religions attempt to use language, with all of its philosophical and theological implications, to attempt to discern or define the truth concerning matters relating to God, what can be said about the nature of language creates a very specific view on the nature of orthodoxy: orthodoxy is a framework within which we can interpret, and communicate to others, certain spiritual and moral realities.

Yet, orthodoxy, at its best, while rooted in objective moral realities, never sees itself as a blind obedience to those authorities who promulgated it, nor does it see itself as ever being finished, without any need further development. In a word, Williams's view on the nature of orthodoxy, and of discourse in general, can be summarized by the following sentiment: exploring the truth is rooted in a perpetual dialogical process. This does not mean that we are on a perpetual quest for truth that reaches no definitive conclusions, a journey with no end; rather, every breakthrough we make in the process of discerning the truth rarely if ever precludes the possibility of further breakthroughs, of deepening our understanding, of learning from others. As Williams writes,

And just as we can say that a particular product of material craft is admirable of its kind, even 'finished' in its way, yet never the last possible thing that can be done in that mode, so with language we can say that such and such a formulation, whether scientific [or] poetic, is 'finished', 'beautiful', 'well-formed', we acknowledge that it is not and can't be the last word that will be said. In the case of material work, the object made becomes a datum for the community of craftsmen and women; it suggests new possibilities. So too in language, what is said becomes a datum, allows something different to be said.⁶⁸

One issue that comes to mind is the practical matter of Church structure and, by extension, ecclesiology. Catholics who wish to engage with, or are even sympathetic towards, the philosophical and theological underpinnings of Williams's work are forced to face a problem of how Williams's thought can in any way be congruent with a belief in an infallible magisterium. The infallibility of the Magisterium can be defined in terms of 'exemption or immunity from liability to error or failure'; more specifically, it can refer to the notion that 'the Church of Christ is, by a special Divine assistance, preserved from liability

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 74.

to error in her definitive dogmatic teaching on matters of faith and morals'.⁶⁹ Even in the magisterial teachings of the Church, infallibility is defined in the following terms: '[W]hen the Roman Pontiff speaks *ex cathedra*...he possesses, by the Divine assistance promised to him in Blessed Peter...infallibility...'.⁷⁰ In a word, based on the promises of Christ to His Church, the Church is protected from making binding on the consciences of the faithful anything that contradicts Divine Revelation when it makes use of its authority to speak dogmatically on matters of faith and morals.

Such infallible pronouncements, because they have the guarantee of being always free from error, are 'irreformable'. Wouldn't talk of the irreformability of certain Church teachings and infallible authorities contradict Williams's thought on the nature of orthodoxy as something which does not necessitate obedience to blind authority? Besides the ecclesial and moral considerations resulting from the fact that only God and His Revelation are infallible in an unlimited and unqualified sense (as Bishop Gasser noted in his *relatio* on Vatican I's decree on Papal Infallibility⁷¹), and aside from the canonical considerations on the limits of Papal Infallibility, the infallibility of the Pope or the Church does not mean that all theological discourse has come to an end.

While it is true that the Catholic Church sees submission to a specific authority structure as a necessary precondition for membership in the Church and sees adherence to its infallible decrees as necessary for continually remaining in good standing with the Church⁷², an infallible decree does not end theological discourse in that it does not preclude the possibility of further doctrinal development. Infallible decrees can be subject to further clarification; other theological controversies may arise in the same area. Take, for example, the early ecumenical councils. Even though they were infallible (and, like many of the infallible decrees of the Church, present their infallibility in rather strong terms, pronouncing anathema on anyone who dissents), the decrees of these councils were themselves the result of several hundred years of debate within the Church. And, in spite of the weight of the authority attached to these councils, theological controversies of a Trinitarian or Christological nature still arose, therefore resulting in the need for further ecumenical councils. These councils also did not

⁶⁹ P.J. Tomer, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 'Infallibility' (New York City: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

⁷⁰ First Vatican Council, *Pastor Aeternus*, chapter 4, found in the *Acta Sanctae Sedis*, vol. VI, p. 46.

