

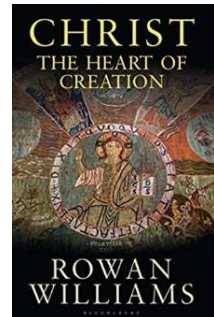
From Christ the Heart of Creation by Rowan Williams

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What I am trying to do in this book is to bring to light one aspect – a central and crucial aspect, I would argue – of how the Church’s language about Jesus works: how it clarifies other areas of what Christians say and organizes other doctrines around itself. I believe that if we have a little more clarity about how this language works we may have a little more understanding of why it is credible. **If people take seriously doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, it is not primarily because they can treat them as if they were tidy conclusions to an argument, deductions from readily available evidence, but because – however obscurely they are grasped, however challenging the detail – they see that the language of doctrine holds together a set of intractably complex questions in a way that offers a coherent context for human living. They make sense, not first as an explanation of things but as a credible environment for action and imagination, a credible means of connecting narratives, practices, codes of behavior; they offer a world to live in. The reasons that might make us decide actually to live in that world, to inhabit, not just vaguely entertain, a scheme of language and imagery like the classical theologies of Christ’s nature, will be as various as the histories of the people who make such a decision. Reflecting on the language of doctrine will not in itself do the job of persuading anyone to believe; what it may do is to give more depth and substance to imagining what it is like to believe and what new connections or possibilities are opened up by speaking and imagining like this.** So what is the aspect of this doctrinal tradition that I am inviting readers to think about here? This book argues that a very great deal of what has been said about Jesus across the centuries is shaped by a very particular concern, which has to do with how we think about the relation between God and what God has made. If people are driven to speak about Jesus as if divine freedom were fully at work in him, if they begin to speak about him as they speak about God, they are posing a serious intellectual challenge to themselves. If God is truly the source, the ground and the context of every limited, finite state of affairs, if God is the action or agency that makes everything else active, then God cannot be spoken of as one item in a list of the forces active in the world. God’s action cannot be added to the action of some other agent in order to make a more effective force. And this also means that God’s action is never in competition with any particular activity inside the universe. How on earth, then, do we speak intelligibly about an individual bit of the universe – the human being called Jesus – as one in whom God is fully active, fully ‘embodied’ – incarnate, in the technical language of the Church? Is he an

incomplete human being into whom God has entered to become a component part, replacing some aspect of his human nature? Is he a human individual upon whom God has such an unparalleled influence that he becomes a sort of channel for communicating divine truth or manifesting divine perfection? The trouble with both of these models is that they presuppose that God is after all another item inside the universe: God can replace a missing bit of human nature and work as if divine action could supply a gap in human action. Or else, God is not capable of acting in but only on or through Jesus because where there is a complete human being, God can only act on it from outside. Early Christian thought wrestled at enormous length with versions of those two models and judged them inadequate: by the fifth Christian century, it was clear that speaking about Jesus in a way adequate to his role in Christian thinking and Christian worship must involve a different sort of model, in which the complete and unequivocal presence of divine action and human action inseparably united with one another was affirmed in a way that did not diminish the true and active presence of either and did not see them as related 'side by side', one of them influencing the other from outside. And the point of this for the wider task of theology is that constructing this model was possible only on the strict assumption that divine and created action could never stand alongside each other as rivals (so that the more there is of one, the less there would be of the other). God makes the world to be itself, to have an integrity and completeness and goodness that is – by God's gift – its own. At the same time, God makes the world to be open to a relation with God's own infinite life that can enlarge and transfigure the created order without destroying it. The model developed in Christology is the model that clarifies all we say about God's relation with the world, the relation between infinite and finite, Creator and creation. The fullness and flourishing of creation is not something that has to be won at the Creator's expense; the outpouring of God's life into the world to fulfil the world's potential for joy and reconciliation does not entail an amputation of the full reality of the world's life. And all this is summed up in our belief in a Christ who is uninterruptedly living a creaturely, finite life on earth and at the same time living out of the depths of divine life and uninterruptedly enjoying the relation that eternally subsists between the divine Source or Father and the divine Word or Son. It is in this sense that we can rightly speak of Jesus as the heart of creation, the one on whom all the patterns of finite existence converge to find their meaning. While the relation between Jesus and the eternal divine Word – the 'hypostatic union', which is an uninterrupted continuity of distinct, self-identifying, active life between the Word and Jesus – is unique, it can only be understood in connection to a general conception, a metaphysical model, of how the finite and the infinite relate to one another. And as the implications of what is said about Jesus become clearer and richer with the development of Christian discourse, this sense of what is involved in speaking of finite and infinite is in turn clarified and enriched. This book is an attempt to trace something of this mutual illumination that connects Christology with the doctrine of creation. Elements in the traditional doctrinal picture that seem abstruse or over-complicated can make sense if understood in the light of a concern to leave no ambiguity at all about the non-competitive relation of Creator and creation. And – as later chapters in the book

argue – clarity about this can play a vital role in clarifying certain themes in ethics and politics for the Christian. When we hear about the ‘non-duality’ of God and the world, we are probably inclined to think of textbook caricatures of Hindu or Buddhist cosmologies; but the Christological model requires us to think of non-duality in its proper sense: **God and the world are not two things to be added together. Neither are they two things that are ‘really’ one thing. They exist in an asymmetrical relation in which one depends wholly on the other, yet is fully itself, made to be and to act according to its own logic and structure. One writer who does not receive anything like an adequate treatment in this book, but who contributes some uniquely lucid insights on this, is the great fifteenth-century genius, Nicholas of Cusa, whose characterization of God as non aliud – ‘not another thing’ – in relation to the world expresses the heart of this point (he continues to influence contemporary theology in all sorts of ways, not least through the enthusiasm with which that phrase was taken up by the Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the most independent and creative Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century).** This non aliud principle, or what I have called – in what I know is a rather awkward phrase – ‘non-dual non-identity’, is at the heart of the relation between the infinite and the finite. And when this is clear, a number of recurrent tangles in Christian thought have some hope of being straightened out.