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**Grace, Disruption and Stability:  
The Christian Life in the Theologies of  
Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan**

by

**Benjamin C. Coleman**

**Submitted for the Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy**

**at the**

**University of Durham  
Department of Theology and Religion**

**2021**

*Grace, Disruption and Stability:  
The Christian Life in the Theologies of  
Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan*

Benjamin C. Coleman

Abstract

This thesis explores the character of the Christian life in the writings of the contemporary Anglican theologians Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan. I display a set of theological contrasts that arise from their respective accounts of creation and Christology, which are amplified in their understandings of the affective shape of the Christian life. I argue that the most constructive response to these differences is not to be found at the level of theological synthesis. Indeed, I argue for a certain kind of theological *irresolution* in response to these themes. When taken together, these thinkers' works display a set of dissonant, yet equally necessary aspects of the Christian vision which are fruitful for wise Christian living.

The dominant motif of Williams' writings is the *disruptive* character of God's transforming work in human lives, as each person grows into conformity with the crucified and risen Christ. In his vision, the Christian life involves a journey of being drawn by the Spirit into the endless abundance of God. It is a life marked by continual repentance and renewal, and learning to see Christ in new ways at the centre of all things. O'Donovan's account of the Christian gospel focusses on the centrality of creation as a *stable* order, assured and restored through Christ's resurrection. The Christian life entails seeking and joyously finding oneself within this good order of God's making and redeeming. The gospel offers an assured place to survey one's life, and a stable foundation from which to live well. I argue that these thinker's works, when taken together, can nourish an account of Christian wisdom and discernment which brings to the foreground, in different ways and at different times, the disruptive and stabilising aspects of the Christian gospel, for the sake of faithful and flourishing Christian living.

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## **Abbreviations**

Complete citations and a more comprehensive list of each thinker's works may be found in the Bibliography.

### **Works by Oliver O'Donovan**

<i>SLA</i>	<i>The Problem of Self-Love in Augustine</i>
<i>RMO</i>	<i>Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics</i>
<i>DN</i>	<i>The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology</i>
<i>WJ</i>	<i>The Ways of Judgement</i>
<i>WSB</i>	<i>The Word in Small Boats: Sermons from Oxford</i> , Edited by Andy Draycott
<i>CWB</i>	<i>A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy</i>
<i>TNA</i>	<i>On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity</i>
<i>SWT</i>	<i>Self, World and Time: Ethics as Theology, Vol. 1</i>
<i>FS</i>	<i>Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology, Vol. 2</i>
<i>ER</i>	<i>Entering into Rest: Ethics as Theology, Vol. 3</i>

### **Works by Rowan Williams**

<i>WK</i>	<i>The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross</i>
<i>OtJ</i>	<i>Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses</i>
<i>OCT</i>	<i>On Christian Theology</i>
<i>Res</i>	<i>Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel</i>
<i>GN</i>	<i>Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love</i>
<i>WA</i>	<i>Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology</i> ,
<i>TT</i>	<i>Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief</i>
<i>FPS</i>	<i>Faith in the Public Square</i>

<i>EW</i>	<i>The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language</i>
<i>OA</i>	<i>On Augustine</i>
<i>CHC</i>	<i>Christ The Heart of Creation</i>

## **Statement of Copyright**

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## Introduction

The subjects of this thesis are the two contemporary Anglican theologians Rowan Williams (1950–) and Oliver O'Donovan (1945–). These theologians each offer compelling, coherent and comprehensive, though also markedly different accounts of the Christian theological vision. In this thesis, I trace the differences of these visions in doctrinal terms. I argue that the most constructive way of understanding the differences between these two thinkers is not to be found on the level of their *doctrinal* claims, but rather, in contrasting impressions of how such doctrinal landscapes can and should be *inhabited* at the level of Christian living. As such, I shall argue for a certain kind of theological *irresolution*. The rich tensions and contrasts in these thinkers' work should not lead us to imagine that their insights for Christian wisdom can be reduced to harmonization at the level of proposition or decisive conceptual formulation. Instead, letting the dissonances and tensions raised through these thinker's works resonate *together* can nourish a constructive account of wise and faithful Christian living. Guided by both thinkers, this account is one that attends to the diverse and varied character of God's ways amidst the complexities and particularities of changing human context, and which seeks to draw on the fullness of the Christian gospel (including markedly different articulations of that gospel) to bear upon the task of Christian living.

Though Williams' and O'Donovan's writings are characterised by different tenors and approaches, they both share a common focus on the major doctrinal contours of the Christian faith. Their respective accounts of the Christian gospel cover a common set of theological loci, with creation and Christology playing a similarly central role in each thinker's work. However, their treatments of these themes are noticeably distinctive. The central contrast of this thesis concerns the difference between, on the one hand, O'Donovan's theological vision which emphasises human inhabitation of the fixed and stable work of God's redeemed creation – a conformity which produces a renewed *stability* and *purposiveness* in human living; and, on the other hand – Williams' vision of the Christian faith as an unceasingly provisional and *disruptive* engagement with a God whose presence in history transforms human beings in interruptive and purgative ways. This essay will trace this central contrast through the different ways in which O'Donovan and Williams treat the themes of creation and Christology, and will examine how these themes structure O'Donovan's and Williams' respective understandings of the lived shape of the Christian faith.

O'Donovan's writings point to a vision of the Christian life characterised by *stability* – a life that finds its foundation and direction in God's works of creation and salvation, and

which looks to the Christian gospel as an assuring and grounding vision to guide the task of living amidst the disruptions of sin, death and time. The Christian life involves seeking and finding our place within the given order of God's good world as our lives and understandings are drawn into truthful alignment with the reality of all that God has done – of which creation is the anchor. Creation is emphasised in O'Donovan's writings as a fixed and a stable order. The resources required for one to live well and act wisely are found in the goodness of creation, through which God has given an order to structure human living towards its flourishing end in God. The human self that is formed in response to God's work is one assured of its stable setting in God's world. Created order is accentuated and renewed in Christ's death and resurrection. In Christ, human participation in creation is restored, and through Christ's resurrection the moral capabilities of human beings are assured and remade for the work of faithful, hopeful and loving living. The trajectory of faith, hope and love is the shape of a life lived in response to all God has done. This life finds its foundation and orientation through loving conformity with the good world of God's making and redeeming.

In contrast, Williams' vision of the Christian life insists that human engagement with the truth of God's works to create and redeem the world produces an unceasingly *disruptive*, and endlessly provisional quality to the task of human living. Human lives find their coherence in Jesus Christ, who is the heart of creation. And yet, the human vision of Christ is constantly unfinished, and liable to be refreshed and renewed by Christ's lively risen presence. This means that the order to which human lives are being conformed to by God is a shape which is still unfolding in time. The order which makes sense of our lives is one to which we do not have full access; it can only be grasped provisionally through the labour of learning and growing. God's active presence in revelation and salvation calls us out of disorder not into a stable or fixed ordering of our lives, but into an ongoing discovery of God's infinite and complex abundance. Abundance is likewise a characteristic of creation, meaning that God creates a world that is marked by change, contingency and endless discovery. Creaturely life, therefore, takes an inherently historical and temporal form: human life is marked by finitude, embodiment, dynamism and provisionality. Christ's person and work show that the historical and finite character of creation can display and embody God's abundance within this creaturely and historical form. Human response to God's work of creation and salvation means that our lives are beckoned into a journey of discovery, as our lives remain perpetually open to the disruptive and surprising work of God to heal us, transform us, and make us whole.

One purpose of this thesis is to display the integrity of each thinker's theological vision, showing the depth of connection between their accounts of Christian doctrine and the Christian life. In this respect, one contribution of my thesis is a deep reading of these two significant and influential voices in contemporary British Anglicanism, whose voices and patterns of thinking are audible in several debates within the Church of England today. However, the more particular task I will pursue is to let O'Donovan and Williams' ask generative questions of each other, and to draw these two rich thinker's visions into creative contrast with each other. My thesis coalesces particularly around their respective writings on Christology, creation and the Christian life – though other doctrinal themes could equally have earned a place here. By reading these two thinkers' side-by-side, I will draw out elements of each thinker's writings – showing their uniqueness, but also developing overlapping areas for further conversation which their work generates.

As I draw these two thinkers' works into creative dialogue with the other, I will pay particular attention to the doctrinal substance of their works, but also the visions of individual and corporate Christian living which they offer. I take seriously the commitment of both thinkers to do theology as one ongoing aspect of the Church's life, and their respective convictions that theology should serve, nurture and deepen the individual and corporate pursuit of faithfulness to the risen Christ. My ultimate purpose in engaging with Williams' and O'Donovan's works is not only to examine their doctrinal contributions, but to engage especially with their respective understandings of how a Christian life comes to imaginatively and affectively *inhabit* the landscape of Christian belief painted by their doctrinal theologies. The contrasts that I trace through this thesis – of a vision focussed more on human response to the *disruptive* and *surprising* quality of grace (Williams), and another based more on the *stabilising* and *orienting* quality of grace (O'Donovan) – are not ones that I will seek to resolve primarily on a doctrinal level. Indeed, my argument for what to do with these richly contrasting visions will be for a certain kind of *irresolution* at the level of conceptual theological reflection. This approach will not lead to resolution in terms of proposition or conceptual formulation: I will not argue for a straightforward preference for either thinker's vision, nor will I attempt to construct my own systematic resolution. Rather, I will argue that the imaginative resources provided by O'Donovan's and Williams' work *together* can nourish the Christian pursuit of wisdom – of discerning the diversity of God's ways, amidst the particularity of changing human contexts, in ways which may require different aspects of the gospel to bear upon human living.

I conclude this thesis by arguing that engagement with these kinds of theological contrasts can be a constructive aspect of pursuing Christian wisdom through maintaining engagement with a set of dissonant, though equally necessary, aspects of the Christian faith. At different times, and in different ways, Christian discernment must bring different aspects of the Christian vision to bear upon the variety and intricacies of life: at times, the gospel will bring disruption, challenge, and painful transformation; and, at other times, it will bring stability, comfort, peace and consolation. In adjudicating between the respective strengths and limits of each thinker's vision, I do so in terms of these *affective* aspects of their visions. The Christian life is neither summed up *wholly* in resurrection joy, nor in crucicentric tribulation. Both are needed, in different ways and at different times, and there is no easy resolution available between the two. The contrasts displayed by Williams' and O'Donovan's work can help cultivate a form of practical wisdom that seeks at different times and in different ways to bring to the fore the more disruptive or stabilising aspects of Christian belief. The emphases of each are important for the task of Christian living. The particular contexts in which Christian faith is practiced will affect and accentuate our telling of the Christian gospel. Likewise, what Christian wisdom and obedience requires will also look different in changing contexts. The contrasts between Williams and O'Donovan shows the richness of the Christian vision to illumine and guide the task of living in a variety of settings, and also different patterns of the interplay between the felt and professed shape of Christian faith. My arguments for complexity and irresolution in response to the themes raised by O'Donovan's and Williams' work are not intended as a statement of theological surrender. Rather, my argument, in response to these thinkers, seeks to articulate an understanding of Christian faithfulness which recognises the complexity of God's unfolding purposes, and the challenge of living in conformity with those purposes amidst the particularity of human living.

## 1. Background to the Argument

Before offering a broader theological context for this thesis, and a summary of its approach, it is worth pausing to articulate a brief answer to the question of why Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan are worthwhile subjects for a thesis-length study at all. Why are these thinkers worth studying not just as individual thinkers, but also for the purpose of reading them together alongside each other?

There were several motivating reasons for this approach. Firstly, I was interested in Williams and O'Donovan because of their significance in contemporary British Anglican theology. I wanted this thesis to be a part of a distinctively Anglican conversation in theology — one that was nourished by Anglican sources, and one that was also mindful of the peculiar historical, ethical, missional, and theological concerns that shape the contemporary Church of England's life. Williams and O'Donovan each represent a distinctive tradition in contemporary Anglicanism — O'Donovan is an important theological representative of an evangelical Protestant expression of Anglicanism, whilst Williams represents a liberal and Anglo-Catholic Anglicanism. Amidst the various elements of their constructive writings, sometimes in the background and sometimes more obviously in the foreground, their works are part of a conversation about the theological character of Anglicanism. They are both interested in Anglicanism's relation to the universal and historical church, and the ongoing work of discerning obedience to Christ within the Anglican way. A study of Williams' and O'Donovan's theology is therefore fruitful, firstly, because their work intellectually represents ongoing traditions of lived Christian practice, and their writings are rich and constructive for nourishing and guiding individual and corporate Christian living.

However, one might ask why are Williams and O'Donovan in particular worthy studying together from the plethora of contemporary Anglican theological voices? The uniqueness of Williams and O'Donovan amidst the richness of contemporary Anglican theology are their shared interest in a set of important theological themes, whilst also a distinctiveness in how they explored such themes. The themes in their works that I bring to the fore in this thesis — learning and growth, creation, Christology, soteriology and the Christian life — are ones shared by both thinkers, and yet handled in fruitfully contrasting ways. They are not and have not been the only theological voices in the Church of England to explore such themes. One might point to a whole wider array of thinkers who have shown the seriousness of Anglicanism as an intellectual tradition: Sarah Coakley, John Webster, Nigel Biggar, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, David Ford, Daniel Hardy and Anthony Thiselton to name but a few of the contemporaries of Williams and O'Donovan. Each of these are worthy of study in their own right and have contributed to the theological vibrancy of Anglicanism in different ways. The particular fruitfulness of reading O'Donovan and Williams alongside one another, I have found, is due to the common gravitational pulls of their thought — especially towards the doctrines of creation, Christology and the resurrection of Christ — but also the different ways in which they trace and inhabit these common contours of Christian belief.



The third reason for researching Williams' and O'Donovan's work, closely aligned with this previous point, is that their work enabled me to explore a very particular theological contrast that can be seen in a wider theological field of inquiry, but which is particularly rich and concentrated when drawing on their works together. I will explore this contrast more fully later in this section. But the heart of this contrast is how the character of soteriology shapes and textures the wider sense of how a Christian life is to be lived. I am interested in how salvation is characterised in ways that emphasise disruption and ways that emphasise stability, and the manner in which these differing accounts of salvation shape Christian living in ways that are grounded in disruption or oriented towards stability. Williams' and O'Donovan's visions provide a rich exploration of precisely this contrast. Williams' work is more concerned with the disruptive, novel and radically transformative character of salvation, and his account of the Christian life gravitates frequently back to this instinct. Whereas O'Donovan's treats salvation in more stabilising and straightforwardly continuous terms, especially in how he relates redemption to creation. His account of the Christian life, which prizes the cultivation of capable and responsible human agency, is closely bound up with this foundational theological tendency towards stability. The choice of Williams' and O'Donovan's work as the subject of this thesis was due to the rich balance of similarity and difference in their visions, and the way in which their works provided a manageable and rich way to explore a very particular set of theological themes.

\*

Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan occupy significant and contrasting places in contemporary Anglican theology. The works of each thinker are often lauded for their richness, depth, and occasionally, also their difficulty.<sup>1</sup> Whilst this thesis will focus on a very specific set of doctrinal themes and contrasts in their writings, there are several other

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<sup>1</sup> The few moments in which Williams and O'Donovan have published appreciations of the other's work offer, I think, helpful insights and guides to their respective intellectual tenors. In one instant, Williams describes O'Donovan as a 'difficult, enriching writer, the stimulus of whose work is exception for all those who have engaged with it.' Williams also characterises O'Donovan's vision as a sharp contrast to the 'guerrilla raids' that can characterise other contemporary political theologians and social ethicists. See Williams, 'Foreword' in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds.), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), vii-viii. Others have characterised Williams' writings similarly in terms of their 'difficulty of style, of range, of reference, of argument.' Higton, *Difficult Gospel* (London: SCM, 2004), 5. But this difficulty which pervades his writings only serves to enhance his reputation as 'one of the most subtle and complex Christian intellectuals of our time.' Ben Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), x.

important contrasts between these two thinkers that are worth noting for the sake of intellectual context and introduction.

The first contrast that could be drawn between these two figures is that of the confessional commitments underpinning their visions. Though both are Anglican, they represent differing expressions of that tradition. Indeed, their intellectual individuality also makes it difficult to neatly typify them even within their respective evangelical (O'Donovan) and Anglo-Catholic (Williams) ecclesial streams where they are usually located. O'Donovan is the more obviously evangelical and Protestant thinker, holding a distinctively Reformed set of instincts, though with many Catholic (and specifically Augustinian) inflections.<sup>2</sup> Williams' theological influences are notably eclectic in ways that make it difficult to locate his thinking and churchmanship in straightforward and simple terms. His churchmanship is broad though he has retained clear tethers to a socially radical and theologically orthodox vision of Anglo-Catholicism. But Williams' influences draw on a dizzying variety of a whole range of Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, as well as Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Protestant traditions.<sup>3</sup>

The second important contrast is each thinker's common indebtedness to – though also their contrasting interpretations of – the theology of St Augustine. Each takes his orientation from a different aspect of Augustine's work. O'Donovan understands the reality and givenness of creation as the anchor of love's ordering in Augustine's writings; and for Williams, Augustine's writings generate a theological vision which emphasises the opacity of human self-understanding, the provisionality of all human thinking, and the endlessly abundant work of God mediated through the life of signs.<sup>4</sup> Their respective interpretations of

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<sup>2</sup> In one of the few moments of explicit engagement with O'Donovan's work, Williams describes the former's writings as 'one of the most eloquent and compelling restatements in the modern age of a classical Reformed divinity [...] imbued with the insights of the patristic age as well as the result of painstaking exegesis' Williams, 'Foreword,' in *Authority of the Gospel*, vii. O'Donovan's work is not Reformed in the stereotypically Calvinist sense (or, at in least not in comparison with pejorative and limited understandings of that term). His Reformed instincts are seen less in terms of a preoccupation with predestination, but retain typically Reformed understandings of justification by faith, the relation of law and gospel, political theology, and Scripture's character and authority. His Anglican and Augustinian instincts temper these Reformed instincts such that his work takes on a unique tenor in relation to other streams of contemporary Reformed theology.

<sup>3</sup> Williams' doctoral work was on the theology of the Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky. For Williams' Anglo-Catholic roots, see his contributions in Kenneth Leech and Rowan Williams (ed.), *Essays Catholic and Radical: A Jubilee Group Symposium for the 150th Anniversary of the Beginning of the Oxford Movement 1833-1983*. His depth of engagement with the Lutheran tradition are seen especially in *The Wound of Knowledge*, and *Christ at the Heart of Creation*. His understanding of a Christian life open to the disruptive work of God finds its bearing as much from contemplative Carmelite traditions, as from Luther's theology of the cross.

<sup>4</sup> For O'Donovan's work on Augustine see O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in Augustine* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2006), and 'Usus and Fruitio in Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana I*,' *The Journal of Theological*

Augustine are as much a point of divergence as they are convergence. They share a commitment to interpreting Augustine's vision, whilst reaching very different conclusions about the shape of that vision.

Thirdly, Williams and O'Donovan, whilst concerned with a similar set of themes, are very different kinds of theologians in how they approach the theological task. O'Donovan is primarily a moral theologian concerned with the question of how the Christian gospel can inform and direct the work of practical reason, of responsible action, and wise deliberation.<sup>5</sup> Williams is a theologian concerned especially with the history of Christian spirituality, though he also launches significant forays into discussions of Christian doctrine, church history, ethics, art and culture.<sup>6</sup> One shared concern in both thinkers' works is that of political theology, and their distinctive contributions to this field reflect their wider differences as thinkers. Nevertheless, their political engagements likewise share an Anglican and Augustinian character.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, we could have approached Williams and O'Donovan as representative figures of two major positions in contemporary Anglican debates surrounding gender and sexuality. As thinkers and churchmen, they have shaped the substance of these debates.<sup>8</sup>

Many more contrasts between these thinkers could be drawn. The purpose of this discussion is to labour the point that there were numerous other theses that could have been

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*Studies* 33:2, October 1982, 361–397. For Williams' engagements with Augustine see his collected volume *On Augustine*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> O'Donovan often summarises his central concern with a question, articulated in slightly different ways throughout his corpus: 'how are we to *think* about how to act?' This, O'Donovan argues, is the central task of deliberation and the work of practical reason. See Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan 'Political Theology,' in Rupert Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, (London: DLT, 2005), 250. O'Donovan expands on this in a response to his work when he describes himself as 'a *practical* theologian, a *moral* theologian, a *political* theologian' and a '*pastoral* theologian' with a 'deliberative rather than theoretical goal.' O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading: A Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54:1, February 2001, 127–128.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donovan characterised Williams' theological work (before Williams' enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury) as that of a 'spiritual theologian' engaged equally with patristic themes as with the place of 'faith in the modern world.' See O'Donovan, 'Rowan Williams,' *Pro Ecclesia* 12:1, February 2003, 5–14, 6. One need only consider his early work on Arius, his history of Christian spirituality, his essayed engagements with doctrine, political theology, his public engagements as Archbishop on issues ranging from legal philosophy to the climate crisis, and multiculturalism in the United Kingdom, to recognise the dizzying breadth of themes that Williams work engages with.

<sup>7</sup> See especially their respective essays on Book XIX of Augustine's *Civitas Dei*. Williams 'Politics and the Soul: Reading the *City of God*,' in *On Augustine*, 107–130; and O'Donovan 'The Political Thought of *City of God* 19' in *Ways of Judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 48–72.

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller account of Williams' archepiscopacy, focussing especially on the debates surrounding sexuality, see Shortt, *Rowan's Rule* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2014). For Williams' theological contributions to this debate see 'The Body's Grace' in Eugene F. Rogers (ed.), *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 309–321. For O'Donovan's relevant writings on these themes see, *Marriage and Permanence* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1982); *Transsexualism and Christian Marriage* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1982); *A Conversation Waiting to Begin: The Churches and the Gay Controversy* (London: SCM, 2009).

written, which could have taken any other number of approaches to the themes raised in their work. My thesis will remain alert to these wider possibilities, though will walk a very particular path in engaging with their theological visions. I will treat both O'Donovan and Williams primarily as *doctrinal* thinkers – concerned with the texture and logic of Christian belief – and also *pastoral* thinkers who are interested in how the Christian faith shapes and directs flourishing human living. We turn now to consider some of the wider doctrinal contexts that have informed my engagement with Williams and O'Donovan, and then turn to a fuller summary of this essay's argument.

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Before approaching a more developed articulation of my argument at the end of this introduction, I wish to cast a more lateral gaze towards some of the themes and questions which motivated my research on Williams and O'Donovan. The present thesis did not begin as a piece of research on these thinkers. Initially, my research was generated by a wider set of questions about the significance of *disruption* and *stability* as soteriological and eschatological themes in modern theology, and how these themes shaped a whole wider set of conversations.<sup>9</sup> I was interested in the different ways in which the doctrine of redemption was articulated in ways that variedly stressed the *continuity* and *discontinuity* of redemption in relation to the work of creation. I was also interested in how the relationships of these two doctrines (creation and redemption) textured a whole other set of themes, especially in relation to divine action, and especially in relation to the Christian life. In this section, I explore these broader questions which led me to focus on Williams and O'Donovan. These themes are, as I will show, germane to the interests of their respective writings, and give a sense of the motivation that directed my treatments of O'Donovan and Williams. In the rest of this section, I offer a sketch of a wider theological landscape shaped by different aspects of continuity and discontinuity, and provisionally indicate where Williams and O'Donovan might be located within that landscape.

So, firstly, we begin with different debates about the nature of creation and redemption. One way of understanding the range of views in contemporary theology about

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<sup>9</sup> The experience of engaging with an array of Protestant theologies whilst studying at the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham – from Martin Luther and John Calvin, through to Karl Barth and recent apocalyptic readings of Paul – and doing so alongside engagement with a broad set of historical and contemporary Roman Catholic theology, was especially helpful for bringing the interplay of disruption and stability in the Christian life into view.

how creation and redemption relate is to present them across a spectrum of greater continuity or discontinuity.<sup>10</sup> At one end of the spectrum, we find redemption articulated in ways that stress the *continuity* of God's saving work in relation to God's purposes in creation. Such accounts of the redemption wrought in Christ tend to understand salvation as a *fulfilment* of God's purposes as they appear in creation, and can often stress the continuity of creation and redemption as mediated through the history of Israel. Such theologies can, to greater and lesser degrees, also understand the goodness and intelligibility of creation as something accessible to human perception and participation, despite the presence of sin and death.<sup>11</sup> It is the goodness of creation which is further restored, renewed and revealed in the person and work of Christ. In other words, redemption is strongly *congruous* with the pattern and character of God's prior workings through Israel and creation.<sup>12</sup> It is *sin* which introduces discontinuity into the life of creation, and it is through Christ's saving work that creation can become all that it was created to be. These instincts have strong grounding in certain Patristic thinkers whose work emphasises the continuity of creation and redemption.<sup>13</sup> The continuity of creation to redemption is likewise exemplified in Catholic accounts of grace and nature, which understand nature as a *subset* of grace, rather than grace as a radically *disjunctive* relation to nature.<sup>14</sup> The question of creation's continuity to redemption is frequently

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<sup>10</sup> These sketches of different theological ways of relating redemption to creation are, I am aware, painted with a broad brush, and do not convey the full nuance and depth of every theologian who explores these themes. Nevertheless, I believe that this typology of different positions on how to relate these two doctrines does have a reasonable purchase in describing a broad set of differences contained in western Protestantism (including Lutheran and Reformed theologies) and certain strands of Roman Catholicism.

<sup>11</sup> The continuity between creation and redemption is essential to St Thomas' Trinitarian vision of theology, and his understanding of grace's relation to nature. Likewise, his insistence that nature is accessible to human reason, whilst perfected in revelation in, likewise presumes a certain congruity between creation and redemption. See *Summa Theologiae* 1q1a1-a8, and Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), 7-8, 204.

<sup>12</sup> The interplay of creation and salvation is likewise a central theme of contemporary conversations about Pauline theology. N. T. Wright's understanding of St Paul's theological vision is strongly aligned with Oliver O'Donovan's, and stresses the gospel as a *fulfilment* of creation. Apocalyptic readings of Paul have tended to stress the *discontinuity* between salvation and creation. For a helpful exploration of these themes as they relate to New Testament studies, see Edwin Chr. Van Driel, 'Climax of the Covenant vs Apocalyptic Invasion: A Theological Analysis of a Contemporary Debate in Pauline Exegesis,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17:1, 2015, 6-25.

<sup>13</sup> Athanasius and Irenaeus are particularly representative of this instinct. The continuity of creation and redemption, and the *wholeness* of these acts are understood as two works with a unifying purpose, and both works of the same eternal Word. See, for example, M. C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008); and Paul M. Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (Oxford: OUP, 2012). Maximus the Confessor's account of the incarnation is one that likewise expresses the deep continuities of God's salvific work in Christ with God's original purpose for creatures. See Paul Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> The language of subset and disjunction comes from Edward Oakes' *A Theology of Grace in Six Controversies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 7. In more recent Catholic theology, we might look to Hans Urs von Balthasar's work and its indebtedness to many of Irenaeus' instincts. Von Balthasar understands redemption as

explored in contemporary Reformed theology through the language of *creation* and *covenant*.<sup>15</sup>

Many of these emphases find an important articulation in contemporary theology through the work of Oliver O'Donovan. As I have already indicated, for O'Donovan, Christ's death and resurrection *vindicate* the original goodness of creation, *restore* creation in the face of sin and death's distortive power, and *renew* creation for eternal life with God. His contributions in Christian ethics have sought to explore the moral significance of creation and redemption's *unity* in Christ, and the dangers of losing a sense of this unity seen in secular historicist and voluntaristic intellectual trends. It is the familiarity and stability of created order which grounds and directs the moral life. As human living, perceiving and loving conforms to the reality of creation's ordering – as it is redeemed in Christ – human lives are given the coherent orientation through which to flourish.

At the other end of the spectrum is a way of understanding redemption that stresses more pointedly the constructive *discontinuity* of God's saving work in relation to creation. Typically, such theologies stress that the distorting power of sin and death (or the power of the Law in Lutheran theologies of creation) have rendered creation inaccessible to human perception and participation apart from saving faith in Christ. The shape of salvation in Christ therefore takes on a sharply *disruptive* aspect – redemption can be received only through the powerful work of the sinner's justification in Christ. Even within this way of understanding redemption and creation, there are a wide variety of theologies that view creation and redemption in tension to greater or lesser degrees. Certain Lutheran theologies, whilst

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the unfolding drama of salvation which begins with creation. Creation and redemption are understood in such a way that emphasises Christ's saving work as a *fulfilment* of all that God started in creation and continued in the life of Israel. See especially *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume 2* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 146-147.

<sup>15</sup> Recent interpretation of John Calvin's work has sought to emphasise the integrity of the doctrine of creation alongside redemption, paying particular attention to the early chapters of his *Institutes of Christian Religion* as they converse with earlier Augustinian traditions. See Henk van den Belt (ed.), *Restoration through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013). The maintenance of creation's integrity – its accessibility, its intelligible ordering and its significance for Christian ethical and political life – is likewise a key conviction of modern Dutch-Reformed theology. For a helpful summary of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd's contributions, see Jeremy Begbie, 'Creation, Christ and Culture in Dutch Neo-Calvinism,' in Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (eds.), *Christ in Our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 113-132. The figure of Karl Barth is altogether more difficult to locate in these debates, with interpreters tending to stress the priority of covenant over creation, but with other recent interpreters recovering the notes of continuity between the two in his writings. Stanley Hauerwas's interprets Barth in terms of redemption's *discontinuity* with creation. See Hauerwas, 'The End is in the Beginning: Creation and Apocalyptic' in *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflection on Church, Politics and Life* (London: SCM, 2015) 3-21. Kenneth Oakes critiques this line of interpretation, stressing instead the notes of *continuity* between creation and covenant in Barth. See Oakes, 'The Question of Nature and Grace in Karl Barth: Humanity as Creature and as Covenant-Partner,' *Modern Theology* 23:4, October 2007, 596-616.

insistent that creation's true character is accessible for human beings only through the ongoing exercise of faith in Christ's justifying work, nevertheless have a developed account of creation's integrity within the Christian faith.<sup>16</sup> For other thinkers following this sensibility, creation still holds a place, but is altogether drowned out against the sheer novelty and utmost significance given to the doctrine of the sinner's justification in Christ. In such theologies, creation is not absent, but the continuity between creation and redemption is certainly diminished as a result of the central place of a forensic account of justification.<sup>17</sup> Finally, the more radical proponents of this sensibility push the discontinuity between creation and redemption to such a point, that the former loses all integrity in light of the latter.<sup>18</sup>

Rowan Williams' place within these two divergent options, we will see, is more difficult to place than O'Donovan. On the one hand, Williams' recent Christological work, with a strong basis in Aquinas and Maximus the Confessor, finds in Christ the full realisation and revelation of creation's purpose and character. In this respect, we find much in Williams'

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther's lectures on Genesis offer a wealth of insight on the character of creation, see Johannes Schwanke, 'Martin Luther's Theology of Creation,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18:4, October 2016, 399-413. More contemporary Lutherans have likewise developed a rich doctrine of creation which does not diminish its significance in relation to justification and salvation. Oswald Bayer is especially significant in this respect, see Bayer 'Poetological Theology: New Horizons for Systematic Theology,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 1:2, July 1999, 153-167; Bayer, 'Self-Creation? On the Dignity of Human Beings,' *Modern Theology* 20:2, April 2004, 275-290.

<sup>17</sup> The Radical Lutheran tradition is especially indicative of this trend. Gerhard Forde's work is particularly insistent of the disruptive discontinuity which God's gracious justification adds to creaturely history. See Forde, "Radical Lutheranism" in Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (eds.), *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); and Forde, 'Forensic Justification and the Christian Life: Triumph or Tragedy?' in Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (eds.), *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement and Ecumenism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 119-133. Eberhard Jüngel's account, likewise, stresses the transformative novelty of justification in relation to the false continuities of sin and death. See Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, Trans. Jeffrey Cayzer, (London: T & T Clark, 2001); and Jüngel, 'The Emergence of the New,' in *Theological Essays II*, trans. by Arnold Neufeldt-Fast and J. B. Webster (London: T & T Clark, 2014), 35-58.

<sup>18</sup> Within this recent trend there are many thinkers who, it could be argued, are simply retrieving certain Protestant instincts, and Protestant readings of Pauline theology. See especially Philip Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), and Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). However, certain thinkers who are part of the recent 'apocalyptic turn' may be perhaps guilty of stretching the discontinuity of creation to redemption to breaking point, such that creation loses all status and significance in Christian theology *except* through its radical transformation in Christ. For Douglas Campbell, this neglect of creation is couched as a critique of natural theology, see Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 203-205. For David Congdon (in a way like Campbell) this neglect of creation is based upon a radically eschatological soteriology, see Congdon, *The God Who Saves: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 228-235. For critiques of these temptations to radicalise the discontinuity between creation and redemption in apocalyptic theology, see Barclay's comments on Campbell in *Paul and the Gift*, 173; and Lexi Eikelboom's critique of Congdon in *Rhythm: A Theological Category* (Oxford: OUP, 2018) 205-207. For a helpful work which examines more widely this recent 'apocalyptic turn' see Douglas Harink and Joshua B. Davis (eds.), *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

work to place him in the first trend of creation *in continuity* with redemption. However, in his wider theological and spiritual writings, we see that the nature of this continuity is complexified. His doctrine of sin emphasises the depth and power of habits and histories of human fallenness, such that the reception of Christ's loving presence in human lives takes on a profoundly *disruptive* aspect. The continuity of Christ with the history of Israel, and the order of creation is one that takes on a *dialectical* form – Christ's resurrection is a recapitulation of the surprising work of God that characterises the Exodus and God's redemptive works in Israel's history. The continuity of creation with redemption in Williams is precisely that Christ's death and resurrection continue the liveliness and surprising quality of all God's acts in the history of creation. The question of how creation and redemption relate in Christ, in their varying continuous and discontinuous aspects, is one that O'Donovan's and Williams' work explore in generative ways. It is this discussion, and these questions, which centre my focus on creation and Christology in Williams' and O'Donovan's writings in chapters 3 to 6.

The different ways of relating creation and redemption can also overlap with different understandings of the character of God's providential work, in ways that might accentuate or diminish these continuities or discontinuities. Explorations in the doctrine of providence often seek to hold together both the consistency and constancy of God's works to sustain, govern, and guide creation to its fruition in Christ, and the sharply surprising course that this providential work takes. The question of consistency and surprise in providence is one way of expressing debates about 'general' and 'special' providence. However, it also focuses the doctrine of providence upon the novel and consistent character of God's actions through history. Doctrines of providence can easily tend, as Caroline Schroder puts it, towards either 'consistency or contingency'.<sup>19</sup> Understandings of providence, she argues, can tend to focus either on the consistency of God's governing, accompanying and directive work amidst creation in such a way that 'continuity, constancy, and regularity will be seen as signs of divine faithfulness'; or, doctrines of providence can tend to stress the *surprising* and *novel* character of God's work 'as the coming One who has promised to make all things new and who is present to his creation as the promised One.' Latter tendencies in the doctrine of providence may ascribe greater significance 'to the unexpected' character of God's workings,

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<sup>19</sup> Caroline Schröder, "'I See Something You Don't See': Karl Barth's Doctrine of Providence," in George Hunsinger (ed.), *For the Sake of the World: Karl Barth and the Future of Ecclesial Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 124.



‘to that which cannot be derived from what has been or from the existing ordering of the status quo’.<sup>20</sup>

This question is about how the character of God’s providential works accentuates and extends the earlier question explored about redemption’s continuity with creation. The tension between different doctrines of providence that emphasise to a greater degree the *consistency* and *constancy* of God’s sustaining work, or those that stress the *novelty* of divine action can often find their coherence in relation to broader instincts about the character of redemption. Both discussions of providence and salvation centre upon the ways in which God acts in continuity with God’s past works, and the ways in which God might act in novel and surprising ways in relation to such previous works.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, an account of divine action that emphasises its novelty and disruptive character can all too easily veer towards occasionalism, with a voluntaristic and arbitrary understanding of the divine will. Likewise, an account of providence that only affirms and accentuates the givenness and regularity of created order can diminish the liveliness of God’s working in Christ and history.

Williams’ and O’Donovan’s works are especially pertinent in exploring these questions about the character of divine faithfulness, and the place of constancy and novelty in presenting this theme. In O’Donovan’s moral theology, creation is the centrepiece of all God’s subsequent workings. Likewise, he stresses the *completeness* of the created order as a central part of his account. Divine faithfulness throughout history is, for O’Donovan, displayed through God’s *sustaining* of creation’s order, through God’s workings which are consistent with the original purposes of creation, and through confrontation with the distorting powers of death and sin which would threaten the integrity of creation’s character and purpose. The central motif of O’Donovan’s account of providence is therefore *constancy* and *consistency*. William’s account of divine faithfulness likewise stresses the constancy of God’s character over time, but this faithfulness is displayed precisely through surprising

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 124. On this point, see also John Webster’s rich comments on the character of historical contingency in accounts of divine providence, Webster, ‘On The Theology of Providence,’ in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Vol 1. God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 133.