⁷¹ Bishop Vincent Ferrer Gasser, *The Gift of Infallibility: The Official Relatio of Infallibility of Bishop Vincent Gasser at Vatican Council I*, second edition, trans. by Rev James T. O'Connor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), p. 49.

⁷² Paragraph 892 of the Catechism even describes the assent of the faithful to the infallible decrees of the Church in rather epistemologically strong terms, as 'distinct from' but 'nonetheless an extension of' the more general assent of faith.

touch on every single issue pertaining to the Trinity, or the Incarnation, which thus led to the need for further theological exploration to more precisely define, at least on the level of minutiae, the details of these doctrines. An infallible decree from the Church therefore does not put an end to, but rather helps to continue, theological discourse, by virtue of more precisely defining the framework within which the datum of the Christian faith can be properly understood.

Nonetheless, if one sees any level of credibility to the teachings of Williams on the nature of orthodoxy or the philosophical implications of language, one still finds themselves at a crossroads: if an ecclesial authority sees itself as having authority of an infallible nature (even if such authority is derived from a higher source and applicable only in certain specific circumstances), an authority that can call the curse of God upon those who deviate from orthodoxy, does this not lead to the exaggerated or deformed vision of orthodoxy that Williams opposes? This may not be the case, considering certain interesting parallels between Williams and traditional Catholic thought. Williams states that one way in which orthodoxy can be used as a tool to prevent abuses of power is that orthodoxy holds those in power within a movement or organization accountable to a higher set of principles. Among these principles are those that gave birth to the community in the first place. As Williams notes, orthodoxy becomes something oppressive, destructive, or counter-productive ‘when it loses awareness of the relation to the reality which generates it in the first place’.⁷³ He goes on to say,

It is that awareness that gives ‘orthodoxy’ its critical edge. If we think of tradition as a means of access to the generative, creative events at the source of a community’s life, an ‘orthodox’ tradition is one which keeps a community authentically attentive to and thus – in the sense already suggested – answerable to something above and beyond its own present life: to its source. Thus its present life and experience is always liable to be brought into question by the abiding possibility of retrieving the original points of novelty, distinctiveness and discrimination which brought it to birth. Not that the source event is repeatable: that would be nonsense. The whole meaning of a tradition is that transmission and representation in history has been accepted, the reality of time and change has been grasped. ... It is not just a highly-organized set of memories, but an agenda, a project.⁷⁴

Orthodoxy, in a word, is what allows for ‘a group [to] retain an element of dialogue with the past and of self-critical adaptability’.⁷⁵

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* defines ‘orthodoxy’ as ‘right belief’ or ‘purity of faith’. Though the author of this entry asserts that the reason why we adhere to orthodox beliefs is because of obedience to the

⁷³ Rowan Williams, ‘What is Catholic Orthodoxy’, p. 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

authority of the Church, and not merely because of a subjective feeling of being convicted by the truth, he also cite a series of Biblical verses and Patristic quotes, including Ephesians 4:5-6, 2 Timothy 1:13, and Augustine's *De Vera Religione* chapter V, which imply to the author that one standard for 'right belief' or 'purity of faith' is whether or not it is in line with what is passed on from previous generations.⁷⁶

The infallibility of the Church, including that of the Papacy, includes the authority to bind the consciences of the faithful, and to be the final say in passing on and interpreting Divine Revelation, but this does not indicate that the Church or its leaders have absolute authority over the content of the Christian faith itself. The Pope and the bishops are themselves bound to that which was passed on from previous generations. Their goal is to provide a context within which the deposit of faith is properly understood, not to mold or shape the content of this deposit however they see fit. Orthodoxy of belief binds the Pope and bishops to what is seen as the perpetual tradition of the Church, and thus there is no valid expression of infallibility apart from an adherence to this perpetual tradition.

The Catholic Church, and in a sense most forms of Christianity, also have an acute understanding of the nature of 'orthodoxy' that, like Williams, emphasizes the communal element. One need only to call to mind the Vincentian canon, which depicts the Christian community as something both horizontal and vertical, including all Christians currently living as well as all Christians throughout history. Upon Baptism or conversion, one is accepting – and, for those assuming leadership positions within the Church, they are being entrusted with – the state of the Christian faith as it stands today. The Christian faith, as it is accepted by all the community of the faithful today, has a specific and well-defined meaning, one that has is rooted in what every previous generation of Christians have said, and while the faithful as well as the clergy have a duty to explore all the different levels of meaning to the faith, all of the nuances and challenges in implementing these teachings – which leads to a certain level of critical or eve creative approaches – they are not free to redefine the fundamental meaning of the faith.

Conclusion

As stated in the last paragraph of the previous section, Newman's theory of the development of doctrines, and the epistemological underpinnings thereof, lead to a twofold conclusion: the objective nature of the deposit of faith, and the notion that Church doctrine can develop over

⁷⁶ Charles J. Callan, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 7, 'Orthodoxy' (New York City: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

time. For Newman, the faith is not whatever we want it to be, but is defined by Divine Revelation. Nonetheless, over the course of the 2,000 year history of the Church, how Christians have understood these Divinely revealed principles has become fuller.

Because development is a historical fact, the Christian theologian should approach theological discourse with a sense of humility, with a sense of openness - openness to debate, openness to correction, openness to the possibility that one's theological system does not overlap with or articulate the deposit of faith as fully as one may have previously thought. Yet, when one examines the epistemological underpinnings of both Newman and the Catholic tradition at large, what one is led to believe is that theology is not merely a dueling between several competing theological worldviews. Over the course of theological debate, theological views - whether they be the official doctrinal stance of the Church, or the personal theological opinions of individual believers, theologians, or churchmen - develop. Yet, for Newman, development has the nature of *growing into itself*, a *becoming more complete*, which implies a standard outside of the idea itself in light of which we compare such development. Newman is clear on this point when he emphasizes the distinction between development and corruption. The Scholastics and manualists promoted a similar view by proposing a twofold principle of theological discourse, one subjective, the other objective. The Magisterium of the Church, even shortly after the time of Newman, accepted a similar view. In reciting the *Oath against Modernism*, one would say: 'I sincerely hold that the doctrine of faith was handed down to us from the Apostles through the orthodox fathers in exactly the same meaning and always in the same purport. Therefore I entirely reject the heretical misrepresentation that dogmas evolve and change from one meaning to another different from the one which the Church held previously'. This same oath also condemns the view that 'in place of the deposit of faith...there is but a philosophical figment or product of human conscience that has gradually been developed by human effort and will continue to develop indefinitely'.⁷⁷

In both the *Oath against Modernism* and the writings of Newman, what is affirmed is the reality that there is a core to the Christian faith which is perpetual, existing independently of human perception, and what grows or changes is not the deposit of faith itself but our understanding or articulation thereof. The Second Vatican Council provides one example in contemporary times of this mindset being upheld by the Magisterium: 'This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is growth in the

⁷⁷ The Oath against Modernism was first put forward in Pope Pius X's *motu proprio Sacrorum Antistitum* of September 1, 1910, found in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. II, p. 670.

understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down'.

From the perspective of the official decrees of the Catholic Magisterium, as well as the general trends found among Catholic theologians, one can acknowledge the finite and incomplete nature of one's theological systems and, on account of this, have an openness to dialogue, correction, and growth (in other words, maintain integrity as defined by Williams). One can do so without falling into relativism by always calling to mind the following: 1) there is a distinction between one's personal theological opinions and the deposit of faith revealed by God; 2) because there is a distinction between the two, it is possible for one's theological opinions to develop, that is, to conform oneself, to greater degrees, with an objective, external standard of reality; and 3) for one's theological system to develop is for it to be conformed, to ever greater degrees, to an objective standard of truth.

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