<sup>21</sup> The surprising and novel character of God’s active presence in the world is a key feature in a recent set of Anglican theologies that overlap with the concerns of Williams and O’Donovan. The most developed articulated of this theme is found in Ben Quash’s *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). This work has strong roots in Rowan Williams’ essay ‘Trinity and Revelation’ in *On Christian Theology*. But the roots of Quash’s work also have deep indebtedness to the work of David Ford and Daniel Hardy. For representative discussions in this trend, see Hardy ‘The Surprise of God’ in *Finding the Church: The Dynamic Truth of Anglicanism* (London: SCM, 2001), 231-237; Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), chapters 5 and 6. See also Ford’s rich discussion of the ‘subjunctive’ mood within an overall understanding of Christian wisdom. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 48-51.

subversions of the established ordering of the world – for example, the Exodus and the Father’s raising of Christ from the dead. God’s promised faithfulness provides no guarantee amidst a life of struggle and contingency. God’s faithful accompaniment of human beings will always guide them through painful and transformative engagement with the cross of Christ. The shape of God’s faithfulness to creatures does not provide any escape from the contingencies or struggles of living.

These explorations of creation, redemption, and providence will inform my engagement in the central chapters of this thesis with Williams’ and O’Donovan’s vision of Christ and creation. However, it is their understandings of the Christian life which became the central concern of my thesis. Different approaches of relating the consistency and novelty of God’s loving ways are essentially tied up with ways of imagining the shape of a wise and faithful Christian life. The thread which holds these conversations together, and which will be the focus of my examination of Williams’ and O’Donovan’s work, is the conviction that different understandings of *disruption* and *stability* at work in creation and redemption, in turn, textures a whole wider set of theological instincts about God’s ongoing activity in the world, and the character of human living that seeks to respond to the fullness of God’s works. Disruption and stability are theological shorthand for describing not simply O’Donovan’s and Williams’ *doctrinal* visions, but also the shape of a life that seeks to *inhabit* these rich and vivid doctrinal landscapes. These themes traced in doctrines of creation, redemption and divine action, gesture towards two wider trends about how to understand God’s active presence in human lives, and the shape of human response to God’s active presence. The divergent trends I have traced in these introductory paragraphs roughly correspond to the coherent visions of creation, redemption and the Christian life in Williams’ and O’Donovan.

The first option, articulated by Williams, stresses the *disruptive* aspect of the risen Christ’s presence in human lives: to encounter the living God in prayer, worship, sacrament and word, is to receive a presence which continually challenges, transforms, and widens human ways of thinking and living which are limited, fallen or distorted. The ongoing work of God in the life of human beings is, for Williams, one that interrupts the prior continuities of human living, and leads individuals into an endless journey of learning, discovery and renewal. To live in accordance with the truth of all that God has worked in creation and Christ will, Williams argues, involve a continuous recognition of the limits, provisionality, questionability, and frailty that marks out human living. O’Donovan’s vision of the Christian life is one of responsible, thoughtful and wise obedience to Christ. It is a life marked by a certain God-given stability as individuals are led, by the Holy Spirit, into patterns of living

that are congruent with the order that God has made and redeemed in Christ. Such a life fits with creation and redemption so that human living is established and ennobled with a stability and authority received from beyond itself, and is able to be directed towards a fruitful end in Christ's promise of eternal life.

This section has sought to explore some of the questions which led me to focus on Williams and O'Donovan, and the themes in their works which I have centred on. I found Williams and O'Donovan to be figures who enabled me to explore a rich set of doctrinal themes: creation, redemption, justification, eschatology, and the place of the Holy Spirit. They also offer two visions that occupy similar confessional territory, which have overlapping concerns, and, when read together, provide richly contrasting ways of thinking about the difference which Christ makes, the character of God's ways with the world, and the shape of Christian wisdom and faithfulness. Their work therefore provides a focused and manageable entry point to explore a tension that might otherwise be too nebulous to navigate well. And their work offers a way of exploring a set of doctrinal themes that are closely related to the concrete shape of Christian living. We turn now to a longer summary of my argument, and the structure of the chapters to come.

## 2. The Shape of the Argument

The heartbeat of this research is O'Donovan's and Williams' contrasting understandings of creation, Christology, resurrection and the Christian life. These topics make up the contents of chapters 3, 4, 5 and 6. Chapters 1 and 2 are preparatory for the main forays of these subsequent chapters. As such, the first two chapters of this thesis should be read as an extended introduction to some of the basic instincts and concerns of each thinker's work. These initial two chapters offer a wider angled lens of each thinker's work, considering their intellectual context, and respective understandings of realism and epistemology. The subsequent chapters adopt a more focussed approach by offering detailed exposition of their contrasting understandings of several important theological themes. A chapter is given to consider each thinker's respective understanding of creation (chapters 3 and 4). They are then drawn together for a side-by-side exposition of their Christologies (chapter 5); this leads in the next chapter to a more concentrated examination of their differing accounts of Christ's resurrection, as well as their differing accounts of the shape and texture of the Christian life (chapter 6).

Chapters 1 and 2 act as an entryway into the visions of O'Donovan and Williams by exploring their respective understanding of realism and learning in the task of theology, with particular reference to how their critical stances towards contemporary intellectual life shape their own theological visions. Chapter 1 begins with Williams, especially his wider philosophical engagements concerned with language and history in *The Edge of Words*, and his work on G. W. F. Hegel mediated through the work of Gillian Rose. Williams finds much of modernity's and postmodernity's intellectual life at fault precisely because life exceeds the orderings that our contemporary habits of thought rely upon. Williams especially critiques the secular habits of contemporary thinking due to their limited ability to make sense of those aspects of reality which evade easy perception or description, particularly the tragic and abundant aspects of our world. What Christianity offers is not, however, a straightforward way of making abundance and tragedy immediately intelligible. Rather, Williams' understanding of the Christian imagination is capacious enough to invite and sustain an ongoing response to the strangeness of human existence and our attempts to represent it. Christianity invites us not into a static perception of the world, but into a process of learning which is always engaging with the difficult and historical nature of reality. Truthful perception of the world is always insecure and provisional because our vision of things is always growing, shifting, finite and remains inevitably unfinished. The journey of learning is one more deeply into the abundance of the world which God has made.

In Chapter 2, we see the major instincts of O'Donovan's vision gravitate towards a realism based on the givenness and objectivity of created order. We trace the importance of realism for his understanding of moral life, beginning with his early work on Augustine and moral theology, and tracing the variations and developments of this theme through *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and his recent *Ethics as Theology* trilogy. O'Donovan frames much of his work as a response to modernity's failure to understand the moral life in an intelligible way. This lack of intelligibility is primarily a failure to connect moral agency with an objective reality that can ground, direct and give shape for our moral lives. What Christianity offers modernity is a vision of human life as a glad inhabitation of the real and given order of creation. The Christian understanding of creation and redemption contains a vision of the world that is fixed and good, that offers our moral lives the imaginative and conceptual resources needed for us to live flourishing and fruitful moral lives. As O'Donovan's thought develops, it gains a greater sense of the temporal capaciousness and opacity involved in our perceptions of reality. But these developments serve to nuance and affirm his basic instincts about the relation of reality to action.

Chapters 3 and 4 engage O'Donovan's and Williams' respective understandings of creation. In chapter 3 we see that, for Williams, the creature/Creator distinction is pivotal in understanding the nature of created life. In his engagements with Augustine, his writings on spirituality and his constructive theological work, he understands creation as something essentially contingent, temporal and finite in sharp distinction to God's eternal, unchanging, and infinite life. Precisely because of this distinction, God and creation are non-competitively related to one another – neither threatens the integrity or character of the other. Nevertheless, creaturely life, precisely as finite, temporal and contingent, images the invisible God. This whole picture is crucial to Williams' understanding of God's love: God made the world not from any need, but in order to share God's own life. Creation shares in God's own loving and life-giving being precisely through its temporality, finitude and contingency. This underlying account of creation is sustained and developed in his account of providence. Trusting that God sustains and directs humanity through history can never be an escape from the essentially provisional and subjunctive quality of all creaturely experience.

O'Donovan's vision of creation places a greater emphasis on the finishedness, givenness, and stability of the order of creation. In chapter 4, we trace this theme in O'Donovan's work, from his early engagements with Augustine, through *Resurrection and Moral Order* and again in his recent trilogy. The finished and stable quality of creation is, for O'Donovan, a natural outworking of confessing creation as a work *ex nihilo*: to speak of the world's creation wholly as a result of God's word is to speak of a creation as a *fixed* work of God which makes all subsequent history and motion intelligible. This order of creation is presupposed by all subsequent human and divine work: it anchors and grounds redemption and the moral life. Creation and history are distinct, and providence preserves and maintains the finished work of creation in the face of the throes of history. As such, creation offers a framing for temporality in which there is a clear and established givenness which directs the contingent and historical aspects of our lives. The developments noted in chapter 2 are relevant to this chapter, as we see in his later work an increased emphasis on how time shapes human perception of creation, and how tradition mediates these perceptions. These developments also coincide with a development in his doctrine of providence, as something which does not simply preserve the stability of created order, but also directs the growth of human engagement with this order.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw Williams and O'Donovan side by side, to consider their respective visions. These chapters begin by considering the saving significance of Christ's

person, before considering the particular character of the resurrection, and ending with how these themes open out into each thinker's vision of the lived shape of the Christian faith.

Chapter 5 engages with Williams' and O'Donovan's differing Christological visions. Both thinkers see Christ and creation as wholly consonant. But given the contrasting parallels of their work up to this point, this means that the differences noted in their respective visions of creation are accentuated and developed in their contrasting Christologies. Both thinkers stress the centrality of Christ's person and work – and especially the central role of Christ's incarnation.

For O'Donovan, his Christology frequently centres on *representation*: Christ is the representative of Israel to God and God to Israel. In Christ is *revealed* the original promise of all that God promised to achieve through creation and the election of Israel. Christ clarifies and accentuates what creation was always meant to be, but which had become obscured because of sin. Likewise, Christ's person and work are the *enactment* of God's promises to creation, *restoring* creation to its original potential for gladness and fulfilment. In the face of sin and death's distorting and disruptive qualities to creation's life, Christ restores and renews creation in order that it may fulfill its original purpose, thus making it possible for creatures to fully and joyfully inhabit the order of creation. Finally, the salvation achieved in Christ *crowns* creation. This claim is the most challenging to fit in with O'Donovan's wider vision. Even though creation is a finished and complete work of God, Christ also leads creation to a position which it has never fully inhabited, and yet which was always meant to attain. The tension here is frequently seen in terms of holding together the fixedness and stability of creation as it was originally given, alongside the transformative and novel aspects of salvation which move creation into a *new* position. O'Donovan's soteriology frequently tends towards securing and perfecting what has been already given in creation. We consider a similar set of texts in this chapter, though with a greater focus on a wider array of O'Donovan's writings in this chapter, including *Desire of the Nations*.

For Williams, Christ is the heart of created reality – the one in whom the fragments of creaturely life cohere and find their true orientation. However, this consonance between Christ and creation is understood in more dialectical terms than O'Donovan's vision. In Christ's Incarnation, the historical, contingent and open texture of creaturely life is taken up in a novel and transformative manner. Christ embodies the fullness of creaturely existence, remaking and renewing creation from within. Christ injects a transformative and disruptive novelty to history, whilst revealing the fullness of created being in his person and work. The central thrust of what Christ achieves is to make possible human participation in the divine

life, inviting human beings to ‘stand where Christ stands’ within the Godhead. This “filial” mode of existence is marked by abundance. In union with Christ, human beings are led into an unseen and unrealised, yet assuredly redemptive, future. In terms of community, solidarity, and individual living, working out our union with Christ continually reveals new depths and connections in our lives. Our perception of Christ’s work and the world are never finished, as we are constantly catching up and coping with the fullness of what it means to see the world with Christ at its centre. This section focusses especially on Williams’ recent *Christ the Heart of Creation*, as well as a broad sample of his constructive essays on Christology.

Chapter 6 expands the contrasting Christologies explored in the previous chapter but does so with greater attention to the particular role of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in their writings. I then turn in the second half of chapter 6 to consider their differing accounts of the Christian life, and the practices of prayer and patterns of selfhood which accentuate their convictions about the character of the gospel. For O’Donovan, we trace what will be by this point an already familiar theme, namely the way that Christ’s resurrection restores, vindicates and accentuates the character of created order. The resurrection recapitulates the original Sabbatical completeness of creation. It is also the foundation for hopeful and joyful human living, as it assures human beings that life’s purposes will not be wrought to nothing by sin and death. For O’Donovan, the defining affective themes of Christ’s resurrection are *gladness* and *joy* – signalling the fulfilment of creation, and the renewal of human agency through Christ’s person and work. This offers the basis for a wider vision of Christian living in O’Donovan’s thought that stresses the *active* self – the person who is empowered by trusting prayer in all that Christ has done, who is made ready for every good work. In prayer, human beings are drawn by the Holy Spirit into confident, ennobled, and intelligible living, as they are guided within a renewed vision of the world of God’s making and redeeming. Faith, hope and love describe the shape of the Christian life. In faith, human beings are summoned by God to the work of becoming an agent; in love, their rational, moral and affective capacities are beckoned to live in conformity with the goodness of God mediated within creation; and hope directs moral agency to find its sustenance in the promises of God to make all things new – a promise whose resolution appears opaque yet is certain because Christ is raised. The Christian life involves seeking and finding one’s place in God’s good world, such that it may become an offering of work which enters into eternal Sabbath rest.

For Williams, the resurrection is something altogether more startling and provocative in tone and substance. The Risen Christ brings life and healing but does so only through

painfully confronting human beings with the truth of their past and present guilt and failure. Christ's resurrection shatters human pretensions of innocence, mastery and self-centred and self-serving imaginings of reality. The resurrection leads human beings into ever greater depth of realisation of their sin, but also into unceasing depths of Christ's powerful and renewing love – a love which promises transformation for the whole of creation. For Williams, the life to which the resurrection beckons us, and the life to which the Spirit calls believers, is one that leads into painful and transformative engagement with the cross of Christ. As the Spirit draws humanity into the Triune life, to “stand where Christ stands” in the divine life, so too does the Spirit draw human beings into continual repentance and conversion to turn away from the disorder of sin and more deeply into the generative abundance of God. The Christian life is therefore marked by a radical openness: to the disorientating and disruptive work of God to sanctify and heal; towards my neighbour, with whom Christ has enabled me to find ever greater depths of mutuality and loving solidarity; and towards the world, as the place where the Spirit labours in all things to draw them into Christ's saving work. The Christian life is therefore one that is less settled and secure, but a life still assured of God's absolute love, and His power to renew all things.

I will conclude this essay with a constructive response to the contrasts explored in the main body of my thesis. Arguing neither for a straightforward systematic or doctrinal resolution, I will instead argue for a certain kind of *irresolution*, which tries to hold together the equally necessary yet dissonant aspects of Williams' and O'Donovan's work within the ongoing task of discerning the shape of faithful Christian witness. Each thinker offers a coherent, consistently textured doctrinal account of the Christian landscape, deeply congruous with their understanding of the shape of human lives that seek to inhabit this landscape with obedience and wisdom. Central to this account of discernment is the cultivation of a practical wisdom that learns when to draw the disruptive elements of the Christian gospel to the fore, and when to signal the notes of God's stabilising work. This work of discernment attends to the structures and dynamics of the fullness of Christian experience – of the gospel's joy, as well as its challenge; of the consolation of grace, alongside the struggle of repentance; of the prophetic work of judgement alongside the healing offered in engagement with Christ. Resolution of the various affective strands of participation in the gospel raised through these writings is not to be found in proposition or formulation, but as a matter of practical wisdom and living.





## **Chapter 1.**

### **Making Sense and Beginning *in media res*: Truth and Growth in Rowan Williams**

The central contrast traced in this thesis, through engagement with Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan, are the differing intellectual convictions underlying their visions of creation and Christology and their respective narrations of the Christian life. In chapters 1 and 2, I seek to locate Williams' and O'Donovan's visions against the backdrop of their wider intellectual concerns: what is the nature of truth? what is the distinctively Christian character of learning and knowing the world as seen through Christ? and what are the major critical and constructive meeting points of the Christian vision with contemporary intellectual life? In these first two chapters, I will begin to point to the central contrasts of their work – of the disruptive and endlessly generative journeying into truth and love in Christ (Williams), and the inhabitation of a stable and secure order of creation that is restored in Christ (O'Donovan).

I begin, in this chapter, with Williams' work. Here, I will argue that the account of *learning* and *realism*, so central to his philosophical and aesthetic engagements, are rooted in his accounts of creation and Christology. Our learning is *historical* – endlessly engaged with a world of intelligible abundance; it is *provisional* – liable to error and constant refinement and growth. Our learning is historical and provisional precisely because all learning is also *creaturely* – undertaken by human beings limited in their perceptions and position in the world, who must *grow* into the truth, and learn to see the truth through the endlessly abundant, challenging and creative presence of the risen Christ.

For Williams, living in accordance with the truth is an endless journey of discovery. This makes the Christian life a never-ending attempt of learning to see and to speak of the gratuitous abundance of the world that is created and redeemed in Christ. The endlessness of this learning journey means that the reality to which a Christian life lovingly conforms is neither comprehensively surveyable, nor permanently fixed in perception at the outset. In other words, for Williams, human *growth* and knowing the *truth* are inseparably interwoven. This chapter focuses on the way that Williams' explorations around the theme of *making sense* seek to display just these two aspects – the inseparability of knowing the *truth* and the ongoing journey of *transformation*.

In this chapter I focus on these defining aspects of Williams' account of Christian learning: its beginning from within the middle of things (section 1); its characteristic difficulty (section 2); the historical nature of all knowing (section 3); and the complex

combination of both *creativity* and *error* in every human attempt to perceive and describe the world (sections 4-5). The writings with which I engage are often those that involve Williams' forays into the philosophical, secular and aesthetic concerns. Whilst these are beyond the boundaries of his more confessional or doctrinal work,<sup>1</sup> they are a means of engaging more deeply with his own distinctively theological interests.<sup>2</sup> In these writings, Williams' concern is less directly focused on displaying the inner logic or structure of Christian belief. It could equally be said that these philosophical writings are also indirect delineations of the apophatic contours of Williams' thought – recognising the limits and possibilities of speech in relation to God and the world.<sup>3</sup> Amidst the breadth of themes, and the wide-angled approach of this chapter, the central purpose of this chapter is to act as a point of entry into Williams' writings and vision, and to prepare the ground for later engagements that trace the contrasts between Williams and O'Donovan in terms of creation, Christology and the Christian life.

### 1.1 Making Sense and Beginning *in media res*

A helpful place to begin with Williams' vision is from within the middle of things, since this is, for Williams, where we must always begin our thinking. His writings greatly complicate the modern preoccupation with finding a secure starting point from which to 'begin' to think.<sup>4</sup> To begin to think is to be caught up in a process of seeking to make sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Of particular importance for this chapter are Williams' essayed engagements with G. W. F. Hegel and Gillian Rose from the 1990s; his more recent work *The Edge of Words*; his works on art and literature, especially *Grace and Necessity*; and finally, his more culturally concerned work from his addresses as Archbishop of Canterbury.

<sup>2</sup> His concerns considered in this chapter are located between the 'critical' and 'communicative' aspects of his work, see 'Prologue', *OCT*, xii-xvi.

<sup>3</sup> The descriptor of 'negative' or 'apophatic' theologian can be a partially helpful one in describing Williams. For a representative expression of this see Rowan Williams, 'Mystical Theology and Christian Self-Understanding' in Mark A. McIntosh and Edward Howells (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Mystical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9-24; and Williams, 'The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Disclosure' in Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (eds.), *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For engagements with this aspect of Williams' thought see Kent Eilers, 'Rowan Williams and Christian Language: Mystery, Disruption, and Rebirth; *Christianity and Literature* 61:1, Autumn 2011, 19-32. Andrew Moody, 'The Hidden Centre: Trinity and Incarnation in the Negative (and Positive) Theology of Rowan Williams,' in Matheson Russell (ed.), *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays*, (Eugene: Cascade, 2009), 25-46. These works offer more direct engagements with this theme in Williams' writings. The present chapter, however, approaches these apophatic themes as mediated through his wider philosophical engagements, rather than more directly in a theological key.

<sup>4</sup> This trend in modernity is seen in most concentratedly Cartesian patterns of thought which typically begin with the interiority and inwardness of the "thinking" self. For works tracing this trend in modernity see Ian Burkitt, *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1999); Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), especially the chapters in part II; and for a more discursive though nevertheless relevant exploration see Louis K. Dupré *Passage to*

the world which is already happening. The place to begin here is precisely within the midst of everyday living. Thinking is not a separable or isolated governing aspect or faculty of human living. Thinking is what we do whilst thoroughly immersed and entangled within the processes and practices that make up human living. Thinking is not the beginning of our being, but precisely an acknowledgement that our being is already alive and interacting with a world not of our own making. As Williams writes:

We can't begin to think, decide to take up a 'thinking' stance towards something called The World, analysing it into primitive components like essence and predicates. If "thinking is what we do," thinking is contemporary with our being in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

Williams' discussion of Aquinas' notion of *intellectus* is especially significant here in refiguring what modernity understands by rationality or thinking. This concept

designates the human subject as receptive and responsive: receptive to the impressions of "intelligible form", discernible order and structure, in the realities it encounters, and responsive in its *engagement* with objects, working on them and willing things about them. *Intellectus*, then, means "understanding" in a very comprehensive sense; and it involves a genuine union of knower and known correlative to the union of lover and beloved.<sup>6</sup>

Knowing cannot be separated from the fullness of human living, loving, embodiment and sociality. This is especially true for the Christian believer whose thinking about the world made new in Christ is also inseparable from the communal life of worship:

I assume that the theologian *is* always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relationship to God.<sup>7</sup>

So our attempts to begin orienting ourselves in a coherent way are always part of a history already happening to us – a complex and rich common life of which we are already a part. Thinking is, for the Christian believer, coincident with praying, worshipping, serving and living.

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*Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), part II.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel', *WA*, 35.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, *WK*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, 'Prologue', *OCT*, xii.

The problem modernity faces in finding the right starting point is an overly intellectualised account of human beings. Williams is especially critical of the tendency of modernity to tether secular and universal accounts of human rationality with the attempt to form a stable basis for the formation of common life. The intelligibility which modernity seeks to offer human beings is worked out, typically, on the basis of a ‘reasoning mind’ that in turn ‘can sort out a sensible common agenda for human beings’.<sup>8</sup> Much of the defining thinking of modernity has sought to provide an account of human loyalty, centred upon the state, as a “rational” alternative to the inherently unstable and potentially violent possibilities of competition and contrasting religious loyalties within a single society.<sup>9</sup>

But this apparently rational basis for organising our common life is based on an account of rationality which dismisses and flattens out the particularity of the commitments to faith, tradition, family and kin that are essential aspects of what make us human. In other words, the political climates of modernity refuse to begin from within the middle of things – with existing loyalties, stories, embodied ways of making sense. To entrust the arrangement of our common life to a certain limited understanding of rationality leads all too easily to assessing the values that shape common life merely according to ‘rational usefulness’. This can, in turn, lead simply to regarding the particular traditions that have come to shape our common life as ‘arbitrary’ according to functionalist criteria, and therefore worthy of being ‘discarded’.<sup>10</sup> This does not lead to a non-religious society, but one in which religious instincts are diffused and sublimated to alternative objects of loyalty, such as trust in an unfettered, and self-regulating global market.<sup>11</sup> This means that the habits of thought and discernment that characterise modernity are habits which leave people ‘stranded when it comes to making decisions requiring more than simple calculations of profit and effectiveness’.<sup>12</sup> The danger of modernity is, therefore, a perpetual gravitational pull towards habits of thought which are reductionistically functionalist.

For Williams, these problems strike at the heart of how we imagine what a society is, and what its ends are. Social integration of the kind that makes for a harmonious society has often been sought in modern societies according to a purely “rational” criteria, as the apparently only universal basis to bring social unity amidst diversity. Because modern

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: T and T Clark, 2000), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, ‘Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State,’ *FPS*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, *Lost Icons*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Williams, ‘Ethics, Economics and Global Justice,’ *FPS*, 212.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, ‘Preface,’ in Duncan Dormer, Jack McDonald and Jeremy Caddick (eds.), *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity* (London: Continuum, 2003), vii.

rationality assumes that because we can make a clean beginning in forming political community, free from the baggage of our traditions, human beings can all, in principle, begin from the same place. It is the state which comes to occupy the primary and wholly rational object of a citizen's loyalty. This provides an apparently more assuredly stable grounding for social harmony.<sup>13</sup> Certain modern attempts to found social cohesion on the basis of a universal account of rationality falls short precisely because they refuse to begin in the middle of things with the particularity of human history, community and tradition. Seeking to found social unity in universal reason falls short precisely because the formation of a common life takes time and labour to identify a shared perspective. As Williams argues:

Reason is a powerful tool for critique, and its power in this context habitually leads us to mistake it for an unproblematic guide in constructing social paradigms. Society is organised not by the discovery of some ultimately unifying principle that will guarantee the fulfilment of all rational aspirations, but by an endless series of "treaties" between aspirations, imagined goods, desirable states of affairs.<sup>14</sup>

This comes close to what Williams elsewhere describes in terms of the difficult work of labour – of *negotiation* – which characterises our pursuit of truth, and our pursuit of social cohesion. Modernity falls short precisely because it seeks to base common life in a fixed and universally accessible vision of things. However, for Williams the shared picture of reality which makes common life possible requires time and labour. In other words, the *truth* which makes community possible is inseparable from habits of learning that consider how our understandings *grow*.

Alongside this recognition that human understanding always begins *in media res*, there is an equal and complementary emphasis in Williams' vision that understanding is genuinely concerned with a *truthful* representation of reality. Even from within this messy bundle of things which shape the place where we begin to think, this beginning from within the middle is essentially a description of where we begin in the process of *making sense*.<sup>15</sup> Human thinking searches for an 'underlying structure that will make definitive sense of the world we inhabit'.<sup>16</sup> And this process of finding a way to speak about a discernible and inhabitable world is always concerned with making sense *of*, and *to*, one another. Williams

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, 'Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State,' *FPS*, 39.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, 'Faith and Enlightenment,' *FPS*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Medi Volpe, "'Taking Time" and "Making Sense": Rowan Williams on the Habits of Theological Imagination' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15:3, July 2013, 345-360.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Lost Icons*, 2.

talks about culture as a way of ‘making things and making sense’.<sup>17</sup> So the sense-making of the individual is always wrapped up with sense-making as a common endeavour. Sense-making involves an individual pursuit to cultivate a sense of intelligibility that enables us to live our lives well together, and to do so truthfully.

It is this conviction concerning the givenness of truth which is noticeably inaccessible within certain postmodern theologies. Postmodernity fails because it lacks an insufficient sense that what all learning and language engages with is a reality which can be known and represented (however provisionally and contingently) in human language. Williams’ contention is that postmodern thought too easily collapses amidst particularity without the resources to maintain language’s relationship to an underlying and given reality: ‘The postmodern consciousness rejects the possibility of a representation of the world that harmonises and includes any and every act, phenomenon or dictum, a representation that does not have to acknowledge its own locatedness and thus its own “failure”’.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Williams’ account of postmodernity goes a step further in arguing that the postmodern frequently offers little *but* locatedness and failure, with minimal sense that human beings encounter a reality that can be known and shared.

Williams argues that the postmodern failure is to equate God to pure absence or rupture without any sense of God’s presence being something knowable.<sup>19</sup> For Williams, the Christian tradition must insist on a vision of God who generates the possibility of being known, and who goes on being known as an endlessly self-giving gift to humanity. In the postmodern visions that Williams considers, God is pure interruption – where God’s active presence and creaturely engagement with God are wholly at odds. God can be known only in the gaps and inadequacies of human understanding. For Williams, there does remain something acutely disruptive about God’s work in history. However, the difficulty of knowing God is that human beings are endlessly beckoned by God into an endless journey of learning – a journey in which failures of knowing are essential to the process of engaging with a reality whose abundance exceeds the confines of human understanding. Human learning is therefore, for Williams – and *contra* these postmodern visions – a task genuinely concerned with a reality whose otherness can be known and shared.

The strength of the postmodern vision is, for Williams, the way it displays the difficulty and challenge of speaking with truth and integrity about identity, otherness and

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, ‘Multi-Culturalism – Friend or Foe?’ *FPS*, 109.

<sup>18</sup> Williams, ‘Balthasar and Difference,’ *WA*, 77.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, ‘Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,’ *WA*, 27-32.

difference. Williams agrees with these postmodern theologians that the kind of intelligibility that life with God invites us to share should not involve an ‘extinguishing of true or final otherness’.<sup>20</sup> The postmodern vision holds the pursuit of truth to account by displaying the sheer difficulty that difference offers to our representations and communications. However, Williams’ conviction is that at the end of all our engagements with the difference and otherness there is a truth we are truly engaging with: ‘truth is that new thing that springs into being when different selves engage in the hard work of sustaining their differences’.<sup>21</sup> Truth takes work, as we labour with difficulty towards making sense of ourselves, each other and the world we inhabit. Engagement with difference will require negotiation and dispossession of my previously held understandings: ‘truth requires loss’.<sup>22</sup> There will be an endlessness in journeying into the abundance of truth, and this journey is authentically engaged with *reality* that makes possible *understanding*.<sup>23</sup>

Williams’ critique of postmodernity moves us closer to his own constructive vision. The resources he finds in G. W. F. Hegel to develop a counter vision against these thinkers enable Williams to hold *truth* and *growth* together, in a way that excludes neither. Williams agrees with Hegel that God is inseparably ‘bound up with the making of sense’.<sup>24</sup> Williams’ interpretation of Hegel is in partial agreement with the postmodern insistence that learning should avoid the pathos of ‘a sterile and reductive adhesion to a fixed perception of fixed states of affairs’.<sup>25</sup> Williams argues that:

Grace [...] is in the making of rational connections, the overcoming of otherness not by reduction to identity but by the labour of discovering what understanding might be adequate to a conflictual and mobile reality without excising or devaluing its detail.<sup>26</sup>

Learning is therefore understood by Williams (and Hegel) in strongly ‘*temporal* terms’ as ‘that *movement* towards that coincidence, the movement towards a kind of action that is proper consummation, the bringing to sense’.<sup>27</sup> Learning is not just the ‘labour of making’ – of reckoning with the immense representational possibilities and limits of bringing reality into speech. It is also a labour of ‘finding’ – the difficult and demanding work of speaking of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid 27.

<sup>21</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 54.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ *WA*, 70.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, ‘The Apprehension of Being,’ *WA*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, ‘Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,’ *WA*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. (emphasis mine)



the real *which invites* perception and representation.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the kind of learning involved in theology is one in which *truth* and *growth* are inseparable.

From this brief foray into Williams' critiques of modernity and postmodernity, we see Williams' own vision beginning to emerge: one in which human habits of making sense are aimed at intelligible representation of reality, and also committed to an ongoing journey of growth and discovery. This sense in which our thinking always begins *in media res*, though equally aimed at the making of sense, begins to display the central conviction of Williams at the heart of this chapter: that knowledge of the truth and human growth go inseparably together, and that knowing the truth involves an endless journeying into abundance. The limits and the possibilities for human learning seen in contemporary habits of understanding show, for Williams, the relevance of the Christian vision. Telling the Christian narrative of God's work to create, reconcile and redeem the world doesn't resolve all questions, nor is it a conclusion of the journey of making sense. Rather, the Christian faith gives us a starting point to engage with reality, knowing that such an engagement is the beginning of an endless journey into abundance – a journey undertaken with God and toward God, and a journey undertaken with others. The Christian understanding of truth involves, for Williams, a beckoning invitation to continually respond to the surprising abundance of seeing Christ at the centre of all reality in ways that are open to surprise, renewal, disruption and healing. We turn now to consider Williams' vision of learning, beginning with the theme of *difficulty*.

## 1.2 Beginning with Difficulty

In their engagements with reality, human beings are dealing with a world which exceeds their ability to wholly understand it. The world that presents itself to our perception is one which we find to be intelligible, which is fitting to its character as a product of God's intelligent love. However, this same world is replete with meaning in ways that make it difficult to comprehensively represent reality. The world abounds in variety and complexity, meaning that true learning involves 'facing and absorbing disruption' in ways 'that allows imagination to be nourished'.<sup>29</sup> Making sense will therefore involve continued engagement with those ambiguous, complex, and *difficult* aspects of reality which resist easy representation in language. We trace this theme of *difficulty* in Williams' understanding of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, 'Has Secularism Failed?' *FPS*, 21.

making sense, focussing especially on his recent work *The Edge of Words*, and his essayed engagements with Hegel, all of which bring the themes of difficulty, learning and growth to the fore.

The significance of *difficulty* in our journey of learning is, for Williams, something inherited from his engagements with G. W. F. Hegel, via the thought of Gillian Rose. The challenge of this beginning in the middle of things is that it contests human attempts at securing a stable, controlling and authoritative location which could support the integrity of our thinking. This is a fear that preoccupies all thinking and creates the tendency to avoid ‘the recognition of the “already” that locates all our putative beginnings in an unsought and uncontrollable middle’.<sup>30</sup> Rose’s concept of the ‘broken middle’ is especially useful in understanding Williams’ thinking here. Rebekah Howes helpfully summarises this concept as ‘an idea which expresses negativity, opposition and contradiction as something substantial’.<sup>31</sup> For the thinking subject to exist in this broken middle is to realise the profound ambiguity, complexity and *difficulty* of human perception of the world. Reality is not simple. Nor can our perceptions straightforwardly make sense of it in its complexity and variety. A gap exists between ‘what that something actually is, between what thought intends and the reality, and so, likewise, what we think we are and what we actually are or have become’.<sup>32</sup> ‘(T)he being of things is,’ Williams writes, ‘marked by authentic difference, and hence difficulty in conceiving and reconciling’.<sup>33</sup> The relationship of the learning subject to the sought-after object of enquiry is, therefore, one which always exists within this unresolved broken middle which navigates the intelligibility and the disorientating gratuity of reality.

Human thinking is, as we have already noted, deeply oriented towards the making of sense. For Williams this is rooted in the conviction that reality invites intelligible perception and representation in speech: ‘(t)he environment we inhabit is [...] irreducibly charged with intelligibility’.<sup>34</sup> Such an intelligibility is generated by the creativity of the Creator whose ‘knowledge is the cause of things’.<sup>35</sup> Since the whole material universe is a product of God’s creative and intelligent love, it is fitting that the world offers itself to human perception as something that invites an intelligible response. When reality is represented in speech, we do so assuming that the world ‘we encounter is something that triggers capacities for recognition

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ *WA*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Rebekah Howes, “In the Shadow of Gillian Rose: Truth as Education in the Hegelian Philosophy of Rowan Williams,” *Political Theology* 19:1, January 2018, 20-34, 24.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ *WA*, 71

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *EW*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

and representation in our minds'.<sup>36</sup> This understanding is closely tied to Hegel's notion that 'the real is the rational': 'What is there for perception of any kind is there to be *thought*, to be rendered in concept and metaphor: it continues to offer a structured life in which the knower has a part, or which has a part in the knower'.<sup>37</sup> In this respect, Williams' work has a strong realist undercurrent. However, he also wants to complexify and nuance this basic picture in a way that does justice to our habits of learning and understanding.<sup>38</sup>

The world is intelligible but is also replete with a limitless capacity for meaningfulness which evades fixed capture in understanding. The world's intelligibility, as well as its abundance of meaning, are both rooted in Williams' understanding of creation. Because God is 'supremely *res*' or '*non aliud*', God is not reducible to any particular *signum* except that of the Word made flesh.<sup>39</sup> All of creation is simultaneously *able* to be a sign that signifies the Creator, however its signifying quality is not inherent or wholly realised. Creation's ability to become a sign pointing to God happens only through the process of *growing* into loving dependence on God.<sup>40</sup> Because the meaningfulness of all created reality is conveyed only through growth and transformation, meaning is an abundant and not a static quality. To quote Williams' exploration of these themes in a specifically Augustinian idiom: 'God alone is the end of desire; and that entails that there is not finality, not "closure", no settled or intrinsic meaning in the world we inhabit'.<sup>41</sup> Meaning is never, for Williams, a final or settled quality. Rather, our engagements with the world of God's making and redeeming will continue to find ever more abundant depths of connections and resonances.

The very processes of finding the deeper coherency and structures of the world we inhabit is therefore, for Williams, inextricably tied up with facing the unfamiliar, surprising and strange aspects of reality. Central to our attempts to make sense of reality is an engagement with what is 'generative' in experience and history. This is one of the most important impulses in his thinking, namely, to seek for God in 'what is *generative* in our experience'.<sup>42</sup> What is encountered as *generative* can also be said to be difficult, disruptive, novel or surprising. As Williams writes, 'Living with difficulty is living in the awareness of

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>38</sup> Catherine Pickstock's review of Williams' *Edge of Words* provides a rich reading of Williams' realist instincts in ways that affirm and enrich this basic picture. See Pickstock, 'Matter and Mattering: The Metaphysics of Rowan Williams,' *Modern Theology* 31:4 October 2015, 599-617.

<sup>39</sup> This is an all too brief attempt to do justice to Williams' discussion in 'Language, Reality and Desire: The Nature of Christian Formation,' *OA*, 43-46.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, 'Language, Reality and Desire,' *OA*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 'The Nature of Christian Formation,' *OA*, 45.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation' *OCT*, 134.

an incompleteness that never ceases to pose questions and to generate both unexpected new strategies and unexpected new frustrations – never ceases, in fact, to generate speech’.<sup>43</sup>

The difficulty of understanding realities that evade final representation in speech is intensified when we also consider the *dialogical* character through which we come to understand the world. As we encounter and engage with another’s perspective, our own linguistic representations are complexified, expanded, challenged and clarified (this difficulty, of course, multiplies exponentially when considering each further contemporary or historical perspective). The fact that we can never have a total perspective is because we are looking to others as part of our process of making intelligible the abundance of the real: ‘this is always a provisional task in the sense that there will always be other angles from which to look, and that my own attempt at characterising will therefore always be in need of other perspectives, other connections that can intelligibly be made’.<sup>44</sup> And so there is a constant openness and unfinishedness to the task of knowing the truth: ‘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’.<sup>45</sup> Language has an ‘unfinished and unfinishable character’.<sup>46</sup>

Since our engagement with reality involves other human beings, the difficulty of reality is also something to do with the ‘indeterminate diversity of representational possibility’.<sup>47</sup> This returns us to Williams’ engagement with Hegel’s claim that “the real is the rational”. He expands on the meaning of this claim when he argues:

What we talk about is always a reality that is talked about – that has been, is being and will be talked about, that requires to be talked about and cannot be talked about without talking of the talking, thinking of the thinking, that engages with it, and that therefore also entails thinking the social relations in which talking occurs.<sup>48</sup>

The search for another’s perspective means that there is always *more* that can be said of the real than what the individual is capable of articulating. Reality is inherently abundant, which is intensified and multiplied by the fact that this reality is always known to us through diverse and wide-ranging social attempts to capture the real: ‘the encountered environment is “real” for us only as it insists on establishing itself in our language and stirring that language to

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<sup>43</sup> Williams, *EW*, 180-181

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 109

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* 74

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

constant readjustment and new kinds of representation'.<sup>49</sup> The habit of sense making is, therefore, not primarily driven by acquiring a finished picture of reality. Instead, our attempts to understand a world riven with "intelligible abundance"<sup>50</sup> seek a form of coherence in terms of "how to go on" in a way that does justice to representing the givenness of reality, whilst continually recognising that my word will never be the final or complete one.<sup>51</sup>

The strands introduced thus far converge in Williams' important and enigmatic statement that 'the only honest beginning is with difficulty'.<sup>52</sup> In one of the most direct, yet equally dense, summaries of this idea, Williams describes this difficulty an 'inescapable issue' in language used by 'material and temporal subjects that has to do with how what is said is appropriated, how it sustains intelligibility in the exchanges and negotiations that constitute our actuality'.<sup>53</sup> So the difficulty of beginning to make sense of the world, and to do so with other humans, involves the convergence of two main tensions: the social nature of our learning, and the nature of reality itself. Williams highlights these tensions in an important passage earlier in the same essay when he writes:

what human beings do is characterised by the kind of difficulty that arises when the effects of action or decision are open to the judgement and interpretation not only of other finite agents as individuals or cluster of individuals, but of what is discerned as the order or structure of a reality not determined by anyone's decision.<sup>54</sup>

The difficulty of making beginnings is due to this dual role of *reality itself* ('the order or structure of a reality not determined by anyone's decision') which exists beyond the level of individual decision or construction. But we also begin with difficulty because reality is always mediated by language. The world we perceive and seek to represent in language is a reality *already being talked about* and that will *continue to be talked about*. As such, conversation and dialogue play a key role in discerning reality.

The pervasive *difficulty* of thinking, speaking and representing reality is ultimately, for Williams, a claim about the grammar and texture of Christian faith. We will approach this theme in a more evidently doctrinal guise in later chapters. But this exploration has a great deal of significance for how to understand the shape of Christian living in response to the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 68.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' *WA*, 62.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 58.

reality of God's active presence in the world. Williams' vision seeks to capture the elusive wholeness of the world as it exists in relation to Christ.

The shifting and constantly expanding perspectives of historical processes of understanding and representation have no end as far as we are concerned, yet they presuppose a kind of coherence, a unity, that is never of itself being represented (let alone described) by us in its wholeness.<sup>55</sup>

To respond faithfully to a reality that is itself known to us only through language, debate, labour and *difficulty* means that to live in accordance with truth, we are engaging with a form which is not fully known and available apart from an ongoing journey of learning and discovery. This is a shorthand way of describing what the life of prayer and worship entail for Williams – the constant recognition of the plenitude and the challenge of Christ's presence in the world. As Ben Myers describes William's vision:

It is God's nearness that makes God so strange, God's brightness that strikes us down as though blinded. For Williams, negative theology is not a way of coping with the poverty of human speech, but a celebration of the inexhaustible riches of divine meaning.<sup>56</sup>

The depths of meaning inherent in creation and Christ are discovered and realised only in an endless journey *through time*. To this theme we now turn our attention.

### 1.3 Beginning with History and Taking Time

In this section we delve more deeply into the temporal dimensions of Williams' vision of learning and making sense. The difficulty of reality and making sense converge in this important theme of *taking time*. The shape of the Christian life is a journey more deeply into truth – though it is a truth not able to be held exhaustively in a single moment of understanding. To take time is, perhaps, one of the most essential characteristics of faithful Christian learning and living in Williams' writings: 'It is a specific protest against the idea of a truth that can be delivered instantly as a timelessly valid given'.<sup>57</sup> The abundance of reality

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<sup>55</sup> Williams, *EW*, 120.

<sup>56</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 103.

<sup>57</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Overcoming Political Tribalism', *ABC Religion and Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2019, accessed at <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/rowan-williams-overcoming-political-tribalism/11566242>. Accessed on April 5<sup>th</sup> 2021.

cannot be grasped in a single moment. Taking time means that old perceptions will be challenged, and new perceptions formed through renewed and enlarged engagement with reality over time. Our perception of reality will always be moving, growing and unfinished.

Learning begins with the recognition that we are part of a history already happening. ‘We discover who we are, in significant part, by meditating on the relations in which we already stand. We occupy a unique place in the whole network of human and other relations that makes up the world of language and culture’.<sup>58</sup> One of the most significant relations in which we already stand is our *historical* location – the pressures that shape the present moment in which we begin to think. Taking up this theme in an engagement with thinking, Williams suggests that ‘history cannot ever be an *adjunct* to thinking. What we understand is what history has made it possible for us to understand’.<sup>59</sup> To say that we begin with history is to recognise that our present understanding always *has* a history – every concept we use has a history; our deployment of them happens in history; and there will be a history of reception and challenge that follow that deployment. Indeed, the very task of metaphysics is engaged with understanding how history shapes the conditions of our present thinking: ‘History is how we do our metaphysics, how we reflect on what we non-negotiably are and what are the conditions of our concept formation’.<sup>60</sup> To say that we are perpetually *learning* is to emphasise that our understanding will never reach a final word and will always invite further labour. Beginning with history broadens what it means to be a ‘thinking being’, away from something solely to do with our mental or rational life, towards something shaped by the fullness of our individual and corporate humanity (i.e., embodiment, social interaction, and the disruptive novelties of human existence).

Furthermore, to begin with history is to recognise that the reality with which we engage *is itself history*: ‘what we understand is history, the story of mental life – which, for speaking and understanding subjects, is life or reality *tout court*’.<sup>61</sup> The particular context of this comment arises in an engagement with Hegel, whose own ‘thinking about thinking is, inexorably, a thinking of a narrative (incarnation and dereliction)’.<sup>62</sup> Reality and narrative are inseparable categories for the Christian theologian – our engagement with reality is an

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<sup>58</sup> Williams, ‘Making Moral Decisions’ in Robin Gill (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics 2<sup>nd</sup> edn*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2012), 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel,’ *WA*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics,’ *WA*, 67.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, ‘Logic and Spirit in Hegel,’ *WA*, 48.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

engagement of the history of God's dealings with the world, a history whose conclusion and resolution are yet to be finally seen.

For Williams, beginning with history entails several qualities that must characterise Christian learning. The learner must constantly reckon with their own *finitude* and *embodiment*, meaning there is never a total or final grasp of truth. To say that our learning is historical is also shorthand for emphasising the importance of our finite bodies as central to the nature of knowing and understanding. Williams insists that what it means to be a person 'unfolds itself and declares itself in *time* and in the *body*'.<sup>63</sup> The individualism that can often pervade contemporary life resents these two qualities, since it 'resents unfinishedness, resents limitation'.<sup>64</sup> As we speak truthfully about the real, we must accept that 'I speak from and only from this limited specificity – the "clustering" – that is this intelligent body, in this moment, with this history'.<sup>65</sup> The finitude of our bodily and temporal locations means that there is a constant and constructive lack in ourselves that lends itself to sociality. As Williams writes, 'our speaking is always time-related; it is always incomplete, and in search of the perspective of another'.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, he writes that 'To be a time-conditioned self is also to be a *social* self, a self formed in interaction'.<sup>67</sup> Recognising the bodily location of learning means also:

Knowing that I am finite – that my thoughts and words are learned over time, that my utterances are open to the – perhaps abrasive response of others, that I do not have the resources as an individual to sustain meaning or honesty in my own practice.<sup>68</sup>

To stake any truth-claim is always partial, and human embodiment is a constant reminder of my own sense of limit. The fact of embodiment accentuates this sense that individual engagement with reality always needs supplementing and challenging from the perspective and position of another.

To say that we begin with history also means that human thinking and learning must take a *dialogical* approach towards that which is other to us: 'engagement with history lays bare for us the character of thinking *as* engagement, as converse, conflict, negotiation, judgement and self-judgement'.<sup>69</sup> To recognise the incompleteness of my own picture of

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<sup>63</sup> Williams, *Being Human: Bodies, Minds and Persons* (London: SPCK, 2018), 43.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* 44.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, *EW*, 109.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 86.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

<sup>69</sup> Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' *WA*, 67.



reality, and the need to find challenge and enlargement in my view of things through interaction with another is an ethical and epistemological point for Williams. He describes how one's

existence as a subject is recognised or re-learned all the time as a process of self-displacement, a never ending "adjustment" in search of the situation where there is real mutual recognition and thus effective common action, because we have moved away from the illusions of rivalry.<sup>70</sup>

It is the unique linguistic character of human existence, that we speak in order to achieve a sense of recognition of ourselves and others, and thereby create some form of relationship: 'We speak because we are in search of recognition; we want to be heard and understood [...] we want to have opened for us the possibility of new kinds of shared action, ways of "going on" in the company of others'.<sup>71</sup>

These instincts are significant for Williams' wider vision. For example, Christian orthodoxy is not the unchanging restatement of a truth articulated with comprehensive finality. Christian faith is not a complete or finished picture of the world. The defining event of Christianity is characterised by a challenging 'contradictoriness' which requires significant labour and debate by Christian believers to clarify, refine and hone their essential theological and moral convictions.<sup>72</sup> As the anchoring narrative of Christianity is returned to for nourishment and guidance, what we find is not a story which irons out the difficulties or answers the questions we bring to it – quite the opposite. Continual engagement with the 'narrative beginnings of theological reflection' in worship and reflection will continue to generate 'new attempts to characterise those defining conditions' by 'which the believing life is lived'.<sup>73</sup> The pursuit of orthodoxy is not an adherence to an unchanging rehearsal of Christian belief. It is a commitment to display essential convictions about God, Christ and the purposes of God to create and redeem the world in a way that stay true to their essential character, whilst recognising the contingency of history in which our own telling of this story takes place. As such orthodoxy is not a static adherence to a timeless given, but a promise not wholly realised and known: 'we do not yet know what will be drawn out of us by the pressure of Christ's reality, what the full shape of a future orthodoxy might be'.<sup>74</sup> The order into which

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<sup>70</sup> Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' *WA*, 70

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *EW*, 91.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, *WK*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: SCM, 2001), 236.

<sup>74</sup> Williams, *Why Study the Past: The Quest for the Historical Church*, (London: DLT, 2005), 58.

Christian lives are being drawn is a form still being realised in time, still responding to the ongoing work and active presence of the risen Christ, which makes *creativity* a central aspect of Christian faithfulness.

#### 1.4 Creativity, Obedience and Truth

The themes considered thus far lead us to a tension in Williams' understanding of learning and making sense. His work is rooted firmly in a set of realist convictions about the relationship of language to the world: as a work of God's creation, the world is an intelligible and given reality which invites perception and representation. However, speaking truthfully about the world requires constant refinement and restatement of our speech, meaning that the intelligible abundance of the world continually generates multiple and varied representations. In other words, there is a constant and constructive dialectic of *obedience* and *creativity* in human language. This tension points to a wider dynamic in Williams' thinking. Christian learning is, for Williams, constantly navigating between an underlying tethering in given realities, whilst remaining open to the novel and surprising ongoing work of God. Williams' consideration of creativity and obedience in a philosophical and aesthetic tenor points to the wider significance of these aspects in his theological vision.

The environment that we respond to and seek to make sense of is not a straightforwardly 'fixed object for describing and managing.'<sup>75</sup> Rather, reality presents itself to us 'as a tantalising set of invitations, [as] material offered for reworking and enlarging'.<sup>76</sup> Williams argues that:

the object is consistently "proposing" more than any one account of itself will capture – metaphorically, that it continues to 'give itself' for new kinds of knowing. It is there as an irreducible other, never to be finally absorbed into the knower's version of things.<sup>77</sup>

The world that we encounter, which we seek to speak truthfully about, does not simply or obviously offer us the language with which to represent it. This means that our ability to render the world with any degree of truthful intelligibility involves a 'capacity to generate fresh schemata and fresh ways of expressing one identity through another'. Understanding

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<sup>75</sup> Williams, *EW*, 60.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

the world does not simply take the form of “charting” or “mapping” in any straightforwardly correspondent sense, but rather in our ability to ‘absorb the life of what is encountered at a level that makes it possible both to recognise and to represent that life in another form’.<sup>78</sup> The abundance of reality means that linguistic representation is ‘constantly edging towards more ambitious varieties of utterance, towards representation, the rebirth of what is “given” in another context of meaning or another medium of showing’.<sup>79</sup>

The creativity which characterises Williams’ understanding of representation in language produces an ‘unstable connection’ between our language and ‘what it engages with’.<sup>80</sup> The instability of this connection between language and world is frequently resolved by returning to the familiar themes of reality’s *abundance*. Reality’s gratuity makes it inaccessible from an individual, immediate, or isolated interior perspective. Instead, access to reality is gained through labour, through dialogue, through refinement and critical restatement of our previous understandings. Williams names this tension and points to its solution in a comment he makes about Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s works. Williams writes that:

What seems at first sight to be a very improvisatory account of how identity is constructed, an account that might lead us to think in terms of voluntaristic models, is actually set against a background of depth and surplus in reality itself which holds and makes sense of all these dialogical processes.<sup>81</sup>

Reality’s surplus and the creativity of representation are seen especially in Williams’ understanding of the theological significance of artistic representation. He writes of the implicit “ontology” contained in the work of art that is based in ‘a kind of *obedience*’.<sup>82</sup> ‘The artist struggles to let the logic of what is there display itself in the particular concrete manner being worked with’.<sup>83</sup> But art also ‘takes for granted’ a world in which ‘perception is always incomplete’.<sup>84</sup> So while the artist is doing something ultimately *creative* and *novel*, it is a creativity complexly related and tethered to an underlying *givenness* in what the world is like and how it shapes perception and response to it:

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), 134.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *GN*, 142. (emphasis mine).

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 135.

The process is one of generation, not creation from nothing, and what can be said is not decided by an inner “free” subject involved in endless self-reflection. What you can meaningfully say is constrained by what is given. But truthfulness unfolds.<sup>85</sup>

This understanding truthfulness in much artistic endeavour is one which rejects any reductionistic account of truth which might reduce it to ‘exhaustively defining the effects of certain phenomena on the receptors of brain and sense’.<sup>86</sup> The character of human perception and reality are themselves closely intertwined. Just as truthfulness has an unfolding quality to it, so too does human understanding of truth possess an ever-growing aspect to it. As Williams writes: ‘Consciousness [...] is *fugal*’.<sup>87</sup> Human understanding of truth and reality is therefore best expressed by a musical analogy. Reality is more characteristically ‘active rather than static, a mobile pattern whose best analogy is indeed musical, not mechanical’.<sup>88</sup>

Creativity is rooted in a pursuit of truth: it cannot be an exercise of will apart from the givenness of the material realities it works with, nor the realities that it is in some way representing. Truth is unknowable apart from exploration, learning and un-learning, and this exercise of creativity. This tension, as it appears in Williams’ work, centres around the question of how to take seriously the creative journey of discovery and learning necessary to understand what is true, whilst not letting this creative dimension descend into mere voluntarist play. The truth of the Christian faith is not therefore only to do with a picture we receive once and for all that is adhered to with rigidity. Instead, the truth of the Christian faith is known as we continue on a journey of discovery more deeply into the world in which God has placed us. In his rich discussions on the nature of tradition at the end of *Arius*, this set of instincts become especially apparent. He argues that ‘the continuity of Christian belief was a more complex matter than the plain conversation of formulae.’ In this same debate ‘it became necessary to say new things and explore new arguments, even while still professing to make no changes in the deposit of tradition’.<sup>89</sup>

Because of the strangeness of the subject matter of Christian theology, the fact that we cannot fully understand and capture a form still being unravelled in time means that we must remain open to the novel and surprising work of God. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is revealed amidst the crisis, conflict and rupture of the cross. Christian theology is born out of attempts to reckon with the question of Jesus’ continuity with Israel, a continuity which

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 118.

disrupts and expands prior self-understandings of Jewish identity and God's character.<sup>90</sup> The appropriate expectation for Christian self-understanding is precisely that God continues to be the God of surprises, that His faithfulness is displayed in His surprising and disruptive constancy amidst a world of sin and disorder. The corresponding shape of Christian life is one that is willing to be challenged, that is open to judgement, and which recognises that creativity is a key quality of faithful response to all that God is.

### 1.5 Error, Sin and Learning

Here we turn to Williams' emphasis on the place of *error* in our learning. There is something fundamental in Williams' vision that rests on 'a faith that knows itself to be without guarantee'.<sup>91</sup> Williams, channelling Gillian Rose and Walter Benjamin, describes human learning as always 'historical' and therefore 'without guarantee'.<sup>92</sup> The task of faithful learning is always marked by an element of 'risk and provisionality' because of the possibility that we may be wrong in our representations of the world and God's dealings within it.<sup>93</sup> The possibility of error is a positive aspect of learning that is fully engaged with *reality*. Because we can be wrong and shown to be wrong, it reassures us that we are genuinely engaging with an environment which exists beyond language. However, error is also rooted in the character of human finitude. Recognising human propensity for error emerges from the conviction that human perception constantly involves *growing* through dialogue, refinement and engagement – truth is never an immediately available or certain possession. Error also describes the human propensity towards self-deception – a mark of *sin* which so easily entangles every aspect of human existence.

Williams argues that error is an inescapable feature of all human communication and understanding, and is a constructive and ongoing aspect of growth as a human being. This important theme is developed in the *Edge of Words*, a theme that is consciously influenced by Rose. Williams describes the possibility of error in our language as a 'metaphysically interesting question'.<sup>94</sup> Indeed he later writes in this work that '(o)ur sense of what is distinctively human is, it seems, bound up with our ability to be *wrong* or even untruthful in

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<sup>90</sup> Williams, *WK*, 3-4.

<sup>91</sup> This phrase is used by Paul Ricoeur to describe Eberhard Jüngel in Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. By Kathleen Blamey, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 25. It is quoted and explored at length in David Ford's *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 85.

<sup>92</sup> Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' *WA*, 67

<sup>93</sup> Williams, 'The Discipline of Scripture,' *OCT*, 49.

<sup>94</sup> Williams, *EW*, 32.

our representing of the environment'.<sup>95</sup> Reality is ultimately something able to be conveyed in language, but which always exceeds language. This means that there is a 'riskiness' of language due to 'its unstable connection with what it engages with'.<sup>96</sup> What this means is that our understanding of language must reflect the dynamism of the world that it seeks to describe and convey. So too we must recognise that when our language seeks to capture a reality whose full meaning and truthfulness perhaps exceeds, and sometimes *evades*, human attempts to describe it, this means that: 'We cannot easily imagine human speaking without the risk of metaphor, without the possibility of error and misprision, without the possibility of fiction, whether simple lying or cooperative fantasy'.<sup>97</sup> Language that seeks to describe this underlying reality must therefore be 'bound in to the phenomena of exchange, exploration, uncertainty, trust, *error*, excess and so forth'.<sup>98</sup> Error here is not an unassailable or tragic resting place for speech. It is instead one of many phenomena contained in a responsible and laborious attempt to take time with reality, to truthfully convey the real in its fullest abundant depths.

Error and sin are not totally synonymous concepts in Williams' writings. To be wrong can be as much attributed to human finitude and creaturely limit, as it is to do with a dispositional rejection of God, neighbour and creation. And yet, there is an important overlap in these themes in Williams' work. The question of error raises the important place of sin in Williams' vision. An unavoidable and hauntingly present feature of human error is human blindness to individual, corporate and historical shortcomings, all of which add to the sense of *difficulty* in learning and also adding an integral *moral* element to the nature of learning. Sin is both an individual and a corporate reality for Williams. On an individual level, our sense of who we are is always contained in the stories that we tell about ourselves. Truthful telling of our own stories will require finding intelligible ways to speak of our own failures in ways that grow our capacities to live with reality: 'I can only approach whatever the term "real self" designates by sifting through remembered narratives in which I identify my problems or failures as arising from self-deception or self-protection, from some sort of flight from the real'.<sup>99</sup>

The necessity of repentance involved in learning to engage truthfully about the world also requires a special attentiveness to the marginalised voices of history. In a passage from

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 183. (emphasis mine)

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 79.

Williams' essay on Rose, he writes that: 'Talking about history is talking about the record or deposit of speech, in every possible sense, including very obviously the paradoxical speech of those silenced in history by the voices of others'.<sup>100</sup> If all thinking begins in a middle which constantly navigates the various stories, symbols and events that shape our individual and corporate identities, then our thinking always happens in acknowledgement of *sin*. Part of the constantly new beginning of grace afforded to the theological task is the necessary recognition that all talk about God is worked out from a particular place in history – a position which may be complicit in past, present, individual, and corporate habits of sin.

But the wideness of sin throughout every dimension of human existence provides an occasion for God's abounding grace and mercy to be similarly seen. Learning which begins with difficulty is also always being led by God more deeply into joy and grace. Williams suggests that: 'If the heart of "meaning" is a human story, a story of growth, conflict and death, every human story, with all its oddity and ambivalence, becomes open to interpretation in terms of God's saving work'.<sup>101</sup> God's saving and gracious work is always active within the complexities, confusions and crises of ordinary human lives. Human lives, when rightly receiving and responding to God's grace, can rightly aspire to holy living – a way of life transparent in real, yet always obscured ways to the loving goodness of God.<sup>102</sup> If God's work always involves and happens through the course and action of human lives then holy lives can 'point us to the scope and beauty of God's action'.<sup>103</sup> Through such lives are we able to see the 'reality of God coming alive in human words and human bodies'.<sup>104</sup>

This brief discussion of error in the task of learning is crucial in affirming the basic reading of Williams which this chapter has been advancing: habits of Christian learning and sense-making involve coming to constant awareness of one's limits, failures, and need for repentance.<sup>105</sup> As Barth writes, 'Christian dogmatics will always be a thinking, an investigation and an exposition which are relative and liable to error'.<sup>106</sup> Human liability for error in its life and speech displays the limits of our understanding of God, and the distortions which can easily mar human love of God.

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<sup>100</sup> Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics,' *WA*, 67.

<sup>101</sup> Williams, *WK*, 2.

<sup>102</sup> Such transparency to God is wholly realised in the person and work of Christ, as we see in Williams' Christology in chapter 5.

<sup>103</sup> Williams, *Holy Living: The Christian Tradition for Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 2.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> See especially Williams' comments about the nature of repentance in 'Theological Integrity,' *OCT*, 8-9.

<sup>106</sup> Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM Press, 2013), 3.

The task of theology is always unfinished as it tries to cope with the intelligible abundance of God and God's world. The Christian life continually reckons with all the joyful possibilities of God's purposes for the world, as well as the painful realities of human limits and guilt. As such, the theological task is one strand of a life always being called to 'begin at the beginning' again.<sup>107</sup> The presence of error and sin in our individual thinking and our common living should not lead to despair in the theological task. Rather, it is a reminder that theology finds its justification not in its inherent integrity, capacity or ability, but in the justifying mercy of God alone. Amidst all the limits, difficulties and contingencies that characterise Christian learning, the one who learns finds themselves again and again in the presence of God who leads his people repeatedly out of disorder, and ever more deeply into an endless journey towards abundant life.

## 1.6 Conclusion

This entry point into Williams' vision has been consciously preparatory for subsequent chapters. My purpose in this chapter is to display the texture and instincts underpinning his vision which come into fuller view in the more doctrinal explorations of later chapters. These first two chapters are also offered as a starting point from which to contrast Williams' work with that of O'Donovan's. The purpose of this chapter has, therefore, been two-fold. Firstly, this is the beginning of a dialogue which the rest of this thesis will develop. Secondly, by offering a wide angled entry-point into the themes of this thesis, these first two chapters introduce the tenor and texture of these thinker's visions, to offer a starting point for contrast and comparison between these thinkers. My central engagements with these thinkers will be their doctrinal visions. But, as I have already suggested in my introduction, these doctrinal explorations are ultimately aimed at portraying two very different accounts of the character of Christian living. The underlying doctrinal contrasts underpin and cultivate two very different visions of the pattern of thinking, *feeling*, and imaginatively inhabiting the Christian vision.

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<sup>107</sup> Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 4. The dialectical resonances of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* volume 1 are near to Williams' own instincts here. 'The fact that it is in faith that the truth is presupposed to be the known measure of all things means that the truth is in no sense assumed to be to hand. The truth comes, i.e., in the faith in which we begin to know, and cease, and begin again [...] Dogmatics is possible only as *theologia crucis*, in the act of obedience, which is certain in faith, but which for this very reason is humble, always being thrown back to the beginning and having to make a fresh start. It is not possible as an effortless triumph or an intermittent labour. It always takes place on the narrow way which leads from the enacted revelation to the promised revelation.' Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God I.1 § 1-7* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 13.



For Williams, we have seen that true learning is characterised by an unceasing provisionality, and openness to surprise and disruption – a willingness to unlearn distorted or limited perceptions for the sake of growing more deeply in harmony with the abundant and gratuitous goodness of God. The difficulty of our attempts to make sense and to learn are because the reality we continually encounter is abundant – replete with meaning and representational possibility. Language continually seeks to represent the *intelligible abundance* of the world: a world at once marked by the intelligibility of being a product of loving intelligence; whilst also a contingent world replete with semantic possibility. Since the abundance of reality will renew and enlarge my finite understandings of it, this comes with the recognition that along the way of learning I will have perceptions that stand in need of correction. To inquire after truth requires the humbling awareness that we are always learners, and our learning always begins afresh:

We become human in the act of finding a place to stand within the irreducibly difficult and mobile interweaving of diverse presentations of what is there for our minds, grasping that to know something in the world is not to arrive at a final structural scheme for it but to inhabit a process of discovery in which there is always more otherness to encounter, the otherness of new perspective and new requirements for “negotiation”.<sup>108</sup>

Being human and being Christian involve a constant and deepening journey of discovery into the reality of God, where there is no end or final point of arrival, only a more profound engagement with abundance. There is no cessation to our exploration, only a constant awareness of finding ourselves at the beginning again. The ‘believer is always learning, moving in and out of speech and silence in a continuous wonder’.<sup>109</sup>

This exploration of learning and language, history and difficulty has ultimately been a preparation for the deeper contrasts that texture Williams’ understanding of the Christian life: to know God, and to seek to witness and embody God’s generative love, is a task whose closest analogy is musical. The reality to which Christian lives conform is not an ahistorical given but is rather one that ‘unfolds’ over time. The form to which Christian lives seek to live in harmony with is ‘active rather than static, a mobile pattern whose best analogy is indeed musical’.<sup>110</sup> Engaging with the fullness of Christian truth involves

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<sup>108</sup> Williams, *EW*, 193.

<sup>109</sup> Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: DLT, 2014), 7.

<sup>110</sup> Williams, *GN*, 137-138.

‘educating our vision so that we understand how to see that we *don’t* see, how to see behind surfaces, the depth that we’re not going to master; [and] educating our passions in the sense of helping us to grow up “humanly” in such a way that we don’t take fright at this strangeness and mysteriousness and run away for all we’re worth’.<sup>111</sup>

The Christian faith, for Williams, is ultimately a journey of ‘inhabiting a larger world’.<sup>112</sup> The mark of true encounter with the world is therefore the transformation of the perceiver by what has been perceived. True learning is marked by an openness to be disrupted by reality in all its wonder and fullness as well as its darkness and tragedy. These motifs arise from Williams’ deep vision of Christ and creation, and which already display something of his understanding of the Christian life. Before attending to these central contrasts, we turn to the work of Oliver O’Donovan, to offer an entry point into his works, and to begin to show a richly contrasting vision to that of Williams’.

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<sup>111</sup> Williams, “‘What Difference Does It Make?’” - The Gospel in Contemporary Culture’ 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008, accessed from <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1375/what-difference-does-it-make-the-gospel-in-contemporary-culture.html>. Accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



## **Chapter 2.**

### **Beginning with Reality, and making ‘beginnings’: Realism, Obedience and Agency in O’Donovan**

Whereas Rowan Williams’ vision begins with the intricacies, complexities and contingencies of historical existence as the markers of human engagement with reality, Oliver O’Donovan’s vision more typically looks for the stable place from where we may see the world of God’s making and redeeming, so that we may act responsibly and rationally within that world. Williams’ and O’Donovan’s differing understandings of realism point to the deeper contrasts at play in this thesis. For Williams, reality is accessible to our perception and description. Yet any final grasp of reality is elusive, because of the abundance of the world, and the limits of human knowing. Reality stands always just beyond our grasp, made complex by contingency and difficulty, and accessible only as part of a journeying into abundance. For O’Donovan, reality offers human beings the place from which their journeying *begins* and to which it *returns* for orientation and direction. Historical contingency and complexity can be located and navigated within the backdrop of the stable order given by God in creation. Human journeying might force subtle or significant reframing of how reality is perceived, but reality remains the anchor for intelligible and fruitful living. The central contrast in these first two chapters is this: Williams’ realism describes engaging with objective reality only through the complex, and provisional journeying through difficulty and contingency; for O’Donovan, realism is that stable position by which we locate and navigate contingency.

Just as the previous chapter provided an entry point into the driving concerns and instincts of Williams’ thought, this chapter seeks to do the same for O’Donovan’s vision. The central argument of this chapter is that O’Donovan’s vision of learning, knowing and realism is rooted in a set of commitments concerning the doctrine of creation and Christology. The determinative foundation of O’Donovan’s vision is that flourishing human action finds its intelligibility through truthful and loving conformity with the stable, objective and given order of creation. The Christian life involves seeking and finding our place within this good and given world that God has created and redeemed.

I trace the significance of O’Donovan’s realism through an exploration of his critiques of modernity (section 1), and the ways in which the reality of creation shapes the task of moral theology (sections 2-3). What Christianity offers the fragile and failing intellectual structures of late modernity is a vision of human life as a glad inhabitation of the real and

given order of God's creation. From this critique, we see a wholly consistent conviction emerge that textures the rest of O'Donovan's vision, namely that the reality of created order is the foundation, sustenance and orientation of the moral life. Human flourishing is found by living in congruous harmony with this order of creation. The second half of the chapter (sections 4-5) will focus on the significance of this realist instinct in shaping O'Donovan's understanding of Christian wisdom, especially in relation to the task of moral learning and practical reason, and the ongoing challenge of time in relation to created order. I trace in the final section O'Donovan's enriched appreciation of time within his moral realism. His earlier understanding of time, which sees newness as the basic threat to moral intelligibility, develops in the later trilogy to seeing time as a more unavoidable and integral aspect of moral learning.

The central themes of this chapter will become important as my exploration of Williams' and O'Donovan's works unfold. What will emerge are two distinctive visions of what human response to all that God has done in Christ will involve: a life marked by response to the endless, disruptive and transformative abundance of God (Williams); and another characterised by fidelity to the objective good of creation as the basis for a renewed stability in human living (O'Donovan).

## 2.1 Surveying the Late Modern Scene: Voluntarism, Practical Reason and Moral Intelligibility

O'Donovan's critique of the late-modern context is important for understanding his own constructive vision. The emphases of his particular articulation of the Christian gospel are developed as a response to what he understands to be the intellectual limits of modernity. His writings have been characterised by Brent Waters as an 'astute, and at times quarrelsome, encounter with late modernity.'<sup>1</sup> The problem which O'Donovan identifies and responds to in modernity is primarily the lack of *intelligibility* it offers for the task of living, especially in terms of *practical* and *moral* intelligibility:

I find myself set down in the late-modern world, looking around and trying to find my way. But the late-modern world is in various respects incomprehensible, which is another way of saying that its secular reason is not wholly reasonable. It doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Waters, 'Communication,' in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds.), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 143.

reason far enough to satisfy those who have to live in it. It presents us with a series of assumptions that create practical contradictions. And so, as a believer, I look to the Christian faith to shed light on what is going on.<sup>2</sup>

Jonathan Chaplin rightly locates O'Donovan against the backdrop of other recent 'Christian modernity-critics' naming Alasdair MacIntyre, John Milbank, Stanley Hauerwas, George Grant and Jacques Ellul. O'Donovan's critique of modernity, Chaplin argues, centres upon modernity's 'denial of transcendence', its 'assertion of the primacy of subjective will and a salvific pursuit of the technological domination'.<sup>3</sup> The second of these themes (the primacy of the will) is one of the central and recurring objects of critique in O'Donovan's writings. For O'Donovan, ethical voluntarism is, as an expression of *pride*, foundational to all other expressions of sin.<sup>4</sup> The critique of voluntarism is central to O'Donovan's critique of modernity:

Behind the disparate appearance of the various critiques of modernity now current, we can detect a theme which recurs persistently. It centres on the notion of the abstract will, exercising choice prior to all reason and order, from whose *fiat lux* spring society, morality and rationality itself.<sup>5</sup>

The deficiency of voluntarism is closely related to the untethering of moral reflection from the objectively given reality of the world. If there is no sense of purposive reality to which our agency responds, then morality becomes purely a construction of the will. Modernity understands morality, O'Donovan argues, as 'the creation of man's will', thereby making '[m]oral reasoning [...] subservient to the commitment of the will'.<sup>6</sup> Representation of the world becomes an arbitrary construction, without the truth and authority to solidly secure a flourishing orientation for stable human living. There is no intelligible basis left upon which to adjudicate between opposing claims about authoritative moral obligations and descriptions. The combination of voluntarism and nominalism generates habits of moral reflection that view 'human presence in the world [as a] creation *ex nihilo*, the absolute

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<sup>2</sup> O'Donovan quoted in 'Political Theology' in Rupert Shortt, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, (London: DLT, 2005), 249.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Chaplin 'Political Eschatology and Responsible Government: Oliver O'Donovan's "Christian Liberalism,"' in Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song and Al Wolters (eds.), *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 267. Rowan Williams is another appropriate name that could be added to this list.

<sup>4</sup> John Milton's Satan is often pointed to as the paradigmatic figure of the voluntaristic impulse in O'Donovan's writings, suggesting that the prideful elevation of the will is the basis of all other sin. See *RMO*, 111; *FS*, 15; and *WJ*, 78.

<sup>5</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 274.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 16.

summoning of reason, order and beauty out of chaos and emptiness'. This work 'does not [...] honour God's creative deed, but competes with it'.<sup>7</sup> The dawning of the will as the centrepiece of moral thinking and action coincides with the eclipse of the doctrine of creation as the determinative doctrine for the moral life.<sup>8</sup>

O'Donovan's wider political theology is deeply informed by this critique of voluntarism, and the untethering of ethics from the reality of created order. He critiques a whole range of liberal concepts as lacking sufficient objectivity.<sup>9</sup> Modern political thinking's lack of objective grounding in a stable reality produces a particular challenge in how freedom and authority intelligibly relate to one another. The kind of authority required for intelligible political life, and that which O'Donovan finds afforded by the gospel, is 'an authority for doing something without equally affording an authority for doing the opposite'.<sup>10</sup> O'Donovan thinks that modernity's voluntaristic tendencies cannot sustain an intelligible account of authority which would anchor human freedom. Contemporary understandings of freedom all too easily become an 'assertion of *individuality*' untethered from an underlying order of reality.<sup>11</sup>

The insufficiencies of modernity's voluntaristic tendencies are seen especially in how subjective rights are understood. Modern political thought understands 'subjective rights' as 'original, not derived'. Since subjective rights are taken as original, deliberation must constantly navigate a 'plurality of competing, unreconciled rights'.<sup>12</sup> By relocating rights in the subjective person, rather than an objective order, O'Donovan sees modernity's voluntarism leading to abrasive and incoherent applications of law. Against this trend, for O'Donovan, it is a concept of *justice*, rooted in the reality of created order, which provides the intelligible basis and orientation for thinking about subjective rights.<sup>13</sup> 'Reality grounds morality'.<sup>14</sup> Justice is the anchoring concept for holding together the often fragmentary and

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<sup>7</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 274.

<sup>8</sup> This claim will be further unpacked in the chapter 4.

<sup>9</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 13-15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 254

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>13</sup> This is the basis of O'Donovan's disagreement with Nicolas Wolterstorff, and much closer (though not completely aligned) with Milbank's vision. See 'The Language of Rights and Conceptual History', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 37:2, June 2009, 193- 207, see especially 202-205. O'Donovan is also to be located somewhere between Milbank's and Williams' understanding of rights, which are explored in John Milbank 'Against Human Rights: Liberty in the Western Tradition', *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1:1 (2012), 203-234; and Williams 'Do Human Rights Exist? And 'Reconnecting Human Rights and Religious Faith' in *FPS*.

<sup>14</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Language of Rights,' 205.

potentially abrasive alignment of subjective rights in legal and political deliberation.<sup>15</sup> In turn, justice finds its bearing and orientation from the anchoring and objective ordering of creation.<sup>16</sup>

By prizing freedom, self-determination, and self-realisation above all else, modernity inevitably undermines these very concepts because it lacks a sufficiently objective account of authority that renders them intelligible. ‘Reality’, not will or subjective construction or assertion, ‘grounds morality’.<sup>17</sup> O’Donovan argues that these concepts, especially *freedom*, are rendered intelligible from the objective reality that gives them shape and meaning. ‘Action is free only as it is intelligible’.<sup>18</sup> For O’Donovan, the voluntarist and nominalist tendencies of modernity fail to provide a sense of solidity, assurance and stability for the task of moral deliberation – of relating the objective order of the world to the work of moral agency.<sup>19</sup>

What Christianity primarily offers, considering modernity’s insufficiencies, is a way of understanding the world in terms of our glad inhabitation of a created order that is established and preserved by the Creator God. The stark choice that structures O’Donovan’s early constructive work in *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and much of his subsequent writings is between moral voluntarism or glad recognition of the reality of created order.<sup>20</sup> Our truthful encounter with reality, therefore, involves coming to understand the contours of the moral order of creation – a familiar knowledge that is further accentuated and confirmed as creation is restored through Jesus’s resurrection from the dead. Human flourishing is found through truthful apprehension of this order.

## 2.2 The Order of Love, and the Natural Ethic: Reality and Action in O’Donovan’s Early Writings

O’Donovan’s work before and around the release of *Resurrection and Moral Order* (hereafter *RMO*) provides a helpful contextual picture of O’Donovan’s central impulses that are taken up and developed in *RMO*, especially concerning the relationship of reality and ethics. His doctoral work on Augustine, and several essays on moral theology before and

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<sup>15</sup> O’Donovan, *DN*, 249

<sup>16</sup> O’Donovan, *WJ*, 40-42.

<sup>17</sup> O’Donovan, ‘The Language of Rights,’ 205.

<sup>18</sup> O’Donovan, *WJ*, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 62.

<sup>20</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 16-17



after *RMO*, are the main source for this section. The conclusion of these sections will identify the central themes of these early writings, which then direct the investigations of the rest of the chapter.

O'Donovan's doctoral thesis, later published as *The Problem of Self-Love in Augustine*, looks to the reality of creation as that which makes the order of human loves intelligible.<sup>21</sup> The *aporia* this work considers is Augustine's attempt to order the self's love for God alongside love of neighbour:

It is plain that unless some formula can be found for saying at once that God alone is to be loved and that our neighbour is to be loved at the same time, the demands of the spiritual enterprise will be left hopelessly at variance with the demands of the moral law.<sup>22</sup>

For Augustine, there could be only 'one object of love'.<sup>23</sup> Augustine sought, with some difficulty, to locate these various kinds of love (love of God, neighbour, and self) within an "order of love."<sup>24</sup> It is within creation that intelligible harmony for these various loves finds its intelligibility:

[A]s I locate myself within God's world, I observe others like me. For to understand a thing – any thing – is to see it as one of a kind, and to understand oneself is to observe a kind to which one belongs. Self-love as ordered by knowledge of an ordered world is love of a kind.<sup>25</sup>

Our sense of agency and identity is grounded in knowing 'ourselves as we are known' by God. Likewise, my reciprocal relation to neighbour is established and mediated through recourse to the reality of created order. What grounds my sense of self-awareness and self-worth, and the recognition of my neighbour's worth, is rooted in our shared identity as creatures of God. To know oneself is to 'find ourselves within the world God loves and to love ourselves for the sake of God's love for us.'<sup>26</sup> It is creation which grounds and anchors

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<sup>21</sup> Often in this work we find little distinction between Augustine's and O'Donovan's voice. I find it helpful not to make this distinction too sharply, particularly in light of O'Donovan's conclusion in this work, which takes his exposition of Augustine to build a conceptual foundation that is taken up and advanced more fully by O'Donovan in *Resurrection and Moral Order*. This early work is as much a work of O'Donovan 'thinking-with' Augustine, as it is an exegetical work on the latter.

<sup>22</sup> O'Donovan, *SLA*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>25</sup> O'Donovan, 'Know Thyself! The Return of Self-Love,' in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 277. For a similar and developed account of this discussion in *FS*, 50-53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 278.

the love of God which calls us as agents, and draws us into love for neighbour, all of which coalesce into a single movement of creation's loving response to the Creator. In short, it is *creation* which is the *presupposition* of human living and loving. The fullness of creaturely life is to be found with rational and affective attention to *this* order of God's making, as that which grounds my individual sense of agency, as well as the network of mutual relations out of which community is formed.

Another strand from O'Donovan's early engagement with Augustine is his rejection of human love as something which *creates* worth. Instead, O'Donovan argues, human love should *find* and *respond* to the order of value given in the reality of creation. These arguments, as with similar ones in *RMO*, are shaped in strong response to Anders Nygren's distinction of *eros* and *agape*. For Nygren, *creatio ex nihilo* provides a kind of analogy for the radically creative aspect of morality – of *agape* love which creates value and worth in that which it admires. For O'Donovan, this tendency is proximate to that problematic voluntaristic strand of modernity. Both see the human will as a radically creative source of action in the world, rather than something that looks to the underlying reality and givenness of creation for its orientation.<sup>27</sup> In a helpful passage, O'Donovan sets out the problem and the beginnings of his response:

*Eros* "recognises" value in the object of love, *agape* "creates" value in it. A love which presupposes a subject-object polarity between itself and the value in which it rejoices is, for Nygren, "thirsty" and so self-seeking. Only when value is posited in the object by the subject is there self-giving love. If we measure Augustine's view of love by this criterion, it is clear that only God's love for man can be *agape*, for that alone is without presupposition.<sup>28</sup>

Human living does not *create* order and meaning, but rather *responds* to the world of meaning and order given by God in creation.

For O'Donovan, the Christian vision finds *human action* and the *reality of created* order closely correspondent to each other. The self is *responsive* to a world not of its own making or imagining and finds its orientation within the ordering of creation. In a discussion of Augustine's distinction between "use" and "enjoyment" in Augustine's account of Christian love, O'Donovan rejects any interpretation that would make the use/enjoyment

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<sup>27</sup> There is something like a doctrine of created analogy in O'Donovan's work, that comes close to a typical Thomist vision. At this point in his argument, he is specifically rejecting *creatio ex nihilo* as the basis of a free and creative moral life - as opposed to the analogy of all our speech and thought about God grounded in the analogy of creature to Creator.

<sup>28</sup> O'Donovan, *SLA*, 13.

distinction a matter of ‘*instrumental order*’ determined and directed by the subject.<sup>29</sup> To do so is to commit the same basic error of Nygren by understanding love as a creation of the subject, rather than an affective and rational response to the object. Against this understanding O’Donovan argues that Augustine’s distinction must be anchored in ‘an *objective order* of things.’ O’Donovan continues that:

The subordination of the world to God is not primarily a decision of the subject; it is an ontological reality which confronts the subject and demands that he conform his love to it. Because God, for Augustine, is both *beata vita* and *lex aeterna*, participation in the joy of the divine being is at the same time an embrace of the created order and an obedience to the divine law. To love one’s neighbour “for God’s sake” is nothing other than to love him realistically, understanding the given fact that he is a creature ontologically ordered to the uncreated supreme being.<sup>30</sup>

Ethical life, for O’Donovan, is rooted precisely in this ordering reality of creation that gives a determinative framing for moral norms and goods. O’Donovan’s interpretation of Augustine, contrary to Nygren, roots its account of love to ‘an overtly ontological order of things, a hierarchy of reality for which the subject’s devising of end and means is not responsible’.<sup>31</sup> Love responds to ‘the order of things,’ rather than *imposing* an order on the external world driven by the ‘pursuit of [one’s] own ends.’ ‘Love is’, O’Donovan argues, ““ordered,” not “ordering.””<sup>32</sup> The language of imposition may be a little jarring, but it does forcefully convey O’Donovan’s basic point that ‘Love’s order is given by its comprehending conformity to the order of reality’.<sup>33</sup> O’Donovan’s moral realism gleaned from his early engagements with Augustine shapes the basic instincts of his vision, and the subsequent course of his writings. We now trace this theme in his later moral-theological writings, as a prelude to his central articulation of these themes in *RMO*.

The close relation of action to reality is once again seen in O’Donovan’s early essay ‘The Natural Ethic.’ In this piece he develops the realist account of ethics established thus far and introduces two categories that will be developed in *RMO*, the categories of ‘kinds’ and ‘ends.’ By kinds, O’Donovan means that ‘reality is given to us’ and that ‘(t)hings have a *natural meaning*. It is not a matter of interpretation to say that the table is an inanimate artefact while you and I are human beings; it is a matter of correctly discerning what is the

<sup>29</sup> O’Donovan, “*Usus*” and “*Fruitio*” in Augustine, “*De Doctrina Christiana I*,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 33:2, October 1982, 361-397, 361.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 362.

<sup>31</sup> O’Donovan, *SLA*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

case'.<sup>34</sup> This category of kinds helps describe and define the constituent components that make up the objective world. There is a stability to where reality is ordered and given according to these 'kinds.' This category will later be equated with the 'generic' aspect of morality, as it identifies definite structures that frame our material world.<sup>35</sup> But there is also the second category of 'ends.' This means that 'these given kinds themselves are not isolated from each other but relate to each other in a given pattern within the order of things.'

To know what *that* thing is is to know what *kind* of thing it is, and to know what *kind* of thing it is is to know how it fits into the whole, that is to say, what it is for. Things have a *natural purpose*. In understanding the natural purpose of a thing, we attend to its claims on us, and so are able to deliberate on our response to that claim.<sup>36</sup>

This category established the temporal ordering of things towards their God-given *telos*. Recovering the teleological aspect to the world is a critical part of O'Donovan's realism. All this means that, for O'Donovan, reality has a meaning, value, and direction given by God. All human thinking, knowing and growing lives responsively to this reality. It is impossible to think about life as a human being without attending to how action acts in continuity with the givenness of reality in its generic and teleological qualities – its *structural* and *temporal* shape.

We begin to see a nexus of concepts emerging in these early works that order O'Donovan's early thought. With some refinement and development, these themes remain the continuous motifs of O'Donovan's thinking. They can be isolated and expressed in terms of a few propositions:

1. Firstly, human living is to be worked out in responsive congruity to the orderliness of reality. This reality is accessed and assimilated through admiring love and rational engagement.
2. Secondly, the realities which captivate and direct our loving and moral attention are fundamentally *ordered*, *stable* and imbued with *purpose*. The major dimensions of created order are *kinds* and *ends*. The intellectual climate of modernity has lost properly proportioned ways of understanding the kinds and ends of reality, and as such the

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<sup>34</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic,' in David F. Wright (ed.), *Essays in Evangelical Ethics* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1979), 23.

<sup>35</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Natural Ethic,' 23.

modern errors of moral philosophy are due to this disconnection from the reality of the world to guide moral action.

3. Thirdly, the created order is something given by God – which mediates his loving and authoritative will for human flourishing – and is similarly sustained and preserved by him.
4. Finally, the pinnacle of moral thinking is to secure the central place of the moral agent: *free, responsible*, able to confidently name the world in ways that makes coherent and intelligible moral action possible. The culmination of knowing and naming reality is, for O'Donovan, the rightly directed capability to *deliberate* wisely and act in accordance with the good and the true works of God.

The final theme that I have not examined yet but will become crucial to understanding O'Donovan's overall vision, and is an anticipated extension of these themes, is that redemption is continuous with creation. The work of God in Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost *restores, renews* and *accentuates* the moral resources given in the created order. Redemption does not entail any kind of negation of created order, nor a radical reformulation of its essential features. Though the future course of creation's fulfilment in Christ remains unseen, it is a central conviction of O'Donovan's writings that redemption will be congruous with the creation that humanity have seen and inhabited. This is a particularly central theme of one of O'Donovan's most important works: *RMO*. It is to this work to which I now turn.

### 2.3 Reality and Authority in *Resurrection and Moral Order*

These motifs are taken up and developed in O'Donovan's influential and significant work *Resurrection and Moral Order*. Foundational to the constructive theological and ethical proposals of this work is the intimate connection of O'Donovan's moral realism with his accounts of the Christian gospel. His concern is to articulate the resources which the Christian vision offers to the task of moral deliberation and action. In this section we focus, firstly, on the 'realist principle' as it appears in *RMO*, tracing its importance in O'Donovan's discussions of created order. The nature of generic and teleological order (or of 'kinds' and 'ends') will be central here. Then, secondly, we explore O'Donovan's important understanding of "authority" as the concept which holds together God's will, the mediative significance of created order, and the significance of these in shaping and directing human

action. The order of creation is an expression of God's gracious will which directs the creature to their true freedom and fulfilment in Christ. Voluntaristic conceptions of divine command theory provide a critical contrast and backdrop for O'Donovan's understanding of authority – as an option he firmly rejects.

O'Donovan early instincts coalesce around the 'realist principle' which predicates his whole vision in *RMO* upon the inextricable link between 'action and reality'.<sup>37</sup> Underlying *RMO*'s moral realism is a stark choice about the moral relation of action to reality. Either the rightness of our moral actions is based on values constructed and sustained as a work of the human will. Or moral reason takes as its basis the created order as the stable and objective orientating reality that guides moral action towards its God-given ends. O'Donovan summarises his endorsement of the latter option like this:

The order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference because it is concerned with man's life in accordance with this order [...] The way the universe *is*, determines how man *ought* to behave himself in it.<sup>38</sup>

This theme is echoed and developed in another important comment, where O'Donovan writes that: '(m)an's life on earth is important to God: he has given it its order; it matters that it should conform to the order he has given it'.<sup>39</sup> Having already been established in 'The Natural Ethic', the categories of 'kinds' and 'ends' return as the two central aspects of creation's ordering. To speak of creation in terms of *kinds* is to think about the relation of 'generic' order, of how all that exists relates to all else that exists that is 'related by a *reciprocity* of each toward the other.' Similarly, to speak of 'ends' is to speak of creation's *teleological* order – the '*directing* of the one thing to the other'.<sup>40</sup>

This objectivity that underpins O'Donovan's thought is crucially related to the understanding of creation and resurrection. These will become the substance of later chapters – though are important to briefly note in passing here. Creation is the anchoring concept of his whole thinking. Its stable and given reality provides the authoritative order to shape a human life towards flourishing ends. True perception of this order, and this order's restoration from the powers of sin and death, is found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection restores and accentuates true human knowledge of the order of creation: 'The

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<sup>37</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, x.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>40</sup> Both references, O'Donovan, *RMO*, 32.

wholeness of the universe depends on it being a created universe, and thereafter on its being reconciled, brought back into the order of its creation'.<sup>41</sup> It is for this reason that the resurrection is the centre of 'evangelical' ethics – as the event which restores humanity to the goodness of the world that shapes and directs their living.<sup>42</sup> The 'gospel of the resurrection [...] assures us of the stability and permanence of the world which God has made'.<sup>43</sup> This assurance is both about the ontological quality of creation itself, as well as our epistemic grasp of created order. As one reviewer of O'Donovan summarised: 'belief that the structures within which God has placed us, within which we think and act, including the structure of our being as humans, are given and objective; through the gospel we get an intellectual grip on reality.'<sup>44</sup> The resurrection of Jesus 'vindicates' (a frequently used term by O'Donovan in this work) the created order, displays to humanity the goodness of creation, and enacts the fulfilment of creation's destiny against the enslaving forces of sin and death: 'We are driven to concentrate on the resurrection as our starting point because it tells us of God's vindication of his creation and so of our created life'.<sup>45</sup>

The order of creation, and its vindication through Christ's resurrection, are drawn together for specifically *moral* ends in O'Donovan's understanding of *authority* and reality. As we encounter this theme in the latter half of *RMO*, several claims demand our attention. The first, is that 'Authority is the objective correlate of freedom'.<sup>46</sup> If the driving concern of O'Donovan's work is to secure an understanding of human action that is free, confident and responsible, then authority becomes the foundation for this understanding of agency. Authority is defined as 'what we encounter in the world which makes it meaningful for us to act'.<sup>47</sup> Note here the tightly woven thread of concepts in play. *Free* action is empowered, directed and given its shape by *authority*, and *authority* is found in an objective *reality* separate to us. Or, as O'Donovan writes: '*reality* is the point on which both freedom and authority rest'.<sup>48</sup> This is based upon the conviction that 'Reality is authoritative and action-evoking, and nothing else is'. And so, O'Donovan continues, the 'possibility of moral theology is founded on the dependence of rational action upon reality' and 'of will upon knowledge' of that reality which authorises and directs human actions.<sup>49</sup> The reality in this

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen N. Williams, 'Outline for ethics: a response to Oliver O'Donovan' *Themelios* 13:3, (1988), 86-91, 86.

<sup>45</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>49</sup> O'Donovan, 'How Can Theology Be Moral?', *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17:2 (1989), 81-94, 88.

context that ultimately governs all human living and thinking is the objective ‘reality of the world redeemed’ in Christ, and the subjective reality of ‘the Spirit here and now’.<sup>50</sup> It is Christ’s presence in the power of the Spirit which makes the realities of creation and redemption authoritative for human living. In other words, because such realities summon one’s moral attention, and speak of the world in which moral action takes place, the gospel matters to human life in a way that demands obedience and response. Authority is both the ground and the ultimate end of action: ‘As well as being the object towards which action strives, it is the authority which has called the form of action into being’.<sup>51</sup>

The concept of authority describes a particular theology of God’s guiding presence mediated through the reality of created order. This metaphysic of divine and human relation is a strongly non-contrastive one, in which God’s directive and sustaining work in creation does not undermine the freedom of the creature – but rather *enables* the creature’s true freedom to be found. This is authentically *God’s* work, and yet absolutely does *not* nullify the inherent dignity and being of creation:

the authorising power of created beings derives from the fact that in truth they are God’s handiwork. They owe their power, as they owe their being, to his creative gift and to his continual affirmation of that gift in sustaining providence. There is no authority except *from* God. Nevertheless, that gift was really given. Authority really is vested in creaturely existence. God, in creating, has effected not only other beings, but other powers, yet without in any way diminishing his own sovereign being and power.<sup>52</sup>

Because God is Creator, his relationship to his creation cannot be one which places God’s being at odds and ontologically competing for the same space and time and God’s creation. Instead, God works to *enable* and *ennoble* human activity towards its freedom in God’s flourishing purposes.

The relationship of authority to freedom presumes a rational correspondence between human understanding and divine action. In other words, authority is something *communicative*, and it presupposes the human ability to recognise and respond to God’s directive work. Freedom, reason, reality and authority are therefore tightly held together for O’Donovan: ‘A command cannot evoke rational obedience unless it discloses some aspect of reality. That is what is said when we speak of "authority." Reality is authoritative and action-

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<sup>50</sup> *RMO*, 109.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.



evoking, and nothing else is'.<sup>53</sup> The fact that authority is a quality that does not compel unthinking obedience, but offers and invites rational comprehension and response, implies that rational engagement is a positive feature of dignified and *free* creaturely existence. True creaturely obedience to divine authority 'must be thoughtful obedience'.<sup>54</sup>

The account of authority that O'Donovan articulates also stresses its existential, *aesthetically* and morally captivating quality. What draws human moral will towards the good is an aesthetic captivation that creates a sense of obligation. 'God's authority, his capacity to summon man to desire and action, is mediated through a diversity of created objects, upon which man's affections are ostensibly fixed'.<sup>55</sup> Creation, as stable mediator of the divine will, has its own captivating quality: 'The created order itself is capable of inspiring love or striving.' But this captivating quality is solely because it mediates God's loving and life-giving will: 'God operates secretly through it, breathing life into its otherwise inert form'.<sup>56</sup> Obedience is the fitting creaturely response to the goodness of God's will revealed, which desires truthful and moral conformity to God's will within one's life. Creaturely '[f]reedom begins in delighted astonishment', at the authority of beauty, truth and revelation.<sup>57</sup> Beauty is a characteristic of God's loving desire to draw God's creatures to fulfilment through a means of captivation rather than coercion, of attraction rather than abrasive command.<sup>58</sup>

Obedience to created order is to be understood in precisely these terms, just as the creature's rational apprehension, loving regard and moral response to God's will that is set forth in the created order. Obedience is a matter of congruous living within the order of creation. Knowledge of the world is 'moral knowledge, and as such it is coordinated with obedience'.<sup>59</sup> But this knowledge takes the form of love, which is defined as the 'free

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<sup>53</sup> O'Donovan, 'How Can Theology Be Moral?' 88. An argument similarly made by philosopher Mark Murphy in *An Essay on Divine Authority* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018) 13.

<sup>54</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Moral Authority of Scripture,' in Markus Bockmuehl and Alan J. Torrance (eds.), *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 175. In this essay, and elsewhere, Romans 12:1-3 takes strong precedent, with a central emphasis upon the *rational* nature of obedient worship.

<sup>55</sup> *RMO*, 123.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> O'Donovan, *WJ*, 132.

<sup>58</sup> The themes O'Donovan is beginning to develop here have a strong parallel in John Milbank's and Catherine Pickstock's rich study *Truth in Aquinas*, (London: Routledge, 2001). Especially important is the recovery of a Thomistic vision of perception and truth that rejects nominalist, and implicitly voluntaristic, accounts of truth and language. Instead, creaturely participation in the world is also a strong matter of aesthetic judgement, rather than detached epistemic judgements about correspondence. 'Every judgement of truth for Aquinas is an aesthetic judgement.' Milbank and Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas*, 8.

<sup>59</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 87.

conformity of our agency to the order of things which is given in reality'.<sup>60</sup> To speak then of obedience to the world that God has made requires a rightly coordinated account of knowledge and will, governed by love.

#### 2.4 Creation and History, Order and Novelty: The Challenges for Christian Wisdom

The basic picture of O'Donovan's vision that I have offered so far centres upon the givenness, stability and structure of the reality of creation as that which anchors moral and theological reflection. Modernity's voluntaristic tendencies and its proneness to see human living as a work of self-authorship find, so O'Donovan argues, a critical but constructive answer in the Christian vision finding ourselves within the givenness and the reality of God's creation. Human identity and action need not find their bearing and direction through acts of pure self-creation. Rather, the world of God's making and redeeming is offered to human beings as that order which points the way to human fruition and flourishing, as an order created and sustained by the loving Creator. There are several important qualifications in O'Donovan's account which enrich and enlarge this vision. In light of the previous exploration of Williams' vision, which stresses growth, learning and provisionality as key aspects of our engagements with reality, we move in this section to consider a set of themes in O'Donovan's work which move him nearer to Williams'. In this section, we turn to consider the place of novelty in O'Donovan's account of wisdom. This section tries to display certain similarities with Williams' own vision, but also signals the distinctiveness of O'Donovan's account. The instinct of O'Donovan's vision is to locate the complexity, contingency, and novelty of human experience precisely within this underlying order of creation. There must always be, so O'Donovan argues, an order which grounds our knowing and learning, in such a way that the contingencies of living in history do not erode or destabilise our perceptions of the world and our navigations through life. The novelties and complexities of historical existence take their bearing, therefore, precisely within frequent recourse to the underlying reality of creation.

In *RMO*, during a discussion of the character of Christian knowledge, O'Donovan lays out some of his basic steering principles which develop more specifically in his argument for how disruptive experience fits within human knowledge of creation. Firstly, he argues that knowledge in Christ 'must [...] be knowledge of things *in their relations to the*

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 236.

*totality of things*'.<sup>61</sup> The Christian gospel makes a comprehensive claim upon our attempts to rationally cohere our knowledge of things. The knowledge that the gospel affords is a knowledge of the 'shape of the whole [...] as it gives meaning to the particular'.<sup>62</sup> As such, Christian wisdom claims to have some purchase not merely 'to a fragment of the world but to the world as a whole, a grasp of its interrelations and connexions, a comprehensive view'.<sup>63</sup> This is not to claim that we 'know everything that exists', but rather to cohere a the sense of 'what we do know as part of a meaningful totality'.<sup>64</sup>

Secondly, knowledge in Christ is properly *provisional*, known 'from within'.<sup>65</sup> Human knowledge has no other place from which to begin except the position of finitude and limit. We begin with the knowledge that affects us and engages us in our longings and needs. O'Donovan describes this as "'existential" knowledge, which can occur only as the subject participates in what he knows'.<sup>66</sup> We come to gain a sense of the whole of reality only from the position of particularity: 'The whole can be known only as a mystery which envelops us, into which our minds can reach only with an awareness that there are distances and dimensions which elude us'.<sup>67</sup> Our ordered sense of the whole does not emerge through 'an accumulation of particulars' but rather through the 'historical sequence of particulars'.<sup>68</sup> Knowledge of the world's order is therefore available for growth in depth: 'new particulars' deepen our *prima facie* perceptions of reality such that they can come to be known 'with increasing subtlety and discernment'.<sup>69</sup>

These initial points lead to the important point that Christian knowledge must also be '*ignorant of the end of history*'.<sup>70</sup> Christian wisdom is caught between having to reckon with the inaccessibility of history, whilst still requiring some sense of history's shape sufficient to engage with the immediately disruptive potential of new questions and settings in which we must live without being undone by them. History's opacity is a recurring tension and theme of O'Donovan's work. Likewise, the knowledge afforded by Christ and the kingdom is precisely a knowledge of the *shape* of history, not as a resolution or straightforward transmission of history's end, but rather a promise over the character and presence of God

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>63</sup> O'Donovan, 'Possessing Wisdom,' in *WSB*, 144.

<sup>64</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 77.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 82.

and God's purposes in the midst of history's throes. These three principles of the character of Christian knowledge enrich O'Donovan's basic picture of human relation to created order, but still point to creation as the essential anchoring for his Christian vision of perceiving and participating in reality.

Later in *RMO*, he develops this discussion to consider more specifically the 'dilemma of historical existence', namely 'constant encounter with the new'.<sup>71</sup> This discussion is of particular importance and brings the phenomenological relation of disruption and stability in O'Donovan's work more closely into view. O'Donovan's focus is what he terms the 'problem of historical existence', namely the 'awareness of novelty, [and] a sense that each episode is "new" in relation to what preceded it'.<sup>72</sup> The nub of this problem is the way that 'it implies that the field of action come to us uninterpreted, and so possibly unintelligible'.<sup>73</sup> The first implication of this problem, for O'Donovan, is the anxiety that 'we are threatened at each turn by a universe which we do not know and cannot recognise, in which memory will not serve us or may even mislead us; life is a series of challenges, none of which conforms to the same rules as any other'.<sup>74</sup> But the challenges of profoundly new moral situations to ethics challenges the very foundation of 'our continuity as acting subjects'.<sup>75</sup> Because the new seems sharply disjunctive in relation to the old, it questions our grasp of the coherency of the moral order which shapes moral action.

For the self to find stability, continuity and confidence in the face of history's newness there must be 'a measure by which novelty can be comprehended, understood and integrated into our experience'.<sup>76</sup> Such an understanding for O'Donovan must be derived 'from the objective world-order with which our experience has put us in touch'.<sup>77</sup> It is in creation that moral deliberation finds the firm rudder by which to navigate the throes of history. Creation is the 'presupposition of history',<sup>78</sup> it is 'that which is non-negotiable within the course of history'.<sup>79</sup> In addition, creation is the presupposition not simply of human history, and the contingencies of time in our immediate experience, but also the anchor of salvation history. At each level of history, it is creation which offers humanity a stable footing from which to perceive and assess novelty:

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 60-61.

For history to be meaningful history, and for God's freedom to be gracious freedom, there must also be order which is not subject to historical change. Otherwise history could only be uninterpretable movement [...] (God) is the author, not only of change itself, but of the order which makes that change good.<sup>80</sup>

Discerning the novelties of history within the purposes of God is made possible by viewing history in relation to the stability and permanence of created order. The givenness of creation provides resources by which to discern the novelties of moral existence according to the goodness of God's created purposes.

Developing the skills by which to assess the newness of history in relation to the permanence of God's purposes in creation is a key aspect of wisdom. Wisdom, for O'Donovan, involves cultivating our seeing of the world and its history, such that 'every novelty, in its own way, manifests the permanence and stability of the created order'.<sup>81</sup>

Without a generic order new things would indeed be incomprehensible [...] The utterly "unique situation", if we were ever to encounter it, would destroy us and the universe. Wisdom liberates us from the persistent fear of that unutterable and unknowable uniqueness by enabling us to interpret each particular thing, in all its newness to us, generically, and so measure its difference from other things and respond to it appropriately according to its kind. Thus, wisdom greets new things with recognition, and new moral decisions can be made.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, a critical aspect of wisdom is the making of connections between the familiarity and stability of created order, in relation to the disruptive experience of new moral situations.

This conviction that newness and disruption will provide deeper perceptions of what is already known in the created order is worked out in O'Donovan's account of moral learning, which traces how new experiences build upon and deepen previous apprehensions of reality. He draws upon the language of sanctification to speak about the way that our

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 189. This theological conviction that experiences of historical novelty will deepen our apprehension of creation's permanence perhaps diminishes the subjunctive aspects of contingent and difficult experiences generated through suffering and crisis in history. For example, Gerhard von Rad's account of wisdom shares with O'Donovan the centrality of creation as the order through which God's manifests His loving will for humanity. (See von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1981), 298-299) Such is the wisdom of Proverbs - chapter 8 especially. O'Donovan's early account of divine providence, we will see, also tends to preserve and maintain the familiar givenness of created order. But for von Rad, the challenge of Ecclesiastes and Job are precisely that experiences of suffering *do* challenge our trust in the goodness of God and the stability of creation. However, what von Rad's account of wisdom emphasises, which is something that O'Donovan's early understanding of creation lacks, is that the ordering of creation is not a given that is immediately available for us, but rather a trust that God's faithfulness to creation *will eventually* be seen. See von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, 191-195 and 303-307.

<sup>82</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 189.

visions of reality are deepened over time in accordance with our original vision of created order:

There is a mode of learning, which is not accumulation on the one hand, not merely a sequence of repentings on the other. There is “sanctification” [...] as well as “justification”, which does not, nevertheless, defy the fundamental principle of grace, that when Christ was given, everything was given. We can know *better* what we already know *in outline*.<sup>83</sup>

Because our knowledge is consistently aimed at a sense of the whole, this means that novelty will either force a rethink of our whole sense of moral order, or it will deepen our already truthful but limited understandings of reality: ‘moral understanding is a grasp of the whole shape of things’.<sup>84</sup> To learn a ‘radically new moral truth’ necessitates a change to the ‘shape of the whole outlook’.<sup>85</sup> O’Donovan expands on this claim: ‘One cannot *add* moral truth to moral truth; one can only *repent* false perceptions of the moral order and turn to truer ones’.<sup>86</sup> This point reinforces the basic theme that creation is the foundation of moral knowledge of reality. If we are rooted in true knowledge of creation, given in Christ, then history will enlarge and grow such an apprehension. The kind of radical reorientation which textures Williams’ account of learning is alien to O’Donovan’s understanding. For O’Donovan, the novelty of history will either show our prior understandings of reality to be *false* – to which the only response is repentance. Or newness will discerningly be able to deepen our prior apprehension of created reality: ‘It is the intellectual penetration and exploration of a reality which we can grasp from the beginning in a schematic and abstract way, but which contains depths of meaning and experience in which we must reach’.<sup>87</sup>

The shape of moral learning and Christian wisdom in O’Donovan’s earlier writings is one that firmly tethers itself to the familiarity and givenness of reality as it is perceived in creation and redemption. Time is a threat to knowing this order intelligibly. Interpreting this disruption intelligibly typically locates disruptive experience within the deeper familiar and givenness of creation:

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 92. This is not to claim that, for O’Donovan, repentance will not be a regular rhythm of the Christian life. Rather, that there is a singular significance to our repentance, which anchors human vision in Christ, which can not be repeated

[T]here can be no interpretation which does not find the known within the unknown; and in moral learning we expect to see emerging through all the new shapes and forms that we encounter the same determining patterns, and the same opposition of true and false, that we first sought to discern and understand when we repented.<sup>88</sup>

The development which we see occur into O'Donovan's later work is the more positive sense that all of our understandings of creation are inextricably temporal, meaning that knowledge of reality does not protect us from subsequent unlearning and re-learning. These experiences of reorientation are precisely what truthful engagement with the real will entail. We turn now to consider the developments of this theme in O'Donovan's recent trilogy.

### 2.5 *Ethics as Theology*: Revision or Refinement?

At a surface level, the angle of O'Donovan's approach, and the tenor of his vision in *Ethics as Theology* shows a rich development in many of his central instincts, in ways that may alter the picture I have painted thus far. O'Donovan's later trilogy is marked by deepened phenomenological tenor. Martin Heidegger and Jean Yves-Lacoste are noticeable influences in this shift. The "thrownness" which pervades Heidegger's account of our experience of being and time is close to O'Donovan's conviction that the starting point of our experience is from within the midst of a set of moral obligations that claim us.<sup>89</sup> These deepened phenomenological notes also move O'Donovan's explorations in these works nearer to many of Williams' core instincts – the provisionality, contingency and constantly growing ways that human perception finds and refines its way in the world. The purpose of this section is initially to consider the continuities and developments within O'Donovan's writings, and especially to show the greater sense of overlap between Williams and O'Donovan's more recent work.

Those parts of O'Donovan's recent trilogy that jar most strongly with the picture I have given of his earlier work are those concerned with the place of time in the Christian life, and in human perceptions of creation:

Not only the immediate sense-impressions and mediated perceptions of tradition, but the world constructed upon them, shares the passing character of time. The created order is an order in time, and time passes.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>89</sup> Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 72.

<sup>90</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 74.

Since all perceiving and living takes place in time, temporality takes on a more determinative role in the later trilogy: ‘The world passes temporally and is thus patient to action; action is realised in world-engagement and thus in time; time is measured in action and so frames the objective world’.<sup>91</sup> He writes of how one must constantly ‘move beyond the immediacy of first experience’ into deeper perceptions of reality.<sup>92</sup> The task of growing in wisdom and truthful engagement with reality involves continually drawing these fragmentary ‘moments of attention’ into a wider vision of reality.<sup>93</sup>

Rather than a radical refinement of O’Donovan’s underlying moral-theological vision, we see in this trilogy an *enrichment* and *enlargement* of this picture, which also remains fundamentally distinctive from Williams’ vision. The realism of O’Donovan’s earlier work remains central in this later account. The world of our moral action, the world which is not of our construction or origination, was ‘a reality before I was a reality, and [an] object of attention to God, angels and men before it was an object of my attention’.<sup>94</sup> Living in accordance with the world of God’s making remains central to O’Donovan’s vision: ‘our actions must fit in with how things are, not fly in the face of objective reality’.<sup>95</sup> He summarises this foundational realism when he writes that:

Objective truth is the condition of all moral awareness, for moral awareness is the demand that the world lays on my inner self without *being* my inner self. To be morally awake is to be “invested” or “taken over” by reality from beyond myself.<sup>96</sup>

He later develops this sense in which creation summons our moral attention: ‘created order itself is not without a voice but has the resources to call us’.<sup>97</sup> Creation is not a static object but has a certain mediated sense of liveliness which summons moral attention to loving conformity. The call of creation to our moral imaginations is ultimately the “call of Wisdom” – as God calls human beings to live in loving conformity with the givenness of creation order.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 19.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>97</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 101.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 100



The central concepts of these later works – self, world and time – enrich the realism of his early works. Yes, the beginning of the moral life, for O'Donovan, involves a cognisant 'awakening' to the '*truth of a world*'.<sup>99</sup> But this picture is enriched through greater attentiveness to the peculiarity of '*our way*' through such a world (and 'to *oneself*').<sup>100</sup> And, finally, to 'wake is to become aware [...] of *time*'.<sup>101</sup> In looking to the world and time, the individual self's moral awakening is looking for an intelligible sense of reality in both its structural and its temporal dimensions.

As such, creation's character in O'Donovan's later work has a greater sense of fullness that exceeds our immediate grasp. Engaging with reality requires an ongoing recognition that the world which I perceive as "my world" – the world that I know 'only as I stand within it' – cannot be immediately or straightforwardly equated with the fundamental 'order of things as it was and will be'. To a comprehensive and final view of reality's coherence we 'have no direct access'.<sup>102</sup> Truth comes to us in fragmentary, provisional and partial ways. It takes time for us to grow into a fuller picture of things:

[t]he truth of the world is not digested in one gulp, and getting to know the truth and our place within it is a slow and complex matter, the relevant truth must reach us through a series of experiences, memories, reports, any one of which can be set aside and qualified by any other.<sup>103</sup>

The incompleteness of perception, and the fullness of reality, lead to a developed account of reality's objective givenness being a quality which we continue to discover and learn *over time*: 'All our knowledge and love is incomplete; there is no total purchase on any reality in the world, only a partial coming to grips with it, which may, however, promise further discovery and encounter'.<sup>104</sup>

This developed sense of time's importance in understanding the reality of the world is seen in O'Donovan's reframed definition of authority in *Self, World and Time*.<sup>105</sup> Truth and objective reality remain essential to what is authoritative within our lives: 'Nothing can be thought or undertaken to any effect unless some truth about the world undergirds it'.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 10.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>104</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 81.

<sup>105</sup> He defines authority in this later work as 'an event in which a reality is communicated to practical reason by a social communication'. O'Donovan, *SWT*, 53.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

However, there is a developed sense that what is authoritative in creation for moral action *takes time* to discern: ‘(a)uthority is not simply vested in the world, self and time as soon as we awake to them’.<sup>107</sup> Authority is not immediately present and straightforwardly perceivable. To look for authority in this way would reduce ‘all authority to self-evidence, all obedience to common sense’.<sup>108</sup> O’Donovan moves away from what he regards as his previously ‘flat and this-worldly’ account of authority in *RMO*.<sup>109</sup> In the later account, reality does not immediately encounter human beings as a comprehensive whole in a single instant. God given authority does not encounter us immediately and all at once, instead authority is a ‘*focused disclosure* of reality’.<sup>110</sup> O’Donovan expands on this claim: ‘Reality is shown us, but instead of seeing it whole, entire, and in the round, we see it through *this* demonstration, *this* personality, *this* theory, *this* command’.<sup>111</sup> As such, the organisation and application of authoritative disclosures of reality are tasks which cannot be achieved in an instant but rather take time and discernment.

In a similar vein, this temporally reoriented account of authority affords a greater sense of the need for correction, refinement and growth in our visions of objective reality that shape our moral lives. The call of wisdom is ‘the call of the world’s temporal openness to knowledge, a call addressed to our powers of living through time’.<sup>112</sup> When we encounter the world, we encounter an aspect of something which promises a sense of ‘the whole’, however ‘the world as a whole does not remain quiescent in our grasp, but slips away and calls us to look further to it. Each finding leaves with something further to help us with further pursuit’.<sup>113</sup> It is truly ‘objective reality’ that ‘is held in our minds’. However, it is ‘in a manner that we never immediately perceive it’.<sup>114</sup> So we look on a world sure of its stability and accessibility, but which also promises a sense of depth that can never be fully captured.

These later developments draw O’Donovan’s vision closer to Williams, but with a sense of comprehension and stability in O’Donovan’s realism that still leaves space between these accounts. Deepening our apprehension of the real may involve significant reorientations, but O’Donovan stresses that developments in our understanding of the real will never be completely discontinuous with what comes before: ‘Losing hold on the world

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 54. (emphasis mine)

<sup>112</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 100.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 101.

and seeing reality melt before one's eyes leaves one in no condition to learn anything. To learn is to integrate, and nothing can be integrated with a *tabula rasa*.<sup>115</sup> For Williams, the kind of unlearning in prayer, contemplation and learning will always entail a particular kind of *loss*, be it letting go of false perceptions of self or the world. For O'Donovan, we must continually look to the world to refresh our vision of it. However, our growing perception of it can never take the form of a '*tabula rasa*, beginning the whole inquiry after wisdom from the beginning again'.<sup>116</sup> Instead O'Donovan's vision of learning and growth revolves around the unifying notion of *integration*. 'We do not simply pick up more and more pieces of knowledge, but integrate what we learn with what we have known already.'<sup>117</sup> New understandings and perspectives that help us see reality more deeply should be welcomed, but 'new perceptions can only be interpreted within a framework of order that unifies and situates them'.<sup>118</sup> This leaves us then on a note of greater provisionality than where we began in *RMO*, 'If Wisdom always presents herself on the horizon of possibility, our arrivals cannot be final.'<sup>119</sup> But it is still located within a confident sense that the knowledge of reality to which God's invites humanity is to a provisional sense of the *whole*: 'we should not make the mistake of sceptics in every age, supposing that if we cannot know with finality, we cannot know at all [...] Knowledge is offered us, knowledge suited to our pilgrim condition.'<sup>120</sup>

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has set out to show a relatively simple claim about O'Donovan's writings, and then to approach this theme from a variety of angles, showing how this basic instinct of O'Donovan's has developed. The instinct in question is that good, wise, and fulfilled Christian living finds its direction through harmonic living with the order of the world as God has made it. His vision of the life is thoroughly *realist*, which takes its direction from the reality of the world as it is given to us. Likewise, it is thoroughly rooted in *creation*. The significance of reality is, for O'Donovan, that it anchors a stable and purposeful account of moral action. Action can be free, responsible and intelligible, because it takes its direction from a reality which exists not as a product of the will but as a fixed work of God.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 101.

The challenge to understanding reality, and therefore to the task of moral agency, is that of *time*. In his early work, time and disruption are considered in more straightforwardly negative terms as those threats to our understanding of the generic order of creation, and the task of bringing our moral lives into conformity with this order. As O'Donovan's thought develops there is a greater sense that time is also an essential feature of reality and our engagement with it. The shape of moral learning cannot look for perspicuous or immediate perceptions of reality to remain unchanged. Rather, in a more phenomenological tenor, O'Donovan stresses that reality will continue to call us to deeper engagement, as our love and knowledge of the world grows through reorientation and correction.

Williams and O'Donovan locate their visions against a backdrop of common concerns – the problems inherent in modern myths of self-creation and self-authorship, rooted in modernity's voluntaristic tendencies; and the failures of modernity to find intelligible ways of making sense of the world that will help orient individual and corporate human living. However, their responses to these concerns are sharply contrasting. Both thinkers are committed to realist instincts about the objective world perceived by human beings and represented in language. But their emphases are significantly different. The first word in William's realist vision is *difficulty*. The mark of true engagement with the reality which does not originate with human beings is precisely the massive *labour*, creativity and complexity involved in engaging with a reality which evades easy or decisive representation. Williams' emphases tend towards those segments of reality which are complex, and difficult to capture in language (something seen especially in his understanding of poetry, and his reflections of suffering and the Christian life). For O'Donovan, the word often associated with his realist vision is that of *authority*. The world of God's making and redeeming which summons human attention is precisely the mediated call of God, conveyed through the goodness of God's ways and the goodness of creation, which invite human beings to obedience and wisdom. O'Donovan's realism is distinctively moral in its concerns, insisting that the question 'how do I live well?' finds intelligible and accessible resources through the goodness of creation.

Williams' account of learning stresses the difficulty, intelligible abundance, and endless creativity which marks out human engagement with objective reality. The shape of such learning is therefore marked by contingency, limit and an openness to the surprise and disruption of new ways of seeing reality. Truthful learning in the task of Christian living entails, for Williams, an endless and never finished quality, as human beings continue to

engage with the surprising ways of God. It is *temporal* and *musical* in its underlying structure.

O'Donovan's account is more pronouncedly *architectural* in its approach. The failures of modernity to provide human beings with the resources to understand themselves and their world provide an opportunity to recover a Christian vision of reality, in which identity and intelligibility are found precisely through deep attentiveness to the good world of God's making and redeeming. Fruition and flourishing are found through participation and conformity with the order of creation. O'Donovan's picture is altogether more stable and more settled than Williams'. The reality of the world that engages us beckons us to reckon with the *orderliness* and *stability* of the world in which God has placed us. The account of Christian wisdom and learning in O'Donovan is one that leans more towards the God-given empowerment to engage confidently with reality, which offers a stability and certainty to our perceptions of the world, and our active response to the order of things. This contrasts richly with Williams' own picture of learning, in which truthful learning is never able to finish the journey of exploration, repentance, and coping with the possibility of God's ever-surprising purposes in the world's midst. For O'Donovan, the Christian life entails entering that already achieved, already complete and eternal Sabbath rest. For Williams, the Christian life entails constant engagement with the ever surprising and disruptive ways of God, who continually leads us through the tragedy of cross and into the abundance of resurrection life.

There is something complementary about these two accounts. The difficulty of William's account of language is complemented by O'Donovan's confidence about the resources afforded for moral agency in creation – the world we encounter may be riven with complexity, but when perceived alongside faith in God as Creator and Sustainer, we may likewise trust that God will lead us in flourishing ways through such difficult negotiations. Likewise, Williams' account of error and self-deception which marks out all human thought and speech provides a helpful counter-note to O'Donovan's sense of human capability to perceive and engage with created order – though a Christian vision of creation can ground a trust in our capabilities to perceive and respond to all that God has done, such responses will always be imperfectly worked out amidst deep habits and histories of sin and self-deception, meaning that repentance is a work never finished. These contrasts, I will argue, offer a set of dissonant but equally necessary features of Christian faithfulness and wisdom. The logic of these contrasts about the shape and texture of Christian living has important roots in O'Donovan's and Williams' differing accounts of creation and Christology, and we now turn

in the next two chapters to consider the doctrine of creation in Williams' and then O'Donovan's works.



### **Chapter 3.**

#### **Time, Growth and Finitude: Creation and Creatureliness in Rowan Williams**

Having already introduced in outline the central contrast of this thesis, we turn in the next two chapters to consider a doctrine which is pivotal in understanding the contrasting visions of Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan: the doctrine of creation. The contrast established thus far is partly rooted in the different ways in which they understand this doctrine. For Williams' vision of the Christian life – that of an endless journey of learning and growing into the intelligible abundance of the world received through Christ – creation is key. Confessing God as the Creator of all things is, for Williams, to learn precisely that I, as a creature, *am not* God: that my life is marked out by all kinds of creaturely limits, and that the created world in which I live will be marked by all kinds of gratuity, novelty and surprise. This contrasts with the O'Donovan's vision of creation which, we will see in chapter 4, focusses on the steadfastness of creation over time as the order which directs human living within God's good purposes. In this chapter, I will argue that the sense of provisionality and contingency which characterise Christian living in Williams' writings, and the surprising and disruptive quality that characterise human engagement with God, are deeply rooted in his account of creation and creaturely existence. The purposes of the next chapters are, therefore, twofold. Firstly, to show the integrity and unity of O'Donovan's and Williams' visions, and the congruity between their fundamental doctrinal convictions and the shape of the Christian life that emerges from their accounts of the Christian vision. And, secondly, to show that Williams' and O'Donovan's understandings of creation, whilst united in certain key convictions, diverge regarding the character of creaturely existence in subtle ways that are then amplified in their understandings of the lived and affective shape of Christian existence.

I begin with the foundation of Williams' vision of creation, namely God's creation of the world *ex nihilo* (section 1). The gratuitousness of this act displays God's character in terms of non-coercive love that wills the good of the other. God is the infinite, fecund, and abundant presence in which all created being finds its creation and preservation. As such, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is the basis for Williams' account of creaturely life which, in its fullest, is characterised by loving, dependent and mutual relationship with God and neighbour. In the sections that follow, I trace three important themes in Williams' account of creaturely existence. Firstly, the centrality of *loving dependence* as the defining mark of created existence. In contrast to God's infinite abundance, creation is finite: it is contingent and dependent (section 2). Secondly, an essential mark of creaturely dependency and finitude



is, for Williams, the pervasive *temporal* quality of creation and creaturely existence. It is characteristic of created being to change and grow through dependent relation with its Creator. Creation comes to share in the divine life precisely through an embrace of finitude, history and active dependence on God (section 3). Thirdly, the finite and contingent character of creaturely life is, for Williams, seen especially in those *mortal limits* that delineate our existence (section 4). These running themes of creation's finite, time-bound and contingent character in Williams' writings on creation are central to my reading of him, and provide a way which enables Williams to be drawn into creative contrast with O'Donovan's vision.<sup>1</sup> The chapter ends with a discussion of Williams' theology of providence (section 5). Williams' account of providence sustains and heightens his convictions about the nature of creaturely life: its subjunctive and contingent quality, and the centrality of human freedom achieved through dependence on God and solidarity with neighbour.

In short, Williams' vision of creation is one that understands creation not as a fixed order, but one that displays its essential character only insofar as it is drawn into the loving purposes of God, and into an unseen and redemptive future with Christ. Within this account of creation, Williams' account of creaturely existence, and the divine accompaniment of humanity through time, he stresses the provisional, finite and dependent aspects of being human. In contrast to O'Donovan, the doctrine of creation in Williams' writings does not provide an assured or stable basis from which to survey our lives. Instead, learning to be a creature, and learning to see the world as God's creation, entails a journey of recognising my frailty and limit amidst a world riven with novelty and mystery. Their different pictures of creation, and their understandings of creaturely existence, are interwoven with a sharply contrasting picture of the affective shape of Christian living, which will be the subject of later chapters.

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<sup>1</sup>There are two important caveats to register about my reading of Williams' vision of creation. Firstly, Williams' metaphysics of creation is not wholly unique. Whilst I focus strongly on his writings in this chapter in ways that may not always register at every point the connections with a wider array of thinkers, many of his arguments find important parallels in other contemporary theologians, who stress in varied yet consistent ways the centrality of this doctrine in anchoring the Christian vision. For a particularly influential work in contemporary reflection on the doctrine of creation, which parallels much of Williams' own logic and emphases, see Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988); for two more general works that explore this theme see Janet Martin Soskice (ed.) *Creation "Ex Nihilo" and Modern Theology* (Oxford: Wiley, 2013), and Gary Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (eds.), *Creation Ex Nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2021). And my second caveat: one might expect in a chapter of Williams' understanding of creation to find an in-depth engagement with his recent work *Christ The Heart of Creation*. This work has informed the approach and argument of this chapter. However, engagement with this work will be reserved for chapters 5 and 6 in their discussions of Christology.

### 3.1 From Nothing: The Creator and the Work of Creation

A central theme of Williams' doctrine of creation is that of Trinitarian gratuity exercised within the act of *creatio ex nihilo*. Creation exists by virtue of the fullness, abundance, and lovingly creative character of the divine life: 'when God creates the world, God acts out of a full, not an inchoate, identity'.<sup>2</sup> God's work of creation is an act of incomparable love and power, which congruously characterises all subsequent loving relations towards God's creatures. This section traces two significant themes in Williams' writings. The first is the significance of what creation *ex nihilo* displays about the character of God's love and almightiness. Because God has made the creation *ex nihilo*, then all that is exists by virtue solely of God's loving goodness and power. This power is not, as certain feminist critics rightly argue, a limitless exertion of will that stifles the life of creatures. Rather, this power displays God's love to create the world and lead it to its loving end. This leads to the second point about the character of creation *ex nihilo* in Williams' writings, namely that because the world has its origin in God alone, so too does its subsequent life find its orientation and fulfilment only through loving and dependent relation to its Creator. God is not the opponent, but the enabler of creaturely flourishing. The importance of these arguments put forth by Williams is that God's character as Creator, far from diminishing or dominating the life of creatures, is ultimately concerned with the full flourishing of creation *as* creation.

Williams' writings on creation frequently take as their starting point the important political and ethical critiques offered by feminist theologians and uses these as an entry point into his reflections. Two of Williams' central essays on creation begin with readings of feminist theologians such as Catherine Keller, Sallie McFague, Rosemary Ruether, and Anne Primavesi, all of whom suggest that the Christian understanding of creation has much to be responsible for in acting as justification for oppressive hierarchies that have led to contemporary problems of gender inequality and climate injustice.<sup>3</sup> In our own time, and in the intellectual undercurrents that produced it, the Christian doctrine of creation has been set in the sights of constructive and antagonistic critiques of the Christian vision. The voluntaristic God who has been perceived to lie behind the creation of the universe, the product of divine will, has been associated with the dominant God of patriarchy who has been

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, *GN*, 164

<sup>3</sup> See Williams, 'On Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 63-66; and Williams "'Good for Nothing?": Augustine on Creation' *OA*, 59-60.

rightly critiqued by feminist scholars. Yet Williams finds creation from nothing is instead the very foundation of conceiving of a gracious God of liberation whose presence frees and enables the full flourishing of God's creatures. Creation is not a product of sheer and abrasive will, but rather witnesses to the generative and creative kindness of the Creator in making all that is not God, and for that to be loved into the fullness of life by this very Creator.

There is another important *metaphysical* qualification to the nature of divine power, namely that we must think of God's power in ways that avoid any hint of voluntarism that understands creation in terms of the alien divine will exercising abrasive power over the material of creation. Williams' argument is precisely to find creation-from-nothing as the liberative doctrine which shows that the divine power displayed in creation is not some kind of imposition of one kind of agency over and against another. In creating and sustaining the world we see that:

God's action cannot *compete* with created agency, God does not have to overcome a rival presence, the creative power of God is not power exercised unilaterally over some other force, but is itself the ground of all power and all agency within creation.<sup>4</sup>

The freedom of God exercised in creating all that is, is precisely a choice to create something *other* with its own dignity and freedom. Williams puts this firmly when he argues that: 'The absolute freedom ascribed to God in creation means that God *cannot* make a reality that then needs to be actively governed, subdued and bent to divine power away from its natural course'.<sup>5</sup> God's freedom and power as Creator is seen in the *sharing* with creation the potential for freedom and love along with a dignity of its own, which in turn is able to participate with the divine life.

Another aspect of the divine freedom witnessed in creation is the way that God's loving intention is motivated by no sense of lack in answering a 'need' or insufficiency within the divine life. Williams' writings attend to this theme in a disciplined and sustained way in order to rid any sense in our speech about God as thinking of our action as being the resolution to this divine need. In his essay on creation in an Augustinian key, he argues that if

creation really is "good for nothing": its *point* is not to serve a divine need. The early Christian claim that God creates out of nothing presupposed the possibility and reality of a love *not* based on kinship or similarity, since it presupposed a God willing

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<sup>4</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, 'Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 69.

to make real something wholly other than the divine life and to endow it with beauty, rationality and liberty.<sup>6</sup>

This conviction places creation at the centre of a Christian vision that offers good news to humanity. Because human beings don't fulfill a divine need, and because God's loving will is not warranted by any particular human response, this means that all God does is singularly and undistractedly oriented towards the flourishing of human beings through mutual and active relation with God.

Creation points to the abundance of God. We recall Williams' claim that 'when God creates the world, God acts out of a full, not an inchoate, identity'.<sup>7</sup> The freedom of God from any sense of lack or insufficiency within God's self also tells us that creation's source is this very joy, love, and fullness that characterises the being of God.

God is, in simple terms, sublimely and eternally happy to be God, and the fact that this sublime eternal happiness overflows into the act of creation is itself a way of telling us that God is to be trusted absolutely.<sup>8</sup>

God's love and joy is the defining characteristic displayed in creating the heavens and the earth. This is proper and fitting to God's identity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. 'Creation is a free outpouring of what God is; but that free outpouring makes sense because God simply is the Father of the Son, the breather of the Spirit from all eternity.'<sup>9</sup> The sharing of God's life to creation is what is 'natural to God' a natural expression of God's identity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

It is God's love that characterises God's power – the two are a united and shared aspect of the perfectly simple being of God. The nature of God's 'almighty power' is less to do with a limitless voluntarism, but more to do with 'a steady swell of loving presence, always there at work in the centre of everything that is, opening the door to a future even when we can see no hope'.<sup>11</sup> In a lengthy and helpful expansion on this theme in Williams' work, Higton writes:

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 72.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *GN*, 164.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, *TT*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence,' in Bruce Ellis Benson (ed.), *Being-in-creation: Human Responsibility in an Endangered World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *TT*, 44.

The word “God” in Christian theology, does not name a being or reality of unfettered power, who has *chosen* to love – it does not, that is, name a reality in which power goes deeper than love. Rather, it names a reality for whom [...] love goes all the way down. In the Christian picture, God’s power always and only emerges from God’s love – God’s will from God’s loving nature [...] There is no shadow of power without love in God.<sup>12</sup>

Since God’s will and power are an extension of, and are defined by, the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we can see both the expansive and powerful possibilities of God’s love, and also a helpful qualifier about what is meant by divine almightiness. The themes here of God’s love and power converge in an understanding of creation whereby creatures have their own integrity and life – able to joyfully share and fully participate within God’s being.

I now turn to draw out this thread in Williams’s writings regarding God’s love and power and note the connections with his wider vision of divine agency in relation to creaturely life.

The context of God’s non-contrastive agency in relation to human agency emerges in in a set of discussions in William’s writings about the foundation and growth of human identity. Human existence is basically configured by a longing for loving and assuring relationship and union with God. There is an essential “neediness” to being human that drives human living. The ultimate longing for God is seen in a refracted form in the human longings for intimacy and love in their various kinds:

love is hopelessly entangled in need and dependence – the need to find in another, human or divine, human *and* divine, the happiness we cannot generate in ourselves; the recognition that we must let ourselves be “made”, to some degree, by others, because we can’t complete ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

This means that ‘I become a self only in the self-dispossession of discovering that there are things I cannot acquire, goals I cannot attain’.<sup>14</sup> The self shrinks from the fear of not being loved. Or, put more starkly and negatively, the self shrinks when one encounters a kind of otherness that is perceived as a diminishing threat to one’s sense of individual identity. So, the journey into selfhood emerges only through a continued engagement with ‘concrete otherness’. However, the journey into selfhood also requires a sense of trust and assurance that the otherness it engages with is not ‘a threat or rival’ to my foundational sense of self.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel* (London: SCM, 2004), 39.

<sup>13</sup> Williams, ‘Loving God,’ *OtJ*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, ‘Interiority and Epiphany,’ *OCT*, 243.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

As such, ‘the self is free to *grow* ethically [...] only when it is not under obligation to defend itself above all else’ and when it is not forced ‘to carve out its place in a potentially hostile environment’.<sup>16</sup> In other words, in order to grow the self needs a kind of assurance, a kind of ‘justification’ that can be found most perfectly in ‘God’s indiscriminate welcome’. This welcome tells us that ‘we are reckoned to have a right to be, by God’s free determination’.<sup>17</sup>

God’s trustworthiness is evidenced through God’s lack of rivalrous ‘interest’ with human beings. It is here that God’s freedom, fullness and utter lack of need is precisely that in which human freedom and longing find their nourishment and fulfilment. In a lengthy quotation, Williams draws out the connection of these themes:

That God is never threatened by finite action entails that there is a level at which my own being is not capable of being threatened. It is simply established by God’s determination as creator – that is, by God’s will for what is authentically other to the divine being to exist. My behaviour does not have to be a defensive strategy in the face of what is radically and irreducibly other, because the radicality of that otherness is precisely what establishes my freedom from the necessity to negotiate with it.<sup>18</sup>

In a similar passage from a more recent work, Williams writes:

God is in no imaginable sense the rival of humanity [...] the relation between finite and infinite agency can never be one in which more of one means less of the other, and (crucially) that God can therefore have no “interests” to defend over against the interest of the creatures God has made out of unconstrained and selfless love.<sup>19</sup>

If holy living requires an assurance that my sense of personal identity is preserved and sustained by God from everlasting to everlasting, then this must begin at the very least with a recognition of one’s createdness alongside God’s boundless creative goodness. Apprehending ourselves and our world as God’s creative work shows the worthiness of God for our confession of trust and praise in his goodness, making it possible to say: ‘I trust, I have confidence in, I take refuge in, the God who has made everything and so can have no selfish purpose’.<sup>20</sup> At every stage the doctrine of creation involves a ‘vision of God as that upon which all things depend’ and an affirmation of ‘the changeless consistency of God as love’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *TT*, 14.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, ‘Being Creatures,’ *OCT*, 74.

The Christian confession of the world existing solely by virtue of God's loving and creative power displays the unchanging and trustworthy goodness of God. Creation is the foundational and *promissory* work of God's faithfulness – that the God who made the world will continually pour out God's loving faithfulness upon all that is, and lead creation to its flourishing end. Likewise, that creation is made from nothing except God's loving and creative power, so too does this same power direct and enable the full flourishing of creatures to be as God made them to be: finite, contingent, and dependent upon God. We now develop this insight from Williams' writings that creation's absolute dependence upon the creative and sustaining work of God is suggestive of a shape of creaturely existence which strives to be openly and vulnerably dependent in relation to God and neighbour.

### 3.2 Living in Trust: Being Human in Creation

The doctrine of creation offers a powerful conception of human beings at once dignified and imbued by God with significance and value, and also characterised by frailty and finitude. This is central to Williams' picture of creation and is central to his distinctive account of the shape of Christian living. We take up this theme here especially as it appears in the concentrated discussions in 'On Being Creatures'. The basic picture of creaturely existence in Williams' writings is one that stresses the finitude of human creature. Life is marked by loving and dependent relationship with the Creator. We consider, firstly, this basic point about dependence of all things for God for their very being. This is then developed, secondly, through Williams' account of human selfhood. As creatures, it is characteristic for humanity to be marked by both agency and dependency. This sense of agency is at once marked by a real sense of integrity, dignity and responsibility, however it also retains a sense of 'questionability' of openness and vulnerability to God and other.

God's creation of the heavens and the earth *ex nihilo* shows that created reality is wholly dependent on the faithfulness of God. This is an instinct wholly shared by Williams and O'Donovan alike. It is taken as an integral given of the Christian vision, for both thinkers, that the world exists only by virtue of God's creative and sustaining goodness. Where their accounts diverge is precisely about the importance of *creatio ex nihilo* for the shape of creaturely existence. For O'Donovan, as we will see, a central theme of his doctrine of creation is the integral connection of *creatio ex nihilo* to creation's stability and permanence. In making the world, God makes an order which precedes any movement in time, thereby offering a steadfast anchor for all subsequent divine and human working.

Creaturely life finds its fruition through loving conformity with this stable and permanent order of creation. For Williams, as we now see, creation from nothing leads in a very different theological direction. Because the world is made and sustained wholly as a work of divine love, the life of creatures come to share in this life *precisely* by being not God. This means that, for Williams, creaturely fruition is found through embracing finitude, contingency, temporality and limit. These visions are not irreconcilable, though the sharp contrast of these visions on this particular point is worth noting.

For Williams, the nature of creation's dependency on God is only partly to do with the chronology and aetiology of creation's coming into existence.<sup>22</sup> Creation's dependence on God rather means that 'the entire situation of the universe, at any given moment, exists as a real situation because of God's reality being, as it were, turned away from God to generate what is not God'.<sup>23</sup> Aside from God's faithful and generative love, creation would not be. Indeed, the work of creation demonstrates God's complete committal of God's self to the flourishing existence of God's creatures: 'For God to create is for God to "commit" his action, his life, to sustaining a reality that is different from him, and doing so without interruption'.<sup>24</sup> Before any response by the creature, their sense of dependence on the sustaining and preserving work of God is real irrespective of the creature's subjective disposition and response to their Creator.

But there is a more active posture of dependence which the creature is invited in to with their God, that entails obedience and loving dependence on God. There is an essential mutuality and loving relationship that defines the natural relationship of God to humanity. The purpose of creation, for Williams, is to draw human beings deeper into loving dependence and freedom with God. In creaturely life, this is marked by a particular kind of mutuality: '(r)elations that we call "loving" are *mutually* constructive; they are not all gifts on one side and all receiving on the other'.<sup>25</sup>

This means that Williams is rightly suspicious of two polarised options of understanding the self. On the one hand, he is concerned about notions of the creature's

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<sup>22</sup> To speak of creation's dependency on God, and its creation *from nothing*, for Aquinas, is secondarily a matter of the universe's definite beginning (which is a matter of faith, see *ST*, 1a.46.1 and 1a.46.2), and primarily the fact that creation exists primarily due to God's faithful will to uphold creation, see *ST*, 1a.45. *responsio*.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 'On Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *TT*, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Williams 'On Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 69. It is worth stressing that the language of construction here is not a marker of the divine-human relationship in Williams' vision. God is not defined by God's relationship with creatures – the divine identity is wholly stable and complete. Likewise, there is a mutuality inherent in the divine-human relationship. This particular definition of mutuality is a more generic definition of the kind of mutuality *realised* in creaturely relationships *as a result* of God's loving and active presence.



dependence on God that looks like the toxic kind of dependence that human relationships can easily take.<sup>26</sup> However he is equally concerned about the notion that the self is ‘independent’ and created ‘out of my own will’.<sup>27</sup> To properly take into account the varying contexts that shape individual identity sharpens the sense of ‘impossibility, for *any* inhabitant of the world, of being a pure source of meaning for other inhabitants of the world’.<sup>28</sup> There is a danger of drifting into the polarised directions of either contextual determinism or, a voluntaristic individualism. To lose one of these poles and to become preoccupied with one rather than the other each has its own set of problems.

The proper answer to these dual concerns (voluntarism or determinism) in the context of cultivating a sense of self, is a proper understanding of dependence oriented to the development of a sense of *agency*. The limitless dependence that human beings can unhealthily place in one another is contrasted sharply with the ‘*fundamental* dependence’ that is an unavoidable feature of human existence, namely: ‘dependence on whatever it is that enables our sense of being an agent, a giver’.<sup>29</sup> Williams’ picture of human maturity emphasises the centrality of *reciprocity* and *gift*. Who I am is characterised by the gifts which make me who I am, and the gifts that I give as part of this ongoing exchange: ‘all receive before they give, and give only as a response to receiving’.<sup>30</sup> The possibility for the self to give – to contribute to a ‘generating context’ – presupposes that the self is reliant on a previously ‘*generated*’ context also.<sup>31</sup> The realisation that our sense of self, identity and agency is simultaneously rooted in a context already received can lead either to ‘the constantly fearful and cautious negotiation of my identity,’ or, it can lead to ‘an act of trust in my right and capacity to act and give’.<sup>32</sup>

There is a quite healthy recognition of ‘a certain persisting instability or insecurity in the tissue of the world’ within all creaturely existence.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, there is a ‘riskiness’ inherent within creation’s growth in freedom towards its flourishing.<sup>34</sup> In another later address Williams draws out this contrast in terms of Augustine’s picture of the self ‘aware of its own intractable hiddenness, its inexhaustible *questionability*’ and the process of:

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 69-70.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *TT*, 42.

gradually discovering that this mysteriousness is to be understood in the light of the fact that the self is what is invited into being by the divine initiative in creation, the divine communication which establishes an indestructible possibility of response.<sup>35</sup>

Creation's dependency upon the Creator is also the very grounds for seeing creation as dynamic, changing, and growing:

God does not [...] make the world by imposing the divine will on some recalcitrant stuff [...] Rather, God causes an entire process in which intelligible structure comes to view. In response to the act of God, created life shapes itself as a balanced whole [...] but all this, and the possibilities thus realised, is simply the result of the divine freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Williams stresses that the reality of creation is utterly contingent upon the loving freedom of God: '[Creation] depends on him moment by moment, carried along on the current of his activity. Behind and beneath everything we encounter is this action'.<sup>37</sup> This is nothing like a view of God whose work is marked by punctiliar and occasional acts of making the world, in a way that would see creation as an ongoing and unfinished project. Rather it comes closer to a claim about divine providence and the necessarily dynamic nature of creaturely life. God's providence, for Williams, is less to do with maintaining a static ordering of created life but is rather the work of God within the ever-changing contingencies of the world to bring creation to its full fruition. The purposes of creaturely life are not threatened or undermined by change and growth, in fact they are essentially connected and united through the faithful will of God to unite all things in Himself (Eph. 1:10). Indeed, there is a strong dialectical sense in Williams' writings that stability is achieved in a human life precisely when it is most vulnerable and open to the purposes of God, which may involve an openness to disruption, surprise and transformation.

This vision of human dependence on God as the means of gaining stability and growth is best understood as a *Christological* reality. It is Christ who displays most clearly what true obedience, true fidelity and openness to God looks like. Human beings, through faith, becoming united with Christ, are invited to stand where he stands, and become caught up with the fullness of the divine life. The share of creaturely existence caught up in union

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<sup>35</sup> Williams, 'Divine Presence and Divine Action: Reflections in the Wake of Nicholas Lash' accessed at <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2131/divine-presence-and-divine-action-reflections-in-the-wake-of-nicholas-lash>, accessed April 5th 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 72.

<sup>37</sup> Williams, *TT*, 36

with Christ looks like precisely the kind of life lived by Jesus that is marked by loving dependence upon the Father:

Jesus, in not clinging to the form of God but accepting the humility of the incarnation and the death of the cross, restores the glory of creatureliness. The incarnation affirms that creation is good [...] because it is in this relationship of loving dependence on the self-giving of God.<sup>38</sup>

We turn now to develop this theme of creation's dependence upon the Creator, drawing out Williams' handling of this theme in its *temporal* dimensions, and his argument for the essential quality of temporality as a feature of creation and creaturely life. The essential quality of all that God has made, in contrast to God's self, is finite, limited, and wholly potential. The life of creatures is therefore one which grows in and through time into the fullness of the life for which it has been made.

### 3.3 The Life and Growth of Creatures

The freedom and sufficiency of God in making and sustaining the world, and the complete contingency and necessity of creaturely dependence on God for their full flourishing – these are the two motifs that permeate Williams' doctrine of creation. God is pure actuality. In contrast, creation is characterised by a mix of potentiality and actuality (though creation is still characterised wholly by a sense of *contingency*). This means that creation's life is characterised by growth, change, and motion. Or, in other words all creation, by nature of being *created* as opposed to *uncreated*, means it is *historical*. I examine here the centrality of this aspect of Williams' account of creatureliness by considering the importance of creature/Creator relation in his writings. For Williams, there is a kind of fittingness about creation's finitude in contrast to the eternal character of God. The fundamental difference between God and creation is creation's wholly temporal nature. The sense of order and stability which creation does possess is, for Williams, one attained by dependency and loving relation with the Creator. This, we shall see as this chapter and later chapters unfold, is central to Williams' vision, and central to the contrast between his and O'Donovan's vision. By placing time at the centre of creaturely existence, and affording history an authority which O'Donovan explicitly rejects, Williams' vision of the Christian life develops out of this

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<sup>38</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness,' 34.

underlying conviction: that all human living is characterised by growth, change and finitude, and that human engagement with God involves being drawn by God more deeply into deeper apprehension of the abundance of God in ways that may draw human beings into unseen and unimagined possibility.

Williams explores Augustine's vision of creation in close proximity to the latter's doctrine of God. In particular, Williams draws attention in Augustine, and more widely in Christian thought, to 'both the continuity and the discontinuity between God and the universe'.<sup>39</sup> To speak of what God is like does not immediately tell us all we need to know about creation. However, reflection about creation needs to remain attentive to how created being is both like and unlike the divine life. This point is helpfully drawn out by Williams in a more recent article on creation, engaging with Sergei Bulgakov around the theme of wisdom in creation. In this essay Williams argues that 'God and the world are related in a continuity that is also an unfathomable difference'.<sup>40</sup> To speak of a common ontological relationship between God and God's creation via this theme of wisdom also requires a recognition of the profound unlikeness of God to creation. However, Williams is quick to insist how careful we must be when we speak of this relationship: 'the greatest errors of Christian theology come when Christian theologians become preoccupied with either the continuity or the difference in such a way that they cannot understand how grace works'.<sup>41</sup>

A central difference between God and creation concerns the nature of temporality, potentiality and change in created being – characteristics that are absent in divine being. Created being is therefore unlike God insofar as God's nature remains unchanging and stable. Creation 'speaks of God *by* being temporal and changeable'.<sup>42</sup> The change that defines creaturely being involves the change from potentiality to actuality, of 'realising potential goods'.<sup>43</sup> This is the sharpest difference between God and creation, since there is 'nothing that is *potentially* good for God'.<sup>44</sup> The dynamism and change inherent in creation should provide an analogical contrast with the stability and simplicity of God's self.

This theme comes to the fore in Williams' essay on Augustine and creation. His concern here centres more prominently on the nature of creation itself, especially in relation to time and motion. The central instincts that I want to tease out and assimilate into the

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<sup>39</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness,' 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 67, (emphasis mine).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

current essay concern how Williams understands creation's temporality, order and dynamic potential for growth as features of its participation in God. A central claim of Williams' essay is that 'To be serious about creation's meaning and value is to weigh properly its integrity as a moving and changing image, as a limited and fluid whole that is not God, yet is saturated with God'.<sup>45</sup> The nature of creation's participation is something which has both a certain stability and temporality inherent within it, and also a dynamism and contingency that makes it transparent and malleable to God's guiding and gracious presence. Creation comes from the power of divine love and is created in such a way that it can freely grow towards and participate within this love as its fulfilling end. This movement is what gives creation its coherency and purposiveness. Creation is dynamically and contingently related to its Creator, who is, in turn, One who is dynamically at work in and through the creation. The order of creation is something *yet to be realised*, meaning that creaturely life is marked by a dynamism, contingency and malleability that shares in the order of the divine life not by nature but by growth.

The positive relation between creation and Creator is envisaged according to a certain understanding of analogy. One of the positive ways that creation is analogous to Creator is in terms of the order of beauty that manifests God's presence in and through the creation:

the transparency of the world to the prior reality of God lies in the perception of things *actively* existing and maintaining a pattern of interaction that we can follow or chart in certain ways, a pattern of interaction that leaves no room for a final self-fragmentation, a chaos of arbitrary events. This orderliness is the essence of what we call beauty.<sup>46</sup>

What shows the mark of the Creator in creation is that it is held together, that it is not abandoned to utter fragmentation. The dynamism and motion that defines created life, as creation explores the potentiality of freedom and growth, is one that maintains a 'pattern of interaction'. Sounding a helpfully Thomist note, Christopher Scott Sevier writes that 'the beauty of the creature is nothing other than the similitude of the divine Beauty in things by participation'.<sup>47</sup> Williams elaborates on the nature of this similitude (which is something like Thomas' insistence that God is the formal cause of beauty) when he writes that 'creation shares or participates in God *by being a coherent system*'. Creation is not part of God (not a 'literal "bit" of God, since God is not a material substance), nor simply an 'an overflow of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Scott Sevier, *Aquinas on Beauty* (Lanham: Lexington, 2015), 165.

divine essence, since Augustine is quite clear that being God is being outside the realm of change and interaction'.<sup>48</sup> Instead:

God is what fixes a *modus* for everything, a specific way of being; what gives a thing *species*, a formal structure that appeals to both aesthetic and intellectual judgement; and what draws a thing towards a state of equilibrium. God is [...] the one who limits all things, gives intelligible shape to all things and directs all things to a goal.<sup>49</sup>

To say that God is the source of what gives shape to creation, is not to say that God accords to a standard independent of God, for 'what God "follows" is the divine life itself'.<sup>50</sup> Nor is it to claim that 'God is identical with measure, proportion and weight as elements in created reality'.<sup>51</sup> Here the non-competitive dimension of divine agency again becomes crucial in understanding God's positive relatedness to creation: 'God's nature is to be, not one harmonious or lovely thing above others, but the cause of all harmony and loveliness'.<sup>52</sup> The similitude of beauty and order to God is not to claim that 'God stands at the summit of an ascending scale of beautiful things, but because we grasp that, whatever God's life is [...] it is what makes for harmony'.<sup>53</sup>

Here we begin to see a sharp point of contrast with O'Donovan's own vision of creation. Though there is some underlying commonality here – William's exploration of the coherency of creation mirrors O'Donovan's account of created order as it is characterised by *kinds* and *ends* – they differ when concerned with the nature of creation's coherency and orderliness. The main point that distinguishes Williams from O'Donovan concerns the character of creation's coherency, and the way in which time relates to the orderliness and intelligibility of creation. 'Creation', Williams writes, 'is caused by God's will alone; and what that will establishes as the logical precondition of everything else is that the world will be capable of change.'<sup>54</sup> The first half of such a claim might be easily shared by O'Donovan – that the world is caused by God's will alone. But O'Donovan would not, I think, be able to agree with Williams on the second part of this statement. For O'Donovan, our discernment of novelty and change over time requires an underlying and stable order

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<sup>48</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

enables us to identify and affirm that change as *good*.<sup>55</sup> It is *creation* that, for O'Donovan, provides such a stable ordering. However, for Williams, this previous claim is the basis for understanding creation in contrasting terms: 'For the world *not* to be God, to be itself as a limited whole, it must be a complex of processes. What does change entail? A *medium* of change or a vehicle of change; or, to put it another way, an interaction between stability and variety'.<sup>56</sup> For Williams, creation's ordering is not immune from time – a separable basis from which to assess change. Rather, creation's order is itself being *worked out in time*. Gray helpfully summarises Williams' understanding of creation's good as a quality that is 'not so much primordial as *eschatological*; creation is a process moving towards fruition'.<sup>57</sup>

To speak of creation as a coherent and unified whole requires some sense of stability in its character: 'For there to be a world, a limited whole, there must be coherence, a convergence on stability'. Yet this stability develops and grows over time. Creation's orderliness is not a given and static form separate to God's active presence at work in creation. The stability of creation 'is a stability that continues to alter and reinvent itself at every moment, as time advances'.<sup>58</sup> The stability and order of creation is always something in the process of being formed and is something that creation grows into over time. 'Creation,' Williams writes, 'exists between these two poles, with form constantly and steadily moulding matter into a coherent world'.<sup>59</sup>

Things are made to change and grow, to realise their optimal form over time; but this change is woven into a universal mobile pattern, consistently reclaiming its stability [...] it is love that draws us back to our proper place, that pulls us back to stability and harmony.<sup>60</sup>

The goodness of creation is a concept with an important temporal dimension to it: 'for Augustine, all good except God's is the product of process'.<sup>61</sup> Consonant with aspects of Augustine's thought, Williams' understanding of time is inseparable, and perhaps even the foundational feature, of his vision of creation. Creation's capacity to grow and change is a feature of creation which displays its dependence on God, and its unique contrasting quality with a God who is stable and changeless: 'what creation then means is that the single divine

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<sup>55</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 45.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 68.

<sup>57</sup> Brett Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 130.

<sup>58</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 68.

<sup>60</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 65.

<sup>61</sup> Williams, 'Augustine on Creation,' *OA*, 65.

act on which everything depends activates a variety of patterns of action in the differentiated and time-taking system that exists as other than God'.<sup>62</sup>

Williams' essays on Richard Hooker develop many of the instincts of his work on Augustine, with a slight shift in focus towards the significance of creation's temporality for the nature of learning and knowing. We turn to briefly consider the themes of these essays as they relate back to this broader picture of creation and creaturely life in Williams' writings. These passages connect the concerns of the current chapter to the previous one on Williams' account of learning. That human life is marked by an endless journeying of growth into abundance is precisely a point about the doctrine of creation, and a recognition of the creaturely quality of human learning.

Williams' reading of Hooker focuses on his status as a 'sapiential theologian', a thinker concerned with the character and cultivation of Christian wisdom. Hooker is a thinker who begins with "the needs and potentials of the human world" rather than with the critical irruption of the transcendent or the mediation of divine presence in specific privileged aspects of or moments in the world'.<sup>63</sup> He is also concerned with the 'natural' and its close association to wisdom.<sup>64</sup> There is also a strong emphasis in Hooker's work upon the freedom of God, however Williams stresses that this freedom works consistently and congruously within the course of created life. Williams sees Hooker as holding together both God's freedom and God's nature, in a way that avoids any hint of voluntarism or occasionalism. Williams' and Hooker's indebtedness to Thomas are evident here.<sup>65</sup> Like O'Donovan, Williams' reading of Hooker curbs an unbridled notion of *potentia absoluta*. When God works, God works for the sake and good of created life. In Williams' reading of Hooker, this aligns strongly with an account of human growth in response to God's work which should not be reduced to a sheer reaction to the irruptive immediacy of 'obedience to divine commands'.<sup>66</sup> Rather, the shape of a life faithful to the lively presence of God is a form of holiness which must be '*progressively realised*'.<sup>67</sup>

What this insistence upon the dynamism and growth of human beings importantly leads Williams to argue for is the more positively inescapable place of history. Because, according to Williams' reading of Hooker, God's actions are a 'sharing of the divine life',

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<sup>62</sup> Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows,' *Wrestling with Angels*, 268.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, 'Richard Hooker: Philosopher, Anglican, Contemporary,' in *Anglican Identities* (London: DLT, 2014), 40.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.



(and such a sharing is ‘not an episodic or determinate activity’) human life is ‘inescapably temporal’ meaning that ‘we are best defined as learning beings’.<sup>68</sup> The rationale here is that knowledge of God

involves elements of flexibility and corrigibility, not because of a trivial or relativist view that what’s true of God changes according to circumstances, but because of the *opposite* conviction, that God remains God, a ‘law unto himself’, and, for precisely that reason, can only be discerned in the following of the divine action within the mutable world, in a process of learning, not a moment of transparent vision or of simple submission to a decree.<sup>69</sup>

Whilst the kind of theology in Williams’ firing line is not strictly speaking O’Donovan’s thought, the resources for critique are readily present here. The most important point here is over the way in which historical contingency, provisionality and change is inescapably and positively a part of human knowledge of God.

This claim is once again rooted in the familiar Creator-created distinction that provides much of the logic of his thinking in this area: precisely because creation is *not like* its unchanging, immutable Creator this means that creation has a contingent, temporal and potentially changing character. In addition, it means that if creation images God in a truly creaturely form, then it does so in and through its contingency, temporality and change. Here we draw this excursus on Hooker back into the recognisably Augustinian instincts of Williams’ thought seen in the chapter thus far. ‘Creation’, Williams writes, ‘has a character’ and this character is realised ‘in contingent and temporal process’.<sup>70</sup>

This leads Williams to argue for a particular understanding of what faithfulness and obedience to God envisages. Fidelity does not involve acting congruously with a set of given and timeless features: ‘being faithful [...] to God’s law, and so to God’s being, God’s self, involves being wary of any kind of positivism about laws enacted or even revealed in history’.<sup>71</sup> The error which this can lead to is to be overly ‘bound to a set of historical positive enactments’ that in turn ‘may lead us to be *unfaithful* to the real law of God, the wisdom in which we are created, when those enactments no longer effect a path to wisdom’.<sup>72</sup> As such obedience, wisdom and fidelity to God is, perhaps paradoxically for Williams ‘a matter of

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, 49.

knowing how and when to innovate'.<sup>73</sup> As such, 'a certain translation from one language to another is indispensable. Creation translates into time and limit and history the eternal fact of God'.<sup>74</sup> This central contrast of God to creation means that the shape of creaturely life must be one of dynamism, attentive to what God is uniquely doing and calling one to do *here and now*. The call to innovate and live creatively is not an optional aspect of being a creature but is instead the very substance of what it means to live as a creature responsive to God's ever new mercy.

In this section we have sought to trace Williams' instincts about the essentially temporal and historical quality of creation, including how human beings come to know themselves as part of God's creation. In making a world other from God's self, creation is wholly dependent on God for its existence. For Williams this means recognising the unfinished quality of creation, and that creation must change and grow into alignment with the divine life. The contrasts with O'Donovan's work will be especially apparent after this section. Each thinker approaches the place of time and history in their accounts of creation in markedly different ways. For O'Donovan there is a necessary distinction that must be made between creation and history. Williams' work finds temporality an essential quality of creation, and that human understanding of creation and one's own creaturely finitude requires acknowledgement of this temporal quality.

### 3.4 Mortality, Finitude and the Embrace of Limit

Finitude, temporality, growth and contingency: these are the themes that texture Williams' vision of creation. Likewise, these themes in turn shape the whole sense of what Christian life in the universe of God's making entails. These characteristics of creatureliness mean that the Christian life is one that must embrace disruption, difficulty, change and transformation. The final element of Williams' thinking on creation which adds to this overall picture is the significance of mortality for his underlying understanding of what it means to be a creature. We trace this theme in Williams' writings and note the resonances with other recent Anglican thinkers. Williams understands mortality as an inevitably aspect of human life. Questions of the post or pre-lapsarian introduction of death are secondary to the fact that death is an inevitable element of our experience, or rather the absolute limit of our

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence,' 27.

experience. Locating mortality as part of his doctrine of creation develops this sense of the absolute finitude and limit that marks out human existence. However, this element of our lives is taken up and refigured in Christ's person and work, such that our experience of death is made a new possibility rather than a finality to human existence.

A key aspect of Williams' vision of the created natures of human beings is the importance of embodiment, finitude, and a positive embrace of mortal limit. As he concludes his essay 'On Being Creatures,' he writes that:

Being creatures is learning humility, not as submission to an alien will, but as the acceptance of limit and death; *for* that acceptance, with all that it means in terms of our moral imagination and action, we are equipped by learning through the grace of Christ and the concrete fellowship of the Spirit, that God is "the desire by which all live," the *creator*.<sup>75</sup>

The goodness of creaturely life is strongly related to learning to live within the limits of being a creature. To embrace the limits of being a creature is also to accept that human beings are not God, and that this is good news for the task of Christian living. Central to the Genesis story and the fall of humanity is Adam's desire to escape the limits of being "merely" human. From this angle, sin is therefore a rejection of the limits that constitute human life, to grasp and aspire through a matter of the will. The central act of trust to which the human being is called is to learn to live within the limits which constitute my existence, not to escape them with aspirations for deification won through an act of will: 'To be a friend of God is to learn to be a friend of my own frailty, accepting it and affirming it, entrusting it to God'.<sup>76</sup>

Stated in more positive terms it is only through 'this joyful embrace of being created, of not being God, the acceptance that we shall die, that we are fragile, that we are fallible' that human beings are able to grow into the fullness of who God made them to be.<sup>77</sup> It is the incarnate Christ whose own life is most transparent to the Father – in dependence, in obedience, faith and embrace of the limits of being human. And so too through union with Christ, and the following of his example, human beings come to share in God's life of love and blessing: 'only in rejoicing that we are not God do we come to share the divine life in the

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<sup>75</sup> Williams, 'Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 78.

<sup>76</sup> Williams, 'Hearts of Flesh,' *OtJ*, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence,' 35. This theme has important resonances in recent Anglican theologies of mortality and finitude. See especially, Ephraim Radner, *A Time to Keep: Theology, Mortality and the Shape of a Human Life* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), and Katherine Sonderegger, 'The Doctrine of Providence,' in Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (eds.), *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 144-157.

way that we are made to do'.<sup>78</sup> The limits of being human and being a creature are ultimately seen and known only in Christ. 'The real and deepest paradox', Williams writes, 'is that only the creator can exhibit fully what it is to be a creature'.<sup>79</sup> Following in the way of Christ means that Christians will face the same temptations as Christ in the wilderness – to throw off the limits of being a creature, to refuse to live day by day in trust upon God's loving and living word. To refuse to be a creature will be the inverse of Paul's exhortation in Philippians 2, to count equality with God as something to be grasped, and to refuse the way of humility. Growth in the Christian life involves struggling against escapist notions of moving beyond the limits of being a creature: 'Discipleship in the body of Christ is in one sense simply a matter of constantly battling to be a creature, battling against all those instincts in us that make us want to be God or make us want to be what we think God is'.<sup>80</sup>

This emphasis on mortal limit gestures pre-emptively to the significant relationship of Christology to creation in Williams' vision. The incarnation is 'God's definitive clue to the divine life, and to how we may open ourselves to it'.<sup>81</sup> Christ's entrance into history also displays that time is intrinsic to our journeying with God. Christ as 'Word and Wisdom shapes and speaks in and acts out a human and material history, telling us that there is no way to God but through time'.<sup>82</sup> Christ's life points us to the significance of our materiality and fragility as essential components of being human before God: 'we must learn to start where we are, as moving, material beings'.<sup>83</sup> To find ourselves caught up within this 'story of things' with the incarnate and humble Christ at the centre, renders it an 'impossibility of fully living in that order without humility'.<sup>84</sup> Walking in Christlike humility makes encounter with God and acceptance of 'our mortal fragility' completely inseparable. The Christian life is one lived by faith in the 'God who speaks and relates to us through flesh'.<sup>85</sup>

All of these limits draw us back to the common motif of Williams' vision, that the doctrine of creation suggests that the shape of the Christian life is one that embraces the limits, ambiguities and growth that is inherent to human life. Such qualities are woven into the fabric of creaturely existence and are an analogy to the finite dependency of all created reality upon the steadfast love of God. These limits which mark out human life form the

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 239.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, 'Creation, Creativity and Creatureliness: The Wisdom of Finite Existence,' 34.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

threshold of the familiar, the known and the stable. To live as a creature is to live by faith in the promises of God, walking into an unknown future, into a promised land seen only from afar (Heb. 11.13-16). These limits are something which display the ‘groaning’ of the Spirit within human beings for the new creation (Rom. 8.23-26); the tent in which human beings groan for another heavenly dwelling (2. Cor. 5:1-4).

### 3.5 Providence and Creaturely Existence

Providence is a theme not commonly associated with Williams. It is not an obviously central theme for his work. The term is rarely used, and the doctrine of providence is very rarely the focus of Williams’ work. And yet, implicit to his understanding of creation and creaturely life is a pivotal, if rarely articulated, understanding of divine providence. The significance of providence within Williams’ theology of creation is that it maintains and preserves many of Williams’ defining instincts, particularly the contingency and finitude of creaturely existence. Providence, far from resolving or unhelpfully consoling those difficulties of creaturely existence, is precisely God’s working amidst such challenges. Williams’ reflections on providence are developed most sustainedly in the context of our attempts to make sense of suffering. Providence does not provide a straightforward justification or rationale for the presence of suffering; however, it does provide the assurance that God is active and present in those moments of greatest tragedy. Likewise, providence is the work of God to bring human lives, even during suffering, into conformity with Christ’s love. As Vernon White suggests, Williams transfigures the question of providence away from causality and towards the importance of God’s active presence in human lives, through signs and the church’s sacramental life.<sup>86</sup>

God’s work as creator displays to us the texture and character of all God’s working in the world. For Williams, creation is a work that is still going on ‘*now*’.<sup>87</sup> He puts this in even stronger terms when he writes that ‘the situation of the entire universe, at any given moment, exists as a real situation because of God’s reality being, as it were, turned away from God to generate what is not God’.<sup>88</sup> These remarks from Williams bring us close to the theology of the classical doctrine of providence, typically located between the doctrines of God and

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<sup>86</sup> Vernon White, *Purpose and Providence: Taking Soundings in Western Thought, Literature and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 110-111.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *TT*, 34.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, ‘On Being Creatures,’ *OCT*, 68.

creation.<sup>89</sup> This is not always a vocabulary or doctrinal theme that is explicitly used or developed by Williams in his writings.<sup>90</sup> However, as we will see, it is replaced by a concern for divine action using a very different vocabulary and driven by a set of concerns very different from those of the Reformed tradition in which reflection on providence has been most sustained and developed. It would be remiss to neglect a brief consideration of this theme in Williams' writings given how closely providence is located to the doctrine of creation in broader Christian theology. But a sideways glance at this theme may also afford us a deeper sense of how creation fits with the wider aspects of Williams' vision.

The classic Reformed typology of God's providential work in terms of *conservatio* (preservation), *concursus* (accompaniment), and *gubernatio* (rule) offers helpful orienting concepts for thinking about providence.<sup>91</sup> Williams' thinking, as I will show, has much to say about the preserving and accompanying aspects of God's ongoing work in the world, though his understanding of God's *directing*, and *guiding* creation is something worked out in a different tenor to Reformed accounts of this doctrine.

From our reading of Williams so far, we can see that he is keen to stress the utter dependency of all that is not God upon God's creative and faithful love. There is no sense that God ceases to be involved in holding creation in existence. Similarly, in terms of *concursus*, there is a deep conviction in Williams' writings that God is with us. Even in the darkest and most hopeless human situations, God's loving presence is near and seeking to be found. He writes that the resurrection of Christ displays 'God's commitment to this world of flesh and blood: it tells us that when we look at things and persons in the world, we're looking at the place where God has promised to be'.<sup>92</sup> God's enduring faithfulness is a recurrent and powerful theme in Williams' writings. It is always a faithfulness displayed most vividly amidst the chaos of human life:

The promise of God means the promise of every person and every situation [...] The world is promising, people are promising, because God has promised to be there;

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<sup>89</sup> John Webster speaks about providence as located 'between the doctrine of God and the doctrine of creation' in 'On the Theology of Providence,' *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 129.

<sup>90</sup> A thorough search of Williams' writings will find few explicit uses of the term providence, and the few times it is used it is typically not explored, or the main theological concept which Williams puts to use.

<sup>91</sup> This is the typology to which Barth attempts to centre his work on providence in *Church Dogmatics III.3*, and this is the regular typology used in Reformed dogmatics since Calvin, for example see Benjamin Wirt Farley, 'The Providence of God in Reformed Perspective,' in Donald K. McKim (ed.), *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 87-93. For a broader account of the history of the doctrine of providence, noting its importance prior to and outside of the Reformed tradition, see also White, *Purpose and Providence*, especially chapter 3.

<sup>92</sup> Williams, 'Ascension Day,' *OtJ*, 82.

through the difficulty, through the risk, through the tragedy, God is committed to that world and no other.<sup>93</sup>

So, while Williams may not explicitly draw on the language of God's providential guiding and steering of creaturely reality in classic terms there remains a strong and pervasive sense of God's faithfulness in preserving and sustaining the existence and goodness of all that is and accompanying all that he has made throughout every circumstance and trial.

However, in terms of God's directing and governing role in creation, this is a less clearly stated aspect of Williams' writings. At one point in his essay 'On Being Creatures', Williams speaks of how 'God does not need the power of a sovereign; what is from God. God's sovereign purpose *is* what the world is becoming'.<sup>94</sup> The context of this claim is Williams' articulation of a doctrine of creation that gives creatures the real, God-given freedom to direct and shape their own lives. So, Williams' valid ethical concerns here understandably seek to move away from notions of providence that involve the exercise of God's power at some expense to human freedom and responsibility. This ethical concern has an important metaphysical aspect to it also. Williams' particular understanding of divine action is set firmly against the idea that God's work is transgressive or violative against creaturely dignity, and the coherency of an ordered universe. Such a way of interacting within creation and history is simply unfitting to the Christian idea of God as the Creator who imbues his creation with dignity:

God establishes the worth, legitimacy, the right to be there, of what is in the world, and in that sense gives meaning; but precisely what God does *not* do is to intrude into the integrity of this or that aspect of being in the world as a justification or explanation for specific events. If the explanation of every event, every determination of being, every phenomenon or decision were simply and directly God, then the life of creation would not be genuinely other than God.<sup>95</sup>

Williams rightly guards against any notion that God's work might undermine a human's capability for freedom. Even in respect to God's ongoing disruptive works of salvation, creation retains this integrity. In a passage on special divine action in relation to creation, Williams writes:

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<sup>93</sup> Williams, 'Covenant in Flesh,' *OTJ*, 41.

<sup>94</sup> Williams, 'Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 69.

<sup>95</sup> Williams, 'On Being Creatures,' *OCT*, 75.

If there are moments when the act of God is recognised more plainly than it is in others, or when the subject senses a closeness to the underlying act of God that has the effect of prompting, warning, reassuring or guiding, we are not to think of the fabric of the finite order being interrupted, but rather of the world being such that, given *certain configurations of finite agencies, the texture of the environment is more clearly transparent to the simple act of divine self-communication*.<sup>96</sup>

Williams' conviction that God's action neither interrupts or suspends finite and creaturely regularities may explain why he avoids more definite statements about God's guiding and directing of human beings, out of a concern of describing God's directing presence as something which comes into abrasive contact with human agency. This is not a revision or critique of providence, but more a wariness of speaking about God's ongoing directing activity for warranted ethical and metaphysical rationale.

Therefore, when Williams does move to speak about God's directive action in and through creation, he is keen to stress the complexity of how this is worked out through finite causes, and not as an interruptive intervention that would inhibit the importance of creaturely integrity. On this basis he expresses his nervousness about 'essentially reactive' understandings of God's providence, which might claim that God's intervention 'becomes more necessary the worse things get'.<sup>97</sup> Williams expresses his worries here about understandings of divine action in 'punctiliar' and 'reactive' terms since they describe a 'God whose action is not really incommensurable in relation to ours, but very like ours in *character*, though utterly different in *scope*'.<sup>98</sup>

In thinking about God's action, Williams stresses instead that 'what God does is nothing other than God's being actively real'. This working is achieved through finite causality and agency: 'God is the empowering source of anything other than God being real, that is, the ultimate "activator" of all particular agency'.<sup>99</sup> Creation itself is something truly other with a God-given capacity to exist in freedom, but also a reality that is utterly dependent on God for its existence: 'creation then means... that the single divine act on which everything depends activates a variety of patterns of action in the differentiated and time-taking system that exists as other-than-God'.<sup>100</sup> God's faithful and loving work to direct created is therefore 'actively present in particular configurations of finite causes'.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows,' *WA*, 268-269. (emphasis mine)

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 267. (emphasis mine)

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 270. He continues 'In heaven, however we are going to understand that, we perceive [...] not "naked deity" but God in ourselves and in all things.'



This discussion of divine action in Williams' writings reinforces the running thread of this chapter: that God's work does not compete with the world of finite causes, and that creaturely freedom is not undermined by God's active presence. The implication of this theme extends to Williams' understanding of providence. This doctrine heightens the *subjunctive* and *provisional* nature of human existence. Another implication of this theme, is that providence far from undermining the significance of human responsibility, rather serves to *accentuate* its importance in Williams' writings.

Providence does not assure us that our lives or histories will find any straightforward resolution, but it does tell us of how God is redemptively at work amidst the contingencies of history as God works for our good. It is a 'trivial (and often almost blasphemous)' use of the doctrine of providence to look within the doctrine for an assurance that 'there is or must be a happy end to any particular human story'.<sup>102</sup> God does not provide any kind of straightforward assurances about the course of the relation of my present to my future. Granted, yes, that the gospel promises a final resolution and conclusion to history 'no disaster is finally and decisively destructive' for our lives, because Christ has been raised.<sup>103</sup> But, for Williams, we must remain wary of taking such final promises of new creation as a way of evading the provisional or subjunctive qualities of a human life. God's work always happens *in time*, and time remains a wholly *subjunctive* and *provisional* as we live within it. The hope of the Christian gospel does provide the 'assurance that time is always there for restoration',<sup>104</sup> and that it is through time in which we find our 'growth' and 'healing'.<sup>105</sup> This discussion shows that the doctrine of providence, for Williams, does not provide grounds for evading the provisional and subjunctive qualities of a human life. But what it does establish is 'my presence as an agent, experiencing and "processing" experience. I continue to be a self in process of being made, being formed in relation and transaction' and that I will do so assuredly in the presence of God.<sup>106</sup>

Of course, the most serious moment of subjunctive threat, and the place where God's involvement with human affairs becomes most difficult to speak of, involves the challenge of human suffering. This theme is taken up and developed further in Williams' essay responding to Marilyn McCord Adams's work. In his conclusion to this essay, he stresses that 'the

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<sup>102</sup> Williams, 'Interiority and Epiphany,' *OCT*, 249.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

question of the healing of outrages' remains 'unresolved' by means of analysis.<sup>107</sup> His whole argument is one that recognises the deep limits of rationality in making sense of suffering, and indeed helping us ethically and spiritually deal with our suffering and the suffering of others.

I suspect that it is more religiously imperative to be worried by evil than to put it into a satisfactory theoretical context, if only because such a worry keeps obstinately open the perspective of the sufferer, the subject, for whom this is never a question of aesthetics, however imaginatively and discriminatingly pursued.<sup>108</sup>

Williams' argument is that the appropriate response to suffering is not to seek for intelligibility, but to respond in compassion and attentiveness to the sufferer. This leads us back again to one of Williams' basic instincts about the character of creaturely life: 'The subject's account of their pain most basically reminds me that the world is a world of differences and so of converse and so of listening'.<sup>109</sup> The proper response to suffering is not pre-emptive rational explanation and consolation. Instead, the proper response to suffering is to listen, attend and pay attention to the reality of our neighbour's suffering. To do so is to recognise the essential finitude of ourselves and the vulnerability of our neighbour, and the mutual dependence which characterises helpful human relations. In the context of these concerns and remarks we can see that Williams is not denying or rejecting the importance of God's providential activity, but rather an insistence that claims about God's providence must not distract from or diminish the place of human suffering, and the necessity of right human responses to suffering.

So, God's providence is an important theme in Williams' thinking, but in an apophatically chastened fashion: 'God is always at work, but that work is not always visible'.<sup>110</sup> There is a complexity, a mystery in the truest sense of the word, to God's providential ordering of the world. Such a mystery does not lead Williams to a resignation of any notion of God's providence, but it cultivates those practices which define the Christian life: of faith, of prayer, of working in solidarity with neighbour (especially the disenfranchised). All these activities both *presuppose* some sense of God's providential activity, but also see themselves as the possible *means* and *finite* or *secondary* causes that are God's very way of ordering his world to its flourishing end. The doctrine of providence is, for

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<sup>107</sup> Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows,' *WA*, 270.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>110</sup> Williams, *TT*, 45.

Williams, is a profoundly *moral* one that challenges humanity and invites us to live in ‘fidelity to the character of God, [and] its “epiphanic depth”’.<sup>111</sup>

His discussions of providence are frequently redirected to a focus on transformation of human lives through their immersions in signs, ritual and liturgy. It is through the sanctification of signs that the fullness of human life can take on a meaningful form that is transparent to God’s loving presence. Vernon White rightly argues that Williams’ account of providence substitutes concerns of causality, with a semiotic approach to this doctrine that instead asks how ‘events can always convey another transcendent meaning while retaining their own empirical integrity’.<sup>112</sup> The process of meaning making is, for Williams, the way that human beings – in their bodies, living, practices, and being over time – are caught up within the divine life, as God’s work transfigures and sanctifies the human effort of sign making.<sup>113</sup>

Providence is therefore, for Williams, ultimately a doctrine which shapes and directs the task of holy living:

We’re never going to have a complete picture of how (God’s action) works, because we don’t have God’s perspective on it all [...] All we know is that we are called to pray, to trust and to live with integrity before God (to live “holy” lives) in such a way as to leave the door open, to let things come together so that love can come through.<sup>114</sup>

God’s loving and faithful purposes are seen precisely amid failure, drawing human lives deeper into a hopeful future of God’s redeeming work. The place where God’s enduring and faithful accompanying of human beings can be seen is within those ‘holy lives’ of the saints. A person’s life is not sanctified ‘because he or she triumphs by will-power over chaos and guilt and leads a flawless life, but because that life shows the victory of God’s faithfulness *in the midst* of disorder and imperfection’.<sup>115</sup>

This redirection of providence as a primarily *spiritual* doctrine is not to understand God’s active presence in our lives to be diminished or withheld. Instead, it is a very particular claim about how the fullness of God’s life becomes present in our lives through the material realities of our lives – the saints, the sacraments, Scripture. God’s providential work is

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<sup>111</sup> Williams, ‘Interiority and Epiphany,’ *OCT*, 264.

<sup>112</sup> White, *Purpose and Providence*, 111. White references in this quote to Williams’ essay ‘The Nature of a Sacrament,’ in *On Christian Theology*, 207.

<sup>113</sup> Williams, ‘The Nature of a Sacrament,’ *OCT*, 198-201; ‘Language, Desire and Reality,’ *OA*, 42-50.

<sup>114</sup> Williams, *TT*, 45.

<sup>115</sup> Williams, ‘Holy Ground,’ *OtJ*, 136.

something that happens *in time*, through the ambiguities of living as bodies immersed in a world of signs. This sense in which God works through the provisionality of our lives means that God's work cannot be understood in any final or secure way. We are often blind to God's work. Our imagination is constantly catching up with the fullness of what God is doing.

Providence does not provide any guarantee of security from the frailty, finitude and contingency that marks our creaturely life. Rather, for Williams, this doctrine heightens the sense that creaturely life can never entail an evasion of difficulty. The doctrine of providence heightens the instincts of his vision of creaturely existence: one marked by limit, frailty, temporally bound, though continually nurtured and faithfully direct by the eternal love of God, who creates a world out of abundance, and who promises to lead this creation through pain and sorrow into eternal life.<sup>116</sup>

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has described several central motifs in Williams' vision that will be developed and extended in later chapters on Williams's Christology and understanding of the Christian life. Creation and Christology, we shall see, are strongly interwoven for Williams. The finitude and contingency that marks out creaturely life is precisely the kind of existence that the second member of the Trinity has assumed as the vehicle for the world's redemption. Christ embraces the contingencies of creaturely existence, whilst also revealing the true depth and character of human identity. The way of the creature is the way of trusting humility and obedience to the Father, and self-emptying service to neighbour. This means that the destination of resurrection, abundance and new life can be received only in continued engagement with the darkness and judgement of the cross of Christ. Creation and Christology also shape Williams' wider understanding of the Christian life. The life of faith recognises its immersion in a world not of its own making and is therefore expectant that the Christian life is one replete with experiencing the gratuitous abundance of God in a way that is ever new, and ever surprising. The historical dimension to reality, and the assumption of creaturely life in Christ, reveal the meaning of human life as an endless journey into abundance. The

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<sup>116</sup> I am aware that Christ's resurrection has been a diminished theme in this section. We have delayed this theme for a fuller discussion in a subsequent chapter. But the lack of resurrection in this section is to display something of the instincts underlying Williams' vision. The resurrection is not a simple answer, annulment or resolution to the problem of human suffering. The resurrection does point to the final redemption of creation in Christ, though it does not allow us to evade the sorrows and contingencies of living.

identity given to human beings in Christ and creation is at once wholly and assuredly beloved by God, and yet also called into an endless journeying more deeply into the reality of God's delight. The excess which characterises the created world, and the finitude and limits of human beings, combine to an account of the Christian life which prizes the novel, disruptive and surprising as crucial marks of truthful Christian living.

We have also begun to see themes in Williams' that will become especially significant in contrast to O'Donovan's work. The concerns and vocabulary of Williams' vision are germane to and overlap O'Donovan's: both place creation *ex nihilo* at the centre of their accounts; both stress the contingent character of creaturely life that remains always aware of its dependence on the goodness of God. Likewise, chapter 5 will show how Christ is, for both figures, the one who reveals the true character and purpose of creation (though even this figuration of Christ and creation differs in each thinker's work). But where Williams' account of creation leads to an account of creaturely life in which growth, temporality, and change are an integral aspect of creature's *growing* into all God made them to be, O'Donovan's account, we will see, understands creaturely fruition in terms of its conformity with the *stable* and *fixed* order given in creation. Creation's order, for Williams, describes its teleological capacity to conform to the purposes of God. It is a quality only received through dependent and loving conformity to God's will. To discover its true ordering in Christ means that creation finds its order precisely *through* its capacity to grow and change over time. O'Donovan, we will see, uses the language of created *order* to describe those structures and givens in creation that precede all subsequent growth in history. For Williams, creation and history are inseparably interwoven, meaning that creaturely life finds its fruition through embracing change, provisionality and mortal limit as it grows into an unseen and unformed future with Christ. For O'Donovan, there is a necessary and integral distinction between creation and history. Creation represents that which is fixed and stable, and offers the resources to direct and orient creaturely life. History represents the realm of contingency and novelty. It is the place where God's purposes are enacted. But history can never offer an objective or stable position from which to survey those purposes or to orient human living. History is in flux, but creation stands fixed as the revelation of God's purposes for the world.

Williams' distinctive account of creation, and the contrasts that I will point to in comparison with O'Donovan, are intimately connected with the question of *how* Christian confession comes to be affectively and imaginatively inhabited within the course of living. We can see that for Williams, confessing God as the Maker and Sustainer of all things will

shape a life in a particular way. A life which comes to inhabit this vision is one that may be led more deeply to embrace its limits and contingencies; this life will continually be led out into a world of *difference* and *change*, recognising that I am but a small piece of a larger tapestry of being which I have only ever begun to grasp. Such a life is characterised by a kind of receptivity and instability, as I open myself continually to the suffering and fragility of the world around me. Naming God as Maker and Sustainer may console, nourish and guide a life through such contingencies and struggles, but it will never be occasion for escape or evasion of these aspects of human living. Some of these themes will be familiar to O'Donovan's account also. But the tendencies and textures of his convictions point to a contrasting undercurrent to that of Williams' account. For O'Donovan, to name and know God as Creator is precisely to receive a sense of my own stability, to be assured of the direction and structure of the world in which God has placed me, such that I can live with confidence, intelligence and wisdom. Such contrasting emphases between these thinkers are not wholly contradictory. But they point to differing patterns and habits of thinking about the Christian vision, which in turn suggest contrasting ways of *how* this vision comes to be inhabited in the shape of a life.

It is Williams and O'Donovan's distinctive accounts of Christian doctrine, and their reflections on *how* such doctrines come to be inhabited, which are the motivating concerns of this essay. My concluding argument will be for a certain kind of *irresolution* in resolving these contrasts precisely because each thinker offers a rich, coherent, and compelling vision of the character of Christian faithfulness. It is the resonating dissonances of *both* thinker's works which can begin to display something of the fullness and unfinishedness which must typify the pursuit of Christian wisdom and obedience. We turn to trace these contrasts at greater depth by considering O'Donovan's theology of creation.



## **Chapter 4.**

### **Entering into Sabbath Rest: Creation, History and Providence in O'Donovan**

Already we have begun to see the centrality of creation in Oliver O'Donovan's vision. My engagement with O'Donovan in chapter 2 stressed how creation is essential to the realism which underpins his moral theology, and I explored his conviction that practical reason and deliberation find their coherence and orientation within the objective goods of the objective reality of creation. Though we are still at an early stage of tracing O'Donovan's and Rowan Williams' visions, some of the contrasts between the two have already partially come into view. In chapter 3 we saw how Williams' account of human creatureliness emphasises the contingency, dependency and provisionality which marks out human living. Creation itself is liable to grow and change over time as it is drawn into the loving purposes of God, and into loving and flourishing conformity with the eternal Word. This, we saw, means that creation and history are inseparably interwoven in Williams' vision. His doctrine of creation does not understand creation as a fixed or unchanging order, nor does he see creation as possessing an inherent stability apart from dependency on God. Rather, the doctrine of creation delineates the limits of creaturely existence; it gestures to the novelty of God's ways within creation and shows that creation's character is yet to be fully realised within the purposes of God. Just as the previous chapter sought to show the centrality and distinctiveness of creation, and to show the interconnectedness of this doctrine with the Christian life in Williams' vision, this chapter likewise seeks to show the significance and character of purpose of this doctrine in O'Donovan's writings.

O'Donovan frequently marshals the doctrine of creation in order to engage with distinctively *moral* questions.<sup>1</sup> The moral significance of creation is its *intelligible authority*, and its ability to summon human beings to rational and satisfying obedience in Christ. Creation underpins the *authority* which gives a life its orientation. The stability of creation undergirds and directs human living within the purposes of God, and the goodness of creation, both of which are displayed and vindicated in Christ's person and work. The world in which God has placed human beings is one hospitable and conducive to human purposes, and this is so precisely because it is the good world of God's making, sustaining

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<sup>1</sup> O'Donovan doesn't define himself as a systematic theologian but instead more precisely as a practical, moral and political theologian whose work is directed primarily towards a 'deliberative rather than a theoretical goal'. Oliver O'Donovan, 'Deliberation, History and Reading: A Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54:1, 2001, 127-128. However, the practical, moral, and political explorations in his writings nevertheless take strong lead from a clearly articulated set of *doctrinal* foundations.



and redeeming. Fruitful and flourishing human living involves dwelling harmoniously within this order – gladly knowing it and loving it insofar as it contains those goods which direct human lives towards their ultimate flourishing in God.

My argument in this chapter places creation's *stability* and *permanence* as the central cohering and organising themes of O'Donovan's account of creation. I begin by tracing these themes in O'Donovan's early work on Augustine, and in his early critical comments about his inherited evangelical Protestant tradition (section 1). From this early work develops the central convictions of *Resurrection and Moral Order*. In this work, O'Donovan argues that creation is *complete*, which means it possesses an *order*, given and sustained by the Creator, to direct the flourishing of human life; creation remains *stable* amidst the shifts of time and distorting effects of sin and death (section 2). To ask what God's will is for the life of God's creatures is, for O'Donovan, answered in the foundational reality of creation which is the "presupposition" of all subsequent divine and human workings. Christ's resurrection may be the centre of the Christian gospel in O'Donovan's writings, but this is precisely because it is an event which points *backwards* to the vindication and assurance of creation in the face of sin and death's distorting powers. Likewise, the future hope of the restoration and renewal of all things contained in Christ's resurrection is a promise that God's redemption in Christ will be a redemption *of the world*.<sup>2</sup>

In sum, the whole Christian vision of O'Donovan's writings looks to creation as the *cantus firmus*, the linchpin, and the presupposition of all God's subsequent works to redeem and save humanity. We trace this important theme of creation as the 'presupposition' of history, and its relationship to his critique of contemporary historicism (section 3). This aspect of his vision develops in his particular account of providence and creation. His particular account of providence and eschatology, we will see, serves to accentuate these core convictions about created order (section 4). The later trilogy enriches and develops many of O'Donovan's core instincts and moves his vision nearer to Williams'. However, we shall see that the foundation of O'Donovan's thinking remains consistent: creation is stable amidst the throes of history, it is steadfast and central within the purposes of God, and it displays the goodness that directs human beings toward their fulfilment (section 4).

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<sup>2</sup> As O'Donovan argues, 'The gospel tells of a God who shows his love to us in Jesus Christ. But such a tale is idle unless this loving God is the ruler of the universe' O'Donovan, *TNA*, 14.

I will argue that these themes are central to O'Donovan's vision, and central to the contrast between his vision and that of Williams'. The givenness of created order anchors the stability of Christian living in O'Donovan's thought. This is in sharp contrast to the unceasing journeying of Williams' vision of the Christian life, which finds its basis in the endlessly growing character of creation. Contained in each account of creation is not simply a distinctive account of creation, but also a distinctive account of being human. For both thinkers, there is an important contrast in how they conceive of the affective shape of learning to be a creature of God drawn into the loving purposes of God.

#### 4.1 Augustine, Creation and Love: Tracing the Early Motifs

The theme of creation plays an implicit, yet crucial, role in O'Donovan's early work. Its centrality is noticeable in his early work on Augustine and the character of love. Whilst creation is not the major theme throughout this work, the conclusions of this work are a set of clear convictions about the character of creation – especially in relation to redemption – which develop in O'Donovan's later writings:

The heart of the quarrel between Augustine and his critics, then, is whether the creative work of God allows for teleology, and so for a movement within creation, which can presuppose the fact of creation as a given starting point, to a destiny which “fulfils” creation by redeeming it and by lifting it to a new level.<sup>3</sup>

O'Donovan interprets Augustine on this point, against the latter's critics, as saying that there must be ‘a line of connection’, that is held together by ‘the redemptive purposes of God’, between ‘that which is and that which will be’.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I want to explore the centrality of this early claim – which remains conceptually continuous with his subsequent writings – that the ‘fact of creation [is] a given starting point’ for thinking about human life with God, and God's redemptive purposes for humanity.

This presupposition of creation's foundational givenness is rooted in an implicit account of creation *ex nihilo*. Creation is, in another thinker's resonant words, an ‘absolute “beginning”’ – it is unique and prior to successive works of God as it defines all subsequent

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<sup>3</sup> O'Donovan, *SLA*, 158.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

interaction between God and his creation.<sup>5</sup> All subsequent change that happens within creation, including God's successive works of providence and redemption, *presuppose* the fixed and stable reality of creation. The history of creation, of creatures within it and God's ways with it, are all contingent on this work of the Creator who 'calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Rom. 4:17).

The centrality of *creatio ex nihilo* and the stability of creation are developed especially in O'Donovan's early criticisms of Anders Nygren, and a certain kind of broader Protestant and specifically Lutheran instinct. Nygren's conception of *agape* as a love which creates and confers value is one that envisages successive moments of God's working with the world as a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*. There is a tendency in certain Lutheran theologies to see God's works subsequent to creation as following the *ex nihilo* pattern. God's works take on a certain discontinuity with what comes before, with minimal continuity between redemption and creation. Considering this, O'Donovan's critique of Nygren, I think, hits the spot when he writes that Nygren 'has no room for anything other than the doctrine of Creation, since every movement from the divine centre has to be presuppositionless, *ex nihilo*, creative, bringing into existence something quite unprecedented'.<sup>6</sup> The wider importance of this critique of Nygren is developed in *RMO* along more ethical lines, as O'Donovan critiques any moral vision that does not base itself on the objective reality of creation: 'In refusing to admit that human freedom is ordered by generic rules, "normless" ethics has, in effect, refused to address man's freedom to the ordered reality of the world which confronts it.'<sup>7</sup> This is rooted in an important analogical *difference* of human love from divine love. Human love respects, admires and honours preceding orders of value, whereas God's love creates such orders of value as an extension of God's very worth and beauty reflected within the act of creation: 'Such creativity is certainly not the creativity of human love. Only God expresses love by conferring order upon the absolutely orderless, and he has contented himself with doing it but once.'<sup>8</sup> This is similarly noted in *Self-Love in St. Augustine* when O'Donovan writes that '(w)e cannot say that *agape* has no presuppositions, for God presupposes that which he himself has already given in *agape*'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Webster, "'Love is also a Lover of Life': *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness', in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 101.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donovan, *SLA*, 158.

<sup>7</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 25.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> O'Donovan, *SLA*, 159.

O'Donovan's critique of Nygren points to another important context for his work, namely the superficiality of historic and contemporary Protestant accounts of creation. This is the great 'omission' of Protestant thought, O'Donovan argues. With the exception of John Calvin and the tradition which followed him,<sup>10</sup> O'Donovan argues that much of Anglicanism and the broader continental Protestant tradition are marked by a 'strange silence [...] regarding the status of created order'.<sup>11</sup> O'Donovan similarly critiques certain occasionalist and punctiliar instincts that pervade more contemporary Protestant accounts of divine action and salvation (especially Karl Barth and several Lutheran figures). The important place of divine freedom in twentieth century Protestant thought is one that O'Donovan is keen to maintain, but never in contradiction to a Scriptural understanding of God's sustained and faithful preservation and commitment to the purposes of creation.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in one of his latest works, O'Donovan critiques Barth and other 'neo-orthodox' thinkers on the ground that they 'put Christ at the centre without putting him *at the centre of the created world*' and that this 'gave birth to an Ethics that danced like an angel on the head of a needle, wholly lacking worldly dimensions and focused solely on a conversion encounter with the cross'.<sup>13</sup>

The recovery of created order as a major theme of theology might suggest that O'Donovan has profoundly Catholic sympathies, especially of a Thomist variety.<sup>14</sup> 'Created order' can, at times, be read as O'Donovan's Protestant synonym for natural law, which requires limited reference to revelation as distinctive form of knowing.<sup>15</sup> As Robert Song argues, O'Donovan's understanding of created order involves a 'recovery of the notion of the "natural", which can to some extent be discerned without resort to revelation'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> O'Donovan, *TNA*, 63. Whilst O'Donovan doesn't always quote and draw on Calvin explicitly in his own thinking, it is hard not to see strong similarities to O'Donovan's thought and elements of the Reformed tradition that came out of Calvin. The centrality of creation in the Reformed tradition is well noted by Kirk M. Summers, *Morality After Calvin: Theodore Beza's Christian Censor and Reformed Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), 35-37.

<sup>11</sup> O'Donovan, *TNA*, 63.

<sup>12</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 40-41,

<sup>13</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> O'Donovan's relationship to the Catholic tradition is a positive one. O'Donovan's own work is clearly continuous with many contemporary Catholic concerns. See, for example, O'Donovan in John Wilkins (ed.), 'A Summons to Reality' in *Understanding Veritatis Splendor: The Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on the Church's Moral Teaching* (London: SPCK, 1994), 43-44.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Hauerwas' critique is an important one. He writes of *Resurrection and Moral Order* that: 'I fear such appeals to order, and the correlative confessions in God's creation that sustains them, because I do not believe such order is knowable apart from the cross and resurrection. O'Donovan seeks an account of natural law that is not governed by the eschatological witness of Christ's resurrection.' Hauerwas, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 1994), 174-175.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Song, 'Body Integrity Identity Disorder and the Ethics of Mutilation,' in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds.), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 237.

Though mindful of Protestant and Catholic instincts, O'Donovan charts his own distinctive path regarding creation. Holding together the evangelical and Protestant emphasis on Christ's death and resurrection as the centrepiece of God's purposes, as well as an objective sense of the moral order of creation that is vindicated and renewed in Christ, O'Donovan's account of creation understands the nature of the creation as a *given* and *stable* foundation for all subsequent history. God works from nothing to create a world hospitable for human beings and their living, acting and flourishing. Human action *rests on*, *responds to*, and lives *obediently and congruously* within this completed work of God. God creates out of nothing, and human beings *honour* and *respond* to that reality, rather than imagining themselves as capable of constructing the values and goods that shape their lives as a matter of self-origination.

#### 4.2 'The world is steadfast; it shall never be moved': The Work of Creation *Ex Nihilo* and Sabbatical Completeness in O'Donovan

The cornerstone of O'Donovan's early constructive work is the conviction that creation is the "presupposition" of history. Consequently, creation is the firm and fixed foundation that anchors God's subsequent purposes. This claim is closely associated for O'Donovan with conceiving of creation *ex nihilo*. We trace a significant articulation of this theme in *RMO*, paying close attention to the theological movement in O'Donovan's writings from *creatio ex nihilo* to the stability, permanence and Sabbatical completeness of creation as the presupposition of history and providence.

To speak about creation *ex nihilo* is to give 'a logical expression to what is said metaphysically by speaking of creation as history's "origin" or "beginning"'.<sup>17</sup> Of course, to speak of creation as an origin or beginning of history is to shift into analogical language. Creation, as Aquinas would insist, is not simply a change or motion that stands at the beginning of a whole chain of causes and effects as simply the 'first phase in the process of history'.<sup>18</sup> To think of creation in this way would further lead us to think about creation as 'a process which might be accessible through the backward extrapolation of other processes'.<sup>19</sup> To speak of creation as the beginning or origin of history is, instead, to make a very different kind of claim – that, in the words of another theologian, 'at every moment,

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<sup>17</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

[creation] is of nothing' and therefore it 'privileges no *particular* temporal instant as revealing more acutely the nature of the cosmos as suspended over the *nihil*'.<sup>20</sup> For O'Donovan, this insight about the character of creation's emergence *from nothing* is closely related to how he views creation as an *ordered whole*. The conviction that creation is not one part of a temporal process but is the very *basis* of there being any temporal movement at all, moves O'Donovan close to his central claim that created order is a *stable* and *permanent* work. Creation as the *presupposition* of history is therefore, for O'Donovan, the claim that creation is a 'completed design' that is 'presupposed by *any* movement in time'.<sup>21</sup> Gerald McKenny offers a helpful explanation of O'Donovan's claim when he writes that by referring to 'creation as a finished act of God, he means that whatever processes might have brought created things about, they constitute an ordered whole. It is this order that explains what has come about in time'.<sup>22</sup>

This claim about creation's centrality corresponds to a particular claim about history's secondary and contingent place in relation to creation. Creation *ex nihilo* (O'Donovan thinks) entails that history is temporally finite, since it gives an origin and implies an end to history. To imagine history as an endless process would 'carry the suggestion that history contained all possibilities inherently within itself'.<sup>23</sup> Creation is not simply 'the first phase in the process of history', nor is it contingent in anyway upon history, but exists conversely as a 'condition of history's movement. As such, there is a givenness and steadfastness inherent within created order that is untouched and unchanged by historical process and change'.<sup>24</sup> Or, in O'Donovan's own words, created order 'is that which is non-negotiable within the course of history'.<sup>25</sup> The *time* of creation is subordinated, and in some ways ontologically distinct from, the *being* of created order. This means that even before the course and destiny of God's creation is worked out in time, the destiny and end of creation's history can, as a matter of faith, be understood as congruous with the initial act of creation. As O'Donovan writes: 'Because created order is given,

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<sup>20</sup> Simon Oliver, 'Trinity, Motion and Creation ex nihilo,' in David B. Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet M. Soskice and William R. Stoeger (eds.), *Creation and the God of Abraham* (Cambridge, CUP, 2010), 142.

<sup>21</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 63. What O'Donovan means by the presupposition has an important parallel with Aquinas' understanding of temporality and creation. O'Donovan's motif of creation as presupposition of God's works is something like Aquinas' claim that creation is not a motion, and action of God which somehow has a beginning, middle or end. See Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 1a.46.1 ad 2.

<sup>22</sup> Gerald McKenny, 'Evolution, Biotechnology, and the Normative Significance of Created Order,' *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31:1, Spring 2015, 15-26, 17

<sup>23</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 62.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

because it is secure, we dare to be certain that God will vindicate it in history.’<sup>26</sup> These claims invite a longer discussion of providence and salvation in relation to creation, which we will consider more thoroughly in the next section.

The congruity of creation’s beginning and its end, held together in God, is articulated by O’Donovan in terms of creation’s *completeness*. This is a unique feature of his account of creation and is one which takes some unpacking. The concept which most concentratedly describes these aspects is that of the Sabbath. God’s resting on the seventh day of creation points us to the finishedness of God’s work, and the entering into rest which occurs at the completion of this work. As Berkman and Buttry write, the completeness of creation in O’Donovan means that:

creation does not take place in or over time. Rather, to call the created order complete is first and foremost to make a claim about the nature of God, and second a confession regarding the intelligibility and goodness of creation, which reflects the wisdom and goodness of God.<sup>27</sup>

The importance of this theme is that it provides a point from which to survey and unite many of the theological strands in O’Donovan’s vision. If there was to be a central theme in his thought, it would be this one. It describes the underlying and original created order that is foundational to his work, showing it to be a finished and orderly work by the Creator; it points to a significant eschatological theme as the promised and long hoped for eternal Sabbath rest for the people of God; and it is an important theme in O’Donovan’s account of moral theology – holding together the themes of work, rest and accomplishment in the concept of Sabbath.

The Augustinian roots of this theme are significant, though often not explicitly registered in O’Donovan’s works. Given his early work on Augustine, it would be reasonable to assume that this theme of creation’s completeness is influenced by Augustine’s commentary on Genesis, though O’Donovan doesn’t always indicate his indebtedness to Augustine on this specific point. The two aspects from Augustine’s account of creation which may help clarify what O’Donovan means in referring to creation as complete are helpfully noted by Simon Oliver in an article on Augustine’s Genesis commentary. Firstly, Oliver emphasises that Augustine understood ‘creation’s goodness in

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>27</sup> John Berkman and Michael Buttry, ‘Theologies of Enhancement? : Another Look at Oliver O’Donovan’s Created Order,’ *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31:1, Spring 2015, 27-37, 31.

terms of its wholeness or completeness,’ meaning that creation ‘is sufficient and features no intrinsic lack’.<sup>28</sup> To bring this nearer to O’Donovan’s account, we might say that creation’s completeness means that all that would be necessary to furnish the different kinds found in creation are given and established (if not fully realised and actual) in God’s original act of creation. Secondly, this motif of creation’s completeness in Augustine’s commentary also stresses that ‘creation’s good, unlike God’s eternal goodness, is the outcome of motion’.<sup>29</sup> This point is perhaps the greatest source of contrast and tension between O’Donovan’s and Williams’ works, and their respective interpretations of Augustine. For Williams, the point that creation’s goodness is realised only through time makes temporality and growth essential features of creaturely life, such that creation’s true purpose and character are still unfolding in time. However, for O’Donovan, the relationship of history and growth cannot mean that creaturely life leaves behind the ordering of creation as we see it, and as it appears to be given by God. Williams’ account of creation and history tends to see the two inseparably – such that growth and novelty are essential aspects of creaturely life – whereas O’Donovan tends to critique contemporary proclivity to perceive history apart from the underlying structure given in created order that would guide human beings toward the good.

O’Donovan would, with Augustine and Williams, affirm that the completeness of creation is to be understood eschatologically, as creation finds its fulfilment in Christ’s coming Kingdom. However, O’Donovan balances creation and eschatology in a way that tends towards the former, in contrast to Williams. He acknowledges that the Sabbath is both a ‘sign which celebrates the completeness of creation’ and which ‘looks forward also to the fulfilment of history’.<sup>30</sup> Between the constellation of texts from which O’Donovan develops this theme in *RMO* (Hebrews 4, Psalm 95, and Genesis 2<sup>31</sup>) which all speak about Sabbath rest in varying forms and contexts, he raises the question of whether this is a primarily eschatological category: ‘Does the eschatological meaning replace or annul, the reference to creation?’ Instead, O’Donovan unites creation and eschatology in a way that makes sense

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<sup>28</sup> Simon Oliver, ‘Augustine on Creation, Providence and Motion’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18:4, October 2016, 389.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>30</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Psalm 95 becomes a key passage in O’Donovan’s later trilogy, especially in terms of highlighting the centrality of self, world, and time in the task of practical reason. See *SWT*, 119-120 and O’Donovan, *FS*, 114-115. The Sabbatical completeness of creation is a foreshadowing of Christ’s completed work in his death and resurrection. Christ’s cry from the cross that ‘it is finished’ (Jn. 19:30) can be understood against this wider biblical theme as a statement of God’s work leading to completion and conclusion once for all, that in turn opens the way to rest for creation. See O’Donovan, *ER*, 128.



of the latter based on the former. The promised end for which humanity hopes and trusts is an already complete and actual reality: ‘God’s works have been completed since the beginning of the world [...] What remains is for us to *enter* that sabbath rest which has been waiting for us all this time’.<sup>32</sup> The completeness of God’s works are not reliant on human achievement. Rather, the fulfilment of human lives is found precisely through the finality of God’s works: ‘Our sabbath rest is, as it were, catching up with God’s.’<sup>33</sup> Indeed, O’Donovan argues that history and humanity’s labouring only find orientation within the underlying completeness of all that God has enacted in creation:

far from being put in doubt by the thought of a yet-to-be completed history, [the completion of creation] is the only ground on which we can take [history] seriously. Historical fulfilment means our entry into a completeness which is already present in the universe.<sup>34</sup>

The completeness of creation also leads us to consider another important aspect of O’Donovan’s account of creation, namely its essential *orderliness*. The basic moral concern driving O’Donovan’s arguments here, is that the discernment of God’s will for humanity is primarily a matter of attending to the structures of creation into which God has placed creatures. One of the most distinctive claims O’Donovan makes about creation in *RMO* is that: ‘we must understand “creation” not merely as the raw material out of which the world as we know it is composed, but as the order and coherence *in* which it is composed’.<sup>35</sup> Song helpfully elaborates on this important claim made by O’Donovan when he writes that: ‘Creation has form and is *in*-formed: it has an intrinsic intelligibility that is in principle capable of being recognised and is not merely a projection of the active, knowing self.’<sup>36</sup> To name the world as creation is already, for O’Donovan ‘to speak of an order’. To confess belief in God as Creator is to describe the world as ‘an ordered totality’.<sup>37</sup> And for creation to be *creation* there must be some sense in which the world is ‘ordered to its Creator’. This leads O’Donovan to insist that the vertical ordering of the creation to the Creator must subsequently entail an ‘internal horizontal ordering among its parts’.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 61.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Song, ‘Body Integrity Identity Disorder and the Ethics of Mutilation,’ 237.

<sup>37</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

The familiar distinction of ‘kinds’ and ‘ends’ becomes important in this conception of creation order. Distinguishing the world in terms of kinds is to do with how particular aspects of reality relate to other pieces of the world. The ordering here is in terms of a picture of how the component pieces of the world spatially fit together and relate to one another. The relation here is in terms of ‘*reciprocity*’ so that they ‘stand alongside each other as members of a “kind”’.<sup>39</sup> The world’s orders according to ‘ends’ is how things are temporally and teleologically ordered to a particular end, and how there may be a ‘*directing* of the one thing to the other’.<sup>40</sup> To discern order according to ends is concerned with the teleological and purposeful direction of the world towards a particular end.<sup>41</sup> I will avoid a full rehearsal of this theme which has already been explored in the previous O’Donovan chapter. But it is sufficient to say for the present discussion that the order of creation is objective, and not the construction of human will: ‘The order of things that God has made is *there*. It is objective, and mankind (*sic*) has a place within it’.<sup>42</sup> Human failure to live according to this order does not reveal the absence of such an order, indeed the primary witness to human fallenness, for O’Donovan, is the fact that ‘this order still stands over against us and makes its claims upon us’,<sup>43</sup> despite humanity’s rejection and flouting of this order.<sup>44</sup>

This distinction for O’Donovan is central to the moral aims of his project. Since ‘[m]orality is man’s (*sic*) participation in the created order’, knowing and naming this order with truthfulness is a precondition for fitting and faithful living. The ethical importance of these two forms of creation ordering is noted by McKenny, and helpfully connected with O’Donovan’s realist principle directed against ethical voluntarism:

This sharp distinction between creation as an order that demands respect and as raw material available to the human will-to-form corresponds to a broadly Aristotelian distinction between two kinds of human action: acting properly understood, which recognises generic and teleological orders as created by God and respects them as such, and making, which treats created things as unformed matter available for human fashioning.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>45</sup> McKenny, ‘Evolution, Biotechnology, and the Normative Significance of Created Order’, 18.

Perception of the world according to these God-given delineations are, for the early O'Donovan, accessible for the mind renewed in faith and unbelieving mind alike.<sup>46</sup> That the world has an ordering inherent within it and is not merely the empty or unmoulded space for expressions of sheer human will, is a reality that should confront any human seeking to live morally. In one of O'Donovan's blunter earlier statements, he speaks about this choice that any form of morality must make about 'these forms of order which we seem to discern in the world': these orders are either 'there, or they are not'.<sup>47</sup>

Implicit in O'Donovan's understanding of created order are his convictions about what it means to be human. Though O'Donovan's account of human creatureliness is less developed than Williams', the theological anthropology that we do find in O'Donovan's work strongly coalesces around these fundamental themes of creation's reality, orderliness and authority. In a sermon on Genesis 1, focussed on the vocation and character of human beings, O'Donovan suggests that human life must begin and continually return to 'the objectivity of the universe apart from and before the human race'.<sup>48</sup> To engage with the reality of creation requires a recognition of the *unlikeness* of material reality from ourselves – by recognising that the world we inhabit does not originate in our subjectivities – and a recognition of the inherent differences *within* creation. The meaning of human dominion in creation is precisely our ability to rationally apprehend the order of the world in which God has placed us. 'What makes for dominion is that we can understand and interpret. Our human privilege is that of knowing'.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, to be a human being is to recognise our capacity to live our lives wisely and truthfully within such a world of God's making and ordering, to respect God's ordering of the world, and to realise that sense of stability in our lives also:

Our human privilege is to conduct ourselves appropriately in such a universe, using the control that knowledge gives to secure a context not only favourable to ourselves but to the variety of creatures God has made. The stabilising of the ecosystem is the lordly task set before the human race.<sup>50</sup>

O'Donovan's understanding of human life which follows from this vision of creation is, therefore, one that learns to live in conformity with the goodness of the world that God has

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<sup>46</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 35.

<sup>48</sup> O'Donovan, 'How to Be a Human Being,' *WSB*, 135.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*.

made, to know this goodness and praise it, and to live a life that inhabits and radiates this goodness.

The orderliness of creation leads to a final important aspect of O'Donovan's early understanding of creation, namely its *stability* in the face of time and sin. The stability of creation is sustained by God's saving and providential work to secure and restore the goodness of creation. Creation as the anchoring concept of his whole thinking – that God has covenanted God's self to the world that he has made, and that he will not forsake it or abandon it – is the reality that forms the basis of theology and ethics. It is for this reason that the resurrection of Jesus Christ becomes central to O'Donovan's vision, and becomes the determinative feature of 'evangelical' ethics.<sup>51</sup> The importance of the resurrection for this vision Christian living is that the 'gospel of the resurrection [...] assures us of the stability and permanence of the world which God has made'.<sup>52</sup> The resurrection of Jesus 'vindicates' the created order, displays to humanity the goodness of creation, the proper end of creation, and enacts the fulfilment of creation's destiny against the enslaving forces of sin and death: 'We are driven to concentrate on the resurrection as our starting point because it tells us of God's vindication of his creation and so of our created life'.<sup>53</sup> What is central for O'Donovan is not only *that* there is an objective, ordered world to which agents must submit to, but that the essence of the gospel of Christ's resurrection is precisely the assurance of this stability.

Also implicit in this account of creation's orderliness is O'Donovan's account of sin, which accentuates the central themes of his doctrine of creation. His account of sin tends to prioritise the epistemic and rational quality of sin in distorting human perception and knowledgeable access to the created order. Considering the nature of sin, O'Donovan emphasises both humanity's 'persistent rejection of the creation order' as well as an 'inescapable confusion in (their) perceptions of it'.<sup>54</sup> Fallenness is more than simply an error of sight, there is something truly broken in human and created nature that requires the healing power of salvation. However, O'Donovan's understanding of sin typically emphasises this aspect of humanity's fallen nature: 'man's rebellion has not succeeded in destroying the natural order to which he belongs; but that is something which we could not say with theological authority except on the basis of God's revelation in the resurrection of

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<sup>51</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

Jesus Christ'.<sup>55</sup> The most immediate danger of sin in O'Donovan's moral-theological vision is precisely the distortion of human perception of the goodness of creation and God's purposes, and the moral paralysis and failure which follow. The gravity of sin, and its distortion of human life as God made it to be, is displayed most concentratedly in the cross of Christ. In Christ's suffering unto death is shown the seriousness of the conflict between 'the true human life and the misshapen human life, between the order of creation as God gave it to be lived and known and the distorted and fantastic image of it in which mankind has lived'.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, to follow in the way of Christ means that any 'joyful and obedient participation' with the created good 'cannot continue freely in the world but must conflict with disobedience'.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, 'participation in the restored creation is by conformity to the death and resurrection of Christ'.<sup>58</sup> Obedient conformity to the good order of creation will therefore always be limited in its apprehension and liable to misperception. But though our knowledge of creation may be "defaced" it is not "lost." [...] We remain beings for whom knowledge is the mode of their participation in the universe. Even in confusion and error we do not cease to know'.<sup>59</sup>

How sin affects human knowledge of creation is also complexified in relation to O'Donovan's varied understanding of the concept of 'the natural'. The confusion of whether 'created order' and 'the natural' are synonymous or distinct concepts is one born out of mixed statements from O'Donovan on this matter. On the one hand, O'Donovan's earlier work moves seamlessly from the 'natural ethic' to 'created order'. Though the language shifts in a short amount of time, creation and the natural appear to be treated similarly around the nexus of common concerns: a retrieval of natural teleology, moral realism, and the objective world of creation as the basis of Christian practical reason. Similarly, his comments in an early essay on Christian marriage seek to assuage Barthian fears about language of 'the natural' by suggesting the reader should read O'Donovan's usage of the term synonymously with 'creation'.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>60</sup> O'Donovan, *Marriage and Permanence*, 5. These tensions were, however, accentuated by O'Donovan's comments at a discussion at the University of St Andrews on 'Creation and the Legacy of the Reformation.' During the discussion, he made a clear delineation between 'nature' and 'creation.' Nature refers to something 'steady state' – the internal pieces and teleological ordering of the world. Following the query of another panel member who seeks to clarify the relationship of nature and teleology, creation and redemption, O'Donovan helpfully made a further distinction between 'form' and 'history': 'What is given in creation is the perfect form [...] capable of making history.' These quotes are drawn from a recorded version of the discussion 'Divinity

Bernd Wannevetsch helpfully articulates the tensions that occur when referring to ‘creation’ or to ‘nature’ in imprecise ways when he writes that:

Any appeal to “creation” is complicated [...] by the difficulties with accessing its reality within the “natural lives” that humans are bound to live after the Fall, when the “voice of nature” is perceived as either mute or cacophonous, and when there are no unambiguous moral instructions that could be directly read off it.<sup>61</sup>

The complicated referent for the term ‘nature’ is due to the interwoven complexity of ‘original created order and what has happened to it under the influence of both human culture and divine preservation’.<sup>62</sup> This arrangement of themes – creation’s permanence, stability, and orderliness – invite us to explore a broader array of topics in O’Donovan’s work, especially creation’s relationship to history, and how both these themes are held together by providence. We turn to consider the broader contours of O’Donovan’s vision in our next section, by tracing the significance of creation in relation to history – a distinction that is central to O’Donovan’s vision.

#### 4.3 Creation as the Presupposition of History: The Challenge of Historicism

In this section we make a slight turn from a direct examination of creation in O’Donovan’s work, to the broader themes of history and providence. In this section we return to the question of history in O’Donovan’s work to show its significance for his account of creation, and the wider significance of this theme for his moral theology. Creation describes, for O’Donovan, that which is stable and anchoring for human experience – God’s works to establish the world, which is sustained and renewed through God’s ongoing providential and salvific works. History, in contrast, describes that which is formless, surprising and disruptive in human experience; it is the expression of creation’s freedom, and the domain in which God works faithfully to lead creation to its good end in Christ. In this respect, living in history is as an inescapable feature of O’Donovan’s writings as it is in Williams’. However, the character and texture of history in O’Donovan’s writings, especially considering his emphasis on creation’s *stability* and *permanence*,

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Forum June 2018: Creation and the Legacy of the Reformation’ accessed at <https://vimeo.com/275212632> on 22nd March 2021. The quoted comments arise in an exchange at 1 hour 6 minutes into the recording.

<sup>61</sup> Bernd Wannevetsch, ‘Creation and Ethics: On the Legitimacy and Limitation of Appeals to “Nature” in Christian Moral Reasoning’ in Anthony Clarke and Andrew Moore (eds.) *Within the Love of God: Essays on the Doctrine of God in Honour of Paul S. Fiddes* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), 216.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

makes for an account of history that looks to an ordering not vulnerable to historical change, namely that of created order. This account of creation and history correlate to an understanding of divine providence that tends more towards *preserving* these qualities of created order, rather than describing any unbridled notion of providential novelty or surprise in history. The familiarity and stability of creation are preserved, in O'Donovan's earlier work, in such a way that novelty and disruption find their intelligibility only through a conformity with God's work of creation. I begin by addressing the nature of history in O'Donovan's early thought – its opacity and contingency – before turning to address the danger of historicism, which elevates history as a source of authority above creation. I then turn to address O'Donovan's handling of these themes in a discussion of providence. The purpose of these discussions is to highlight the contrasting character of history with creation in O'Donovan's works, something which is central to his account of creation, and which is an important point of contrast with Williams' vision.

History describes several aspects of God's works and creaturely life. The major dimensions of this theme as they are present in O'Donovan's works are captured in a discussion early in *Desire of the Nations* about the nature of history and realism in the formation of political concepts:

We must speak, therefore, of a *history* of creation order, and yet of a history of *creation* order, at once a proclamation rooted in the contingency of history and at the same time a vindication of reality which affords us an authority for doing something without equally affording an authority for doing the opposite.<sup>63</sup>

To speak of history is to speak of all these aspects. Firstly, of the 'history of created order', of a narrative that tells of God's working in God's world that is extended over time, and yet one which does justice to creation as something fixed and immovable. History is, secondly, a description of the 'contingency' of being historical agents with the finitude and temporal limit that defines being creatures – this has already been discussed and explored in chapter 2. Thirdly, we see the profoundly ethical concern for understanding history and creation rightly in order that we may speak of what 'affords us an authority' for living with order and fidelity according to God's gracious will.

History's most immediately distinctive quality is, for O'Donovan, its opacity. The final ends and resolution of history remain inscrutable and inaccessible. The early chapters

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<sup>63</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 19.

of Revelation provide O'Donovan with rich theological insight about the mystery of history. In an extended passage he describes the tension of creation and history that Revelation presents:

In the fourth and fifth chapters [the author of Revelation] sees a tableau of creation, in which the throne of God is surrounded by the symbolic representatives of the created order, ceaselessly offering their praise. But their hymns are interrupted by the discovery of a sealed scroll in the hand of the Most High. As a scroll, it represents history; as a sealed scroll, its contents are unintelligible. So, the prophet presents his problem: how can the created order which declares the beauty and splendour of its creator be the subject of a world history, the events of which are apparently contradictory and without point?<sup>64</sup>

The tears of St John in light of the sealed scroll are a response to 'the opacity of history' that are contained within 'the sealed scroll in the hand of the Most High'. Within this scroll is given 'to all creation the joy of having history'.<sup>65</sup> To live in history is a mark of creaturely life, and history is a medium through which God's redemptive power is known and affected through creaturely life. But the character and course of history remain something fundamentally *mysterious* – an important contrast with the familiarity and intelligibility of creation in O'Donovan's writings.

The person of Christ, the revelation of God, and the thread of God's promises in Scripture to his people, provide us with some purchase on history's future *shape*, but a limited and provisional one. In the gospel our knowledge of creation is assured, vindicated and clarified. There is not a sense that human beings discover something *new* about creation in the person of Christ, so much as human understanding of creation is accentuated and assured in Christ's resurrection. However, the gospel does offer the Christian, O'Donovan argues, an understanding of history that was 'never possessed before'.<sup>66</sup> The promise of creation's ultimate fulfilment in the Kingdom of Christ speaks of a work familiar to the character and order of creation.

However, such knowledge of history's promised fulfilment in Christ remains an unrealised *promise*, and therefore something beyond the scope of human apprehension and deliberation. To follow Christ through history as his disciple involves a following *with* and a following *after*.<sup>67</sup> O'Donovan's Christology centres on Christ's *representative* role as the

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<sup>64</sup> O'Donovan, 'History and Politics in the Book of Revelation,' in *Bonds of Imperfection*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 85.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>67</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 117-118.



mediator between God and humanity which extends to his understanding of history such that the follower of Christ can walk the way of history confident that ‘Christ leads us through no darker door than he has gone through before’.<sup>68</sup> However this following *after* Christ means that we are always ‘catching up’ with him in history,<sup>69</sup> with our ultimate end secure, though our penultimate ends remain a mystery. The mysterious and unknown future that God promises is always to be a matter of hope, a hope that is disciplined and measured. The confidence with which O’Donovan assimilates the givenness of created order’s resources within practical reason, is tempered by an apophatic reserve regarding the future *shape* of history and its authority to determine moral reason. Given that the future is unknowable and opaque from the perspective of the present moral authority remains with the givenness and familiarity of created order.

It is these concerns about history’s opacity which precisely shape O’Donovan’s frequently directed critique of historicism. And it is to this theme which we now attend. The problem of historicism is, for O’Donovan, the way in which historical progress can become all too easily aligned with the redemptive work of God. The doctrine of providence, for O’Donovan, will become significant in this context as the assurance of God’s working amidst the uncertainties of history, and a chastening of human tendencies to uncritically interpret any historical change or novelty as containing salvific meaning. This excursus will be drawn back to my main argument about O’Donovan’s work in an important way. The Christian’s scepticism towards historical progress as a source of salvation requires a trust in the freedom of God to judge and redeem history from outside of history. However, since our experience of history is inevitably limited, and the future remains an unknown, O’Donovan’s understanding of providence strongly veers towards understanding the providential work of God – including God’s freedom – in ways that affirm the familiarity of creation.

Historicism is defined by O’Donovan as the tendency to ‘look for “the way things are going”’ based upon the ‘direction that can be read off the present’.<sup>70</sup> In more conceptual terms: ‘[t]ime, rather than essence, is taken to be the primary dimension of reality’.<sup>71</sup> And in more expanded terms, historicist thinking argues that:

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Baxter, ‘Lord it Belongs Not to My Care’ in Janet Morley, *Our Last Awakening: Poems for Living in the Face of Death* (London: SPCK, 2016), 169.

<sup>69</sup> To echo the language of ‘catching up’ with God’s sabbath. O’Donovan, *RMO*, 61-62.

<sup>70</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 230.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

The orderliness of nature is taken to be rooted in history, which is narrated as a quasi-natural unfolding of events, whether a simple cause-and-effect sequence or a more complex organic development, that can be projected onto the inscrutability of future history too.<sup>72</sup>

The challenge of historicism in these passages is primarily the way that it undermines and negates a sense of stable moral order across time. For O'Donovan, the problem with historicism is that it denies that 'a universal (moral) order exists'. He continues that '(a)ction cannot be conformed to transhistorical values, for there are none, but must respond to the immanent dynamisms of history to which it finds itself contributing'.<sup>73</sup> Historicism undermines any notion of unchanging authority since 'the whole content of the claim of the good is mediated to man through his developing social culture'.<sup>74</sup> Historicism veers towards viewing historical progress as the arbiter of salvific possibility: 'It seeks to commend the eschatological intervention of God in terms of the natural strivings for progress which any reasonable man can recognise as constituting the highest in human endeavour'.<sup>75</sup>

A driving concern of O'Donovan's early work is this distinction between historical and natural teleology. The problem of historicism is its understanding of 'all teleology is historical teleology'.<sup>76</sup> He expands on this claim, when he writes that historicism views 'The concept of an "end," it is held is essentially a concept of development in time [...] The natural exists only to be superseded: everything within it serves only a supernatural end, the end of history'.<sup>77</sup> This futurist approach to interpreting the world diminishes the status and being of the material world, including human beings: 'Natural order and natural meanings are understood only as moments in the historical process. They are to be dissolved and reconstituted by that process, and their value lies not in any integrity of their own but in being raw material for transformation'.<sup>78</sup> In another passage, O'Donovan locates the historicist impulse in the context of what he describes as conceptual attempts to 'turn [...] away from the apparent objectivity of [created] order'.<sup>79</sup> Instead of finding order as something 'perceived' in reality but rather as something 'imposed' on reality, O'Donovan

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>73</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 67.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 35.

understands historicism as the imposition of a perceptive ordering based upon faulty temporality, as opposed to an order which retains some consistency and stability despite the changes of history.

The importance of this distinction in O'Donovan's writings can, however, limit the role of providence in his vision. In O'Donovan's early work providence is primarily a *defensive* and *protective* doctrine to establish and secure the theological primacy of creation. Providence's primary role is to maintain the stability of created order, rather than to explore the ways in which our perception and inhabitation of created order are transformed through possibilities not yet found. For example, in a discussion of divine authority in the Old Testament, O'Donovan refers to how God's authority to summon and conform the people of God to glad obedience 'not a creation *ex nihilo* but an act of providence, keeping faith with the creation once made'.<sup>80</sup> God's providential rule in this instance finds its authority precisely because it 'demands what is recognisable' – by referring back to the goodness and authority of creation.<sup>81</sup> Providence tends to be understood in O'Donovan's thought in ways that are suspicious of anchorless moral creativity. However, this wariness also closes off that possibility of receiving those kinds of experience that might disrupt and renew our perceptions of creation, in ways that might constructively untether our perceptions from the familiarity of our previous understandings of the world.

Here, I think, are where O'Donovan's instincts as a moral theologian help to account for the character and place of providence in his thinking. His work is consistently driven by questions about moral deliberation, about how to think about acting well. This means that when he does explore broader questions of dogmatic theology in his work, he is doing so for the sake of drawing on theological resources to orientate and guide moral questions, rather than tracing the fullness and breadth of any given doctrine. Therefore, his early account of providence, which stresses the unity of history's ends with God's purposes in creation, serves to accentuate his account of created order, which in turn bolsters his conviction that morality must find its authoritative direction from the goods of created order. The logic here is driven by particularly moral concerns – to emphasise creation as the objective basis for moral reason. The limits (and strengths) of O'Donovan's account of providence are rooted in the distinctiveness of his approach as a *moral* theologian.

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<sup>80</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 32.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

What all this means for O'Donovan's account of providence and eschatology (and, indeed, his account of the Christian gospel) is that his early work is marked by a suspicion of excessive emphases on the kind of radical transformative novelty that characterises Williams' work. For O'Donovan, the newness of history – either in terms of divine or human work – find their anchoring within creation, as the order which 'makes that change good'.<sup>82</sup> God's ongoing and redemptive work within created order will always be, for O'Donovan, a 'transformation' which is 'in keeping with the creation'.<sup>83</sup> For Williams, the kind of transformation effected through God's presence in the world is of a kind that may entail radical renewal of our perceptions, which might preclude any stable basis apart from the lively and disruptive presence of the risen Christ. The constant provisionality of human knowing and the ongoing potential for renewal through the Spirit's work mean that human perception of God's purposes is something always open to refinement and restatement. In a sense, O'Donovan agrees with Williams' conviction about the future course of God's purposes as something unseen and inaccessible to human vision – history's opacity and mysterious quality is present in both thinker's works. Whilst this conviction leads Williams to an account of creatureliness, learning and living which is always beginning again, O'Donovan's vision of seeing the world stresses the anchoring familiarity and authority of what we can *already* know – the world of kinds, ends and order as it is renewed in Christ. For Williams, human living cannot escape the constant negotiation of surprise, contingency, disruption and limit. For O'Donovan, humanity negotiates these qualities of existence through recourse *back* to the underlying reality of creation, with a faith that God's ways will conform to what we already have seen through creation and Christ. Our apprehension of these central points of the Christian vision may be liable to growth, enlargement and refinement, but, for O'Donovan, surprise and novelty ultimately lead to deeper apprehensions of that which is *already given* in creation and vindicated in Christ.

#### 4.4 'Behold I do a new thing!': Creation, Providence and Eschatology

The frequently tense relationship between creation and history in O'Donovan's thought, especially in his critique of historicism, raises the questions of how best to constructively envisage the unity of history and creation in Christ, and how to harmonise

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<sup>82</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 45.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

the novel and surprising qualities of salvation-history within the underlying stability and permanence of created order. At many points in O'Donovan's works he argues that creation and history's fulfilment are not 'generated immanently from within'.<sup>84</sup> Creation's redemption and fulfilment in Christ is therefore 'a work "from outside"' of history: 'to speak of "grace alone" is to say more than that God is at work within history [...] God is not merely responding to the necessities intrinsic to [history] but is doing something new'.<sup>85</sup> As part of this emphasis, eschatology and novelty are crucial for understanding the character of salvation in Christ: 'For where the new intervenes and reshapes the old, there is God, the Lord and giver of life'.<sup>86</sup> However, the notes of eschatological novelty that emerge in O'Donovan's work are frequently tethered by a recourse back to the underlying reality of creation. Precisely because of the *new* character of Christ's coming kingdom, its unseen and unpredictable quality lies beyond human apprehension and imagination as that which no eye has seen, nor ear heard. Our moral attentions must be led to that which we *are* able to see and grasp: the world of creation, given and renewed in Christ. This means that O'Donovan's accounts of eschatology and providence tend to stress the unity of creation and eschatology in ways find their orientation from the givenness of *creation*.<sup>87</sup> The transformation of all things in Christ remains unseen, and yet we can see that such transformation will be 'in keeping with the creation'.<sup>88</sup> Creation and redemption are 'the poles in relation to which Christians have consistently narrated the history of the world',<sup>89</sup> and it is a distinctive conviction of O'Donovan's writings that Christian reflection must not abandon the work of discerning 'the good hand of God within the order of a good creation'.<sup>90</sup> The new creation promised in Christ's coming kingdom 'is *creation* renewed', it is a 'restoration and enhancement, not an abolition' of creation.<sup>91</sup>

To draw out these aspects of O'Donovan's vision, I will place his thought in brief conversation with a thinker who likewise stresses the unity of creation and history but does so in ways that prioritise eschatological ends over the given character of creation. Robert Jenson is an important and representative figure in contemporary Protestant theology and is an occasional figure of critique in O'Donovan's work. He explores a similar Scriptural and

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>86</sup> O'Donovan, 'Eternal Fire,' *WSB*, 47.

<sup>87</sup> This argument is developed at a length and depth that I am unable to pursue here in Samuel Tranter's *Oliver O'Donovan's Moral Theology: Tensions and Triumphs* (London: T & T Clark, 2020).

<sup>88</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 64.

<sup>89</sup> O'Donovan, *CWB*, 86

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 99. (emphasis mine).

theological terrain but reaches very different conclusions about the eschatological shape of the Christian vision. The difference between Jenson and O'Donovan is a matter of how creation and history illumine each other. Does history and creation's unity lend greater importance to *history*, stressing a more futurist, eschatological doctrine of creation in which our understanding of God and history coincide such that we can only truly know God in God's fullest at the *end* of history? This is the path of Jenson. Or should history's unity with creation means that the structures of creation are steadfast amidst the throes of history, meaning that while we may not be able to tell the shape of history before God's final revelation of it, we may nevertheless see history as consonant with the original givenness inherent in creation? This is the answer of the early O'Donovan. Let us probe these questions a little further in order to get to grips with O'Donovan's treatment of this theme and its implication.

Robert Jenson's programmatic statement regarding creation is that:

the world God creates is not a thing, a "cosmos," but is rather a history. God does not create a world that thereupon has a history; he creates a history that is a world, in that it is purposive and so makes a whole.<sup>92</sup>

As with much of Jenson's writing, this rich and provocative statement needs further clarification, which Jenson provides in brief terms. This unity of history with creation, indeed the very description of creation as 'a history,' is a statement of the unity of God's work, the singular direction and purpose of this work, and the inseparability of God's diverse works of creation, redemption and consummation. He claims that, following Irenaeus: 'the doctrines of creation and redemption were developed with less and less reference to one another'.<sup>93</sup> The diagnostic question for whether a theology unduly stresses the distinction of God's acts over their unity is 'whether redemption is understood to fulfil initial creation or merely to restore it'. For Jenson, Christian 'theology has too much tended to the latter'.<sup>94</sup> Craig Bartholomew places Jenson and O'Donovan in alignment around this statement on the grounds that they both understand 'history to be part of creation order'.<sup>95</sup> O'Donovan responds within the same volume to reject precisely this formula since it

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<sup>92</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 14.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>95</sup> Craig Bartholomew, 'A Time for War, A Time for Peace,' in Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song and Al Wolters (eds.) *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), 109.

unavoidably conflates ‘moral and historical teleology, “the good” and “the future”’.<sup>96</sup> The problem of configuring creation in such eschatological terms is, for O’Donovan, to fall into the same trap as historicism which confuses ‘the good with the future’.<sup>97</sup>

As such, Jenson’s distinctive narrational metaphysics is useful as a sharp comparison with O’Donovan’s understanding of creation’s stability and permanence. One of Jenson’s central instincts regards the alignment of God with the future, in a way that is disturbing to the continuity and stability of the present. ‘Since the Lord’s self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end, not at birth, not in *persistence* but in *anticipation*’.<sup>98</sup> There is a particular alignment between God and history. History becomes the very mode and medium of God’s life and work: ‘the one God is an *event*; history occurs not only in him but as his being’.<sup>99</sup> Since time and narrative are a familiar medium for God’s action, God’s ontological uniqueness is significantly reinterpreted by Jenson in terms that are not incongruous with creaturely time. God’s eternity is not timelessness, but rather ‘pure duration’.<sup>100</sup> The distinctiveness of God’s identity (or as Jenson would say God’s “eternity”) is not because of its temporal distinctiveness from creaturely time, but because of God’s fidelity *within* and *through* time. ‘The true God is not eternal because he lacks time, but because he takes time’.<sup>101</sup> God’s unique identity and his relationship to time is primarily, for Jenson, a way of understanding God’s faithfulness to his creatures:

The eternity of Israel’s God is his faithfulness. He is not eternal in that he secures himself from time, but in that he is faithful to his commitments within time. At the great turning, Israel’s God is eternal in that he is faithful to the death, and then yet again faithful.<sup>102</sup>

The nature of God, then, does not envisage God’s action in any kind of antagonism with temporal change and contingency. For Jenson, divine faithfulness does not entail continuity according to any external principle other than the story of God’s interactions with his creatures: ‘As triune, he is truly faithful to himself, so that all his acts cohere to make the

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<sup>96</sup> O’Donovan, ‘Response to Craig Bartholomew,’ in *A Royal Priesthood*, 114.

<sup>97</sup> O’Donovan, *CWB*, 88.

<sup>98</sup> Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 66.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>100</sup> Jenson, *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrills, 1969), 128-129.

<sup>101</sup> Jenson, *STI*, 217.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

one act that he personally is, and so that no further explanation is required'.<sup>103</sup> What this means for how Jenson understands the biblical narrative of salvation is one that there is no assurance of stability apart from God as the 'guarantor of this continuity'.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, Jenson places this in even more radical terms when he writes of the Exodus that 'Israel's God is not salvific because he defends against the future but because he poses it'.<sup>105</sup> The idols of the nations from which Israel are called out from 'are guarantors of continuity and return, against the daily threat to fragile established order; indeed they *are* Continuity and Return'.<sup>106</sup> No stage of the story of God's salvation of the world is allowed to be isolated and elevated as the anchor and stable framework to understand salvation, apart from God's own self. But to speak of the being and identity of the God of Israel and Christ, for Jenson, is known only by surveying the entirety of God's dealings with the world, a story of dealings yet to be finished whose telling must also wait in hope.

Introducing Jenson into this chapter draws into clearer view what is most distinctive about O'Donovan's account of providence. Providence is a doctrine inexplicably connected with both creation and eschatology. It is, as Webster writes, a 'distributed doctrine,' that intersects with several themes in theology – of the doctrine of God *in se* and God's works *ad extra*.<sup>107</sup> Bringing O'Donovan's work into contrast with Jenson's shows that God's providential cohering of creation and history in Christ can be understood in ways that variedly stress either the unseen and novel future which will make sense of the beginning (Jenson), and also in ways that stress the congruity of God's future works in alignment with the goodness of creation (O'Donovan). The providence of God, for O'Donovan, means God's faithfulness to all that God has made, by honouring its goodness, and by drawing creation to its fulfilment in ways that *restore* and *renew* its character, rather than a radical alteration or redefinition of its essential character:

God's action can encompass novelty, that which is itself unpredictable except in terms of God's own declaration of his intent: "Behold I am doing a new thing" (Is. 43:19). God cannot suffer under constraint, even from his own past dispositions. On the other hand, God's freedom also implies his self-posed faithfulness. When we say that God "bound himself" in the covenant of creation, we use a paradoxical metaphor, certainly, but what we say is not meaningless. It means that God's freedom is exercised in congruence with itself. It is not randomness, turning idly

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>107</sup> Webster, 'On the Theology of Providence,' in Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (eds.), *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 159.



back upon itself and cancelling out its own creative deed, but redemptive transformation, which respects and exalts that which has gone before [...] God's unlimited power includes also the power to be consistent with itself.<sup>108</sup>

This section has served to accentuate my main argument in this chapter, namely for the centrality of understanding creation in O'Donovan's vision of creation's stability and permanence: its characteristic completeness, and its determinative anchoring for perceiving history and God's subsequent works. Based on this exploration so far, we may see that the central contrasts of O'Donovan's and Williams' vision have been significantly sharpened. The fixed ordering of creation in O'Donovan's treatment of history and eschatology contrast significantly with Williams' account of history as an essential, inseparable and constructive feature of being a human creature engaged with God and God's world. The musical and temporal shape of Williams' understanding of creation is strongly discordant next to O'Donovan's conviction about the more established and architectural character of created order. Whilst these themes are sharp at this point, I now wish to nuance this contrast in constructive ways, through turning to O'Donovan's most recent works.

#### 4.5 Love of the World, Providence and Discernment: Creation in *Ethics as Theology*

By turning our attention to O'Donovan's later work, we will see that many of his central emphases remain intact, but these are also expanded and developed in important ways. The created order is still the foundational anchor for O'Donovan's vision – its givenness, objectiveness, stability are still taken to be creation's essential qualities. However, there are some developments in his account of creation which are worth raising and reflecting on in this final section. The main development of the *Ethics as Theology* trilogy is not substantive change to O'Donovan's vision, but a redirected 'angle of vision' in the concerns of the work.<sup>109</sup> O'Donovan's focus in his earlier work (the centrality of 'the objective order of created goods' <sup>110</sup> for Christian ethics) shifts in his later work to a renewed focus 'principally towards the subjective renewal of agency and its opening to the forward calling of God'.<sup>111</sup> The movement of these works is not one from theology to

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<sup>108</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 136.

<sup>109</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 93-94.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

ethics, moving from created order to moral agency.<sup>112</sup> Rather, they seek to show how ‘[e]thics opens up towards theology’,<sup>113</sup> and of how moral experience is caught up within the Holy Spirit’s work such that ‘active life with its active purposes comes within our reach’.<sup>114</sup> The coherence of the moral life is found as each of these aspects accord with the person of Christ: ‘the centre of the world, the bridegroom of the self, [and] the turning point of past and future’.<sup>115</sup>

The phenomenological tenor of these later works has already been noted in chapter 2.<sup>116</sup> This aspect, and the movement of the work from ethics into theology, signals a greater attentiveness to the *creaturely* aspects of participation with the given and stable order of creation, and the contingencies and complexities which characterise this work of participation. The central importance of this shift for our present discussions of creation is that its stability and givenness are largely preserved in this later account, but within an epistemic framework that is more capacious and dynamic, and less immediately perspicuous in how humanity relates to creation’s order. For example, O’Donovan describes the ‘two aspects from which we think about the one world: objectively, as God created it for mankind to live in, and subjectively as we ourselves have received and imagined it within our life-context’.<sup>117</sup> Accompanying this developed emphasis, is also a growing sense of the *dynamism*, temporality and growth which accompanies human participation in created order. These emphases move O’Donovan’s vision closer to that of Williams, stressing in more emphatic ways the provisionality, finitude, and growth which marks out creaturely life. But these emphases in O’Donovan’s work are articulated within a framework that remains fundamentally *distinct* from Williams’. O’Donovan’s approach to moral theology remains a distinctively ‘architectural enterprise’, which draws on a whole complex myriad of disciples and themes,<sup>118</sup> but a task that remains oriented towards

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<sup>112</sup> This is, to some degree, the approach of *RMO* which moves from its first two sections on the ‘The objective reality’ and ‘The subjective reality’ of the Christian vision. These focus largely on the doctrinal contours of O’Donovan’s earlier accounts – creation, eschatology, providence, history, authority and Christology. The final section (‘The form of the moral life’) shifts to exploring the character of practical reason and moral deliberation in light of the Christian gospel. The theological and ethical are evidently intermingled in this work, and I don’t mean to suggest any simplistic or linear movement in the work from theology to ethics. Likewise, the recent trilogy is not simply a straightforward movement from ethics to theology in the reverse direction. However, there is a clearly distinctive approach between these early and later works, their direction of movement between theological exploration and ethical concerns, and their starting point from either theology or ethics.

<sup>113</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 19.

<sup>114</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 19.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, *SWT*, 10-12; and *FS*, 76, 104-18.

<sup>117</sup> O’Donovan ‘The Practice of Being Old’ in Ephraim Radner (ed.), *Church, Society and the Common Good: Essays in Conversation with Philip Turner* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), 211.

<sup>118</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, x.

recognising and gladly participating within the order of God's making and redeeming. Likewise, though the subjective world of our experience and perception offers us an 'ensemble of particular recognitions' that remain 'time-bound' and 'passing', it is these impressions that 'have mediated God's created order to us'.<sup>119</sup> It is only in engaged discernment with this passing and temporal world that frames our immediate experiences through which human beings can perceive 'the created world of God's designing that gives shape to our very existence as agents and persists unchanging from generation to generation'.<sup>120</sup>

O'Donovan writes of how 'created order' itself comes to be understood as an 'an order in time' meaning that time plays a more developed role in moral perception of creation.<sup>121</sup> Likewise, he connects human affective responses to creation with this renewed temporal dimension to creation in a discussion about the nature of human desire. 'Desire,' he writes, 'is the opening of love to time's distribution of created goods'.<sup>122</sup> Desire is one aspect of human love that 'comprehends a certain dynamic interplay of possibilities'.<sup>123</sup> This particular aspect of love, which responds to the temporal course of life and creation, is one especially 'characterised by disturbance'. He continues, saying that '[t]ime is disturbing to our love of the world's good order'.<sup>124</sup> However, this sense of disturbance to our perceptions of the goodness of the world in relation to history is not an ultimately destructive one.<sup>125</sup> The way in which time disturbs glad appreciation of creation is a disturbance that can lead humanity *more deeply* into knowledge and inhabitation of created order. The focus and desire of human loving and learning of creation remains precisely the longing to know reality as a 'satisfying whole'.<sup>126</sup> There remains the central conviction that 'God did not create a world of disjointed and unrelated moments, but one tied together as a whole in a multitude of ontological and temporal relationships'.<sup>127</sup> However, there is a more pervasive awareness that such attempts to perceive creation 'may go astray'.<sup>128</sup> The

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<sup>119</sup> O'Donovan 'The Practice of Being Old,' 211.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 74.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>125</sup> As O'Donovan writes, 'Disturbance and striving [...] belongs entirely to being alive.' O'Donovan, *FS*, 104.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 111.

search for a ‘unity of knowledge of knowledge and love’ can be inhibited by ‘[f]alse love and uncommitted knowledge’ that ‘close down the possibility of further discovery’.<sup>129</sup>

In the later trilogy, it is precisely because humanity’s participation in creation is more prominently a work of *love* and *desire* (and not simply knowledge) which accounts for the developed sense of time and growth that distinguishes O’Donovan’s account of creation. Love responds not simply to the ‘ontological’ but also the ‘temporal’ ordering of creation.<sup>130</sup> There is a more developed sense of the journeying which happens as human beings learn to perceive and inhabit the goodness of creation:

Loving God “above all things”, then, leads back to loving created goods, but it does so in a specific way and in a specific order and under specific controls [...] Love of God is affirmed in and through our other loves, structuring them and ordering them so that with each new discovery of good that world and time lay open to us, the question of the love of God is put again, its sovereignty over other loves reasserted or forgotten. For love of the world and of the God who gives the world occupies our experience not as a settled condition, but as a series of openings and adventures.<sup>131</sup>

By understanding human participation in created order more widely in terms of love, affective response, as well as rational discernment, there is a more developed understanding of time’s role shaping creaturely perception of the world. To perceive the world as a gift of the Father requires an act of discernment that can only happen over time. O’Donovan argues: ‘All our knowledge and love is incomplete; there is no total purchase on any reality in the world, only a partial coming to grips with it, which may, however, promise further discovery and encounter’.<sup>132</sup> The incompleteness of human knowledge does not undermine O’Donovan’s earlier emphasis on the Sabbatical completeness of creation. Rather, O’Donovan’s later trilogy does greater justice to the journeying that characterises creaturely participation in created order.

This positive appropriation of time in O’Donovan’s account of creaturely participation in the created order introduces an element of instability into the character of human participation within that created order. How, for example, might the theologian square the Johannine exhortation to ‘love not the world’ (1 Jn 2.15), whilst recognising that the world is also the object of God’s unshakeable and steadfast love (Jn 3.16)?<sup>133</sup> How does

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>131</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 119.

<sup>132</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 81.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 73.

the haunting presence of sin, and the contingencies of time in creaturely knowing relate to the firm and unfixed order of creation? The challenge becomes how creation can remain an object of love considering the destabilising forces which threaten human understanding: ‘How, then, can we avoid a purely ephemeral love of an ephemeral world, unstable, disconsolate, unappreciative, unfulfilled in response to the beauties and goods of creation?’<sup>134</sup>

The answer lies in a trusting response to providence, to the goodness of God and his purposes in creation. Divine providence grounds human assurance in the permanence, stability and loveliness of the created order that forms the basis of our moral field: ‘The will that has brought the world into being, and will sustain and redeem it, rules our responses to the world’s phenomena. To fix our love and action upon the object of God’s will is to engage in the world of God’s creation *really*, and not in fantasy’.<sup>135</sup> In speaking about the captivating goodness of creation, he speaks of this as a work of providence in which creation’s splendour ‘falls on no other site than where God has placed it, quite independently of our vision, the world he has made so sure that it cannot be moved [...] the school of our first and last purposes’.<sup>136</sup> On a similar point of reflection about authority of divine command he insists that: ‘God’s “absolute” power is a truth of speculation only, for in meeting God we meet him as Creator and Preserver, faithful to the good that he has made’.<sup>137</sup> There is tight relating of God’s providential work to the stability of creation. The world’s ‘permanence is not a necessary attribute but a function of the sustaining rule of God’.<sup>138</sup> Similarly, O’Donovan argues that ‘Nothing that the world shows up, no object of desire or boasting, can endure unless God preserves it’.<sup>139</sup>

The more developed account of providence within O’Donovan’s account of creation in *Ethics as Theology* is accompanied by a greater influence of eschatological themes. Love responds to the created order of God’s making. However, because this ‘order is not only ontological, but temporal’ then moral attention formed by the gospel must be ‘shaped eschatologically, in light of the world’s end’.<sup>140</sup> This aspect of O’Donovan’s work moves us to view creation through the unconsidered and final member of the theological triad in these works: hope. Faith describes the summons and direction of agency and self; love structures

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>136</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 113.

<sup>137</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 30.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 239.

the life of agency in response to the loveliness and goodness of the world, giving faith a concrete form in love towards God and neighbour negotiated in conformity to the created order. Hope shifts the work of moral agency towards *time*, towards the future of the moral agent, and of the world which shapes moral agency.

The future remains a haunting unknown for the task of Christian ethics in O'Donovan's later work. O'Donovan critiques attempts to base Christian ethics in eschatology in ways that would imagine the future as an extension of the regularities of the present – the frequently critiqued habit of 'anticipation'. To imagine eschatology this way would involve closing ourselves off from the genuinely new future promised in the coming Kingdom of God.<sup>141</sup> Hope responds not to the 'present' but rather to the 'future of God's promise'.<sup>142</sup> Since hope responds to the promise, not a projection of present regularity into future anticipation, the relationship of the present to future is not simply that of 'means to end' when viewed through the promises of the gospel.<sup>143</sup> The apophatic character of what hope cannot foresee, and the unknown resolution of present reality to future hope, means that the immediate and most important framing for ethics remains creation. The restoration and renewal of all things remains a work that is unseen, and yet one that can be trusted as congruous with creation itself. Through faith, hope and love human beings are assured that 'created good' has been 'given as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, as the future appearing in a present familiarity'.<sup>144</sup>

From this survey of O'Donovan's treatment of creation in the *Ethics as Theology* trilogy, we can see that many of O'Donovan's core instincts remain intact, though with enriching nuances and developments. Creation remains the anchor of salvation history and the Christian life. However, there is a greater sense of the constructive place of time in human perceptions of created order. Creaturely participation in this order happens through the growth, reorientation, and refinement of immediate perceptions of creation. The necessity of discerning engagement with creation that is aware of human finitude comes more closely to the fore in these writings. These developments do not radically alter O'Donovan's earlier account but enrich and affirm his basic instincts about creation: that created reality is the fixed and stable order of God's making, and glad harmonious conformity with this order forms the basic purpose of the Christian life. The completeness,

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<sup>141</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 121-122.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>143</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 163.

<sup>144</sup> O'Donovan, *ER*, 4.

stability and orderliness of created order, however, are less determined theological starting points in the trilogy. Rather, creation's character and significance in the Christian life are met in a *journey* of ever-growing moral awareness. The needs of a moral life – the desire for coherence, orientation, and fulfilment – find a foothold through glad acknowledgement and participation in the good world of God's making. The difference between these early and later accounts of creation is not a change of O'Donovan's central theological convictions, but a development in how such realities come to be learnt and assimilated within the task of human living. This produces a subtle shift in O'Donovan's fundamental account of creaturely existence, but not in his fundamental account of creation itself.

This later trilogy, at times, teases several points of development that would move O'Donovan's vision more closely to Williams': the centrality of time as an essential and constructive feature of creaturely existence; a more developed sense of *growth* as an essential characteristic of creation; and a more developed sense of *novelty* as a key marker of creaturely life. All these themes emerge in O'Donovan's later works and are themes which are more pointedly made in Williams' writings. However, the basic architectural structure of creation remains in O'Donovan's account in a way that makes a straightforward resolution of these accounts difficult, given their fundamentally different characters. The basic motifs of their accounts contain much constructive overlap but retain important distinctives from the other.

#### 4.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to display the centrality of creation in Oliver O'Donovan's vision, to show its distinctive doctrinal character in his writings, and to begin to heighten the contrasts between his vision and that of Williams. Creation is central to his account of the Christian gospel and the Christian life. The defining qualities underlining his account of creation are the completeness, stability and orderliness of the created order, which in turn anchor his understanding of history and providence. I have argued that O'Donovan's account of creation, in contrast to Williams', stresses to a greater degree the *given* and *fixed* quality of creation. Marked by a sense of stability and permanence, creation is the reality which authoritatively guides human living, and which anchors salvation-history. O'Donovan's thought treats creation as an anchor – not an exhaustive or homogenous concept – but one which still strongly shapes the rest of his moral-theological vision. Redemption is not simply a mere 'repetition of the created world' but neither does

salvation in Christ entail a ‘negation’ of created order.<sup>145</sup> Instead, O’Donovan understands creation as the anchor of history, and the history of God’s purposes leads human beings to ‘discover created good’ as that which is ‘given as a foretaste of the kingdom of God, as the future appearing in a present familiarity’.<sup>146</sup> Likewise, ‘it is within the created world that the goods we love, the ends for which we act, the reasons we discover for each purpose we form, arise’.<sup>147</sup> ‘Love makes a home in the world.’<sup>148</sup> Creation is the world God has made which is ‘hospitable to our purposive action’ as human beings.<sup>149</sup> This is not to claim that recourse to creation solves every moral question or irresolution. Rather, it is to discover ourselves as creatures, placed in the world of God’s making, to see ourselves with moral agency and confidence, gifted with resources that will guide and inform the human journeying with Christ.

For O’Donovan, the motifs of this chapter texture much of the subsequent themes that we later turn our attention to, especially in relation to Christology, the meaning of the resurrection, and the character of the Christian life. Christ is the one in whom the Creator’s purposes and very presence have become wholly present in the event of the Incarnation. As the one who represents humanity to God (and God to the world), Christ is the representative of faithful and unfaithful Israel, and through Israel, Christ represents all of creation before God. The work of Christ is one that is wholly congruent with the purposes of God in creation. It is especially the resurrection of Christ that, for O’Donovan, points backwards to creation – reaffirming its goodness and orderliness. The Christian life that flows from the person of Christ, and his resurrection from the dead, is characterised by a stability reoriented and assured by the work of God in Christ.

Both this chapter and the previous one have pursued a strongly *doctrinal* exploration of the themes of these thinkers’ visions – their understanding of creation’s character, some of their implicit understandings of the doctrine of God, the nature of providence and the character of creaturely existence. However, my angle of approach has already suggested that my understanding of these two thinker’s doctrinal visions are ones inseparably interwoven with different patterns and habits of thinking about the shape of the Christian life. Contained in both their accounts of creation are different accounts of what is most pronounced in creaturely existence – the glad recognition and inhabitation of the order

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<sup>145</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 55.

<sup>146</sup> O’Donovan, *ER*, 4.

<sup>147</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 113.

<sup>148</sup> O’Donovan, *ER*, 201.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.



of creation (O'Donovan), and the life marked by limit, frailty, surprise and gratuity (Williams). Theological conviction has been central to these contrasts, especially about the character of temporality and createdness. But important to these contrasts are also the different affective bases and orientations of their theological accounts. Williams' vision of creation begins from those experiences of abundance and finitude: of those moments of recognising the gift of the world's beauty and complexity and our incapacity to fully perceive this richness; and it begins from that experience of the limits which mark out my life, of bodily, temporal and mortal limit. This account tends to accentuate those aspects of learning, growth and limit which characterise being human, but also affirms these aspects as the means of God's working in a life. For O'Donovan, the doctrine of creation arises in the process of becoming morally aware, and of recognising my need for coherence and direction in my pursuit of the good. The tendency of this account is to affirm that human need for intelligibility, and to affirm that the Creator provides us with those resources to live well, to do good and to live lives of purpose. These contrasts can complement and enrich the other. But there is also a depth to the contrasts which cannot simply be reduced in a straightforward harmonisation. Instead, what I hope to show through these contrasts are two visions of the Christian faith and life which taken together, in all their discordant richness and particularity, display equally necessary and irreplaceable aspects of Christian wisdom. This contrast is heightened in their respective accounts of Christology, which build on and develop instincts articulated in their respective accounts of creation. It is to this subject to which I will now turn.



## **Chapter 5.**

### **The Difference Christ Makes: Christology and Soteriology in Williams and O'Donovan<sup>1</sup>**

The thematic explorations that have led us to this point have been a preparatory marshalling of motifs that come into full view and arrangement within the centre of Williams' and O'Donovan's visions – namely their accounts of the nature of Christ's person and work, Christ's death and resurrection, and the newness of life achieved and offered through him to sinful humanity. This chapter develops themes from each thinker's respective and underlying visions that will be familiar. As such, this chapter continues to develop my argument for the coherency of each thinker's vision of Christology and creation, as well as building towards the argument of the next and final chapter that their respective contrasting visions significantly shape the affective texture of their accounts of the Christian life. My previous explorations of creation in these thinkers' works intentionally withheld fuller discussions of their Christological works in order to trace more fully the doctrinal contrasts at play in each of their writings. The purpose of this chapter is to develop the central instincts of each thinker's work considered thus far and to show the importance of these contrasts for Williams' and O'Donovan's understanding of the Christian gospel. Just as both thinker's account of learning and knowing in chapters 1 and 2 were shown to be informed by their understandings of creation and creaturely existence considered in chapters 3 and 4, so too does this chapter seek to show that their Christological work is integrally related to their accounts of creation. This chapter builds on the explorations of previous chapters, showing a consistency of texture in their visions of Christ and creation, and is also a pivot point to subsequent chapters on the Christian life in these thinkers' works.

Both Williams and O'Donovan agree that Christ is the one through whom and for whom all things are created (cf. Col. 1:16). As such, both thinkers' Christologies share a set of core convictions. Each is fully committed to a Chalcedonian Christology that holds together Christ's human and divine natures in ways that do not metaphysically compete with, or negate, each other. But their understanding of the character of Christ's saving work, and what it means to see Christ at the centre of all things, develops a set of contrasts that we have already seen thus far in their understanding of creation and history.

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<sup>1</sup> To borrow Sam Well's titular essay from Stanley Hauerwas' *Festschrift*. Charles M. Collier (ed.), *The Difference Christ Makes: Celebrating the Work, and Friendship of Stanley Hauerwas* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

For Oliver O'Donovan, Christ's person and work are wholly consonant with the given and stable character of creation. A helpful shorthand for Christ's significance in O'Donovan's writings is a threefold work to *reveal* the true character of creation, to *renew* the creation marred by sin and death, and finally to *crown* creation by pointing to its final fulfilment. Christ is the faithful representative of Israel, and as representative of God's promises to Israel, he is also representative of *all humanity* before God. In Christ are the cries of a longing and sinful humanity answered, as human beings find mercy and renewal in Christ's death and resurrection. Likewise, Christ's representation of humanity indicates that *all* of creation is being redeemed, and human beings are being restored to an assured place of confident living within this created order. Creation continues to occupy an anchoring position in O'Donovan's account of the Christian gospel. His account of salvation often diminishes the notes of discontinuity or disruption in relation to creation's goodness. The purposes of Christ's saving work are the restoration of creatures to full participation within the order of creation – an order which remains *good*. Sin, for O'Donovan, is more frequently addressed in its subjective dimensions, especially the distortive effect of sin on human moral perception and agency. This account of sin accords with an account of salvation which focuses on God's restorative work to renew our moral capacities for the work of obedient and wise action.<sup>2</sup> The problem of sin in O'Donovan's vision primarily entails the failures of full creaturely participation in the order of God's making – the confusions, distortions, and misrepresentations of the given reality of the world as God has made it. As such, the saving character of Christ's person and work are, for O'Donovan, expressed in ways that are focussed upon the renewal of human beings for the task of confident and purposeful moral living. This is the terrain covered in the first section.

In the second section, we will see that the character of Christ's identity is also one of the most pressing themes of Rowan Williams' work. Christ is consonant with the purposes and character of creation, but not in such a straightforward or linear a way as in O'Donovan's writings. The fixedness and stability of created order in O'Donovan is sharply contrasted with creation's essential malleability and liability to grow in Williams' vision. The true character of creation is unknowable apart from the witness and work of Christ as the true fruition of creaturely life – as the one who displays the fullness of creaturely existence through total,

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<sup>2</sup> As we will see, the objective dimensions of sin – its destructive power in negatively effecting the underlying character of creation – is present and well noted in his works. But O'Donovan's distinctive account of *moral* theology means that he tends to consider sin in its subjective elements, and the way that it effects, limits, and distorts the work of moral agency.

joyful, and dependent relation with the Father. For Williams, the historical, contingent and open texture of creaturely life is taken up in a novel and transformative manner in the incarnation. Christ embodies the fullness of creaturely existence, remaking and renewing creation from within. The central thrust of what Christ achieves is to make possible human participation in the divine life, inviting human beings to ‘stand where Christ stands’ within the Godhead. This “filial” mode of existence is marked by abundance: in union with Christ, human beings are led into an unseen and unrealised, yet assuredly redemptive, future. Our perception of Christ’s work in the world is never finished, as we are constantly catching up and coping with the fullness of what it means to see the world with Christ at its centre.

As well as building on previous chapters, this chapter will begin to move our attention to the central argument of my thesis that both Williams’ and O’Donovan’s works offer a set of discordant and equally necessary affective aspects of Christian wisdom. In this respect, this chapter is consciously incomplete, as its focus remains more pronouncedly *dogmatic* without yet addressing primarily how these visions inform their accounts of the affective shape of Christian existence. This chapter traces the broader doctrinal contours of each thinker’s vision of Christian faith. It builds towards the next chapter about the character of Christ’s resurrection,<sup>3</sup> where the affective dimensions of their theologies will come into clearer view. The central contrast, however, remains consistent between this and the final chapters. One vision is based on the soteriological motif of *restoration* in which Christ’s saving work restores and fulfils creation, renews human participation in the created order. In this vision, union with Christ makes possible a form of living that is stable in its orientation and marked out by glad and assured living (O’Donovan). The other vision is based around a soteriological motif of *disruption* in which Christ’s loving work interrupts human histories of sin, offering a radically unexpected fulfilment of creation. The life that is united with Christ is one opened to the endlessly generative possibilities of divine freedom and creaturely existence. It is a life marked by radical openness to neighbour, world and the generative purposes of God (Williams).

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<sup>3</sup> Having a chapter on Christology and the resurrection might naturally lead the reader to wonder where the cross lies in my treatment of these thinker’s works. The cross is certainly integral for both thinker’s vision. But it is not a major point of *difference* between Williams and O’Donovan. Certainly, there are some subtle differences in how each of them understands atonement, and how the cross features within this account. However, atonement is part of a broader framework of salvation, which is more focussed within their works on the nature of the resurrection.

### 5.1 Christ the Representative: Christology in O'Donovan

Thus far we have seen how the reality of created order is central to O'Donovan's vision. Human action finds its intelligible orientation through attention and inhabitation of the world of God's making and redeeming. I have hinted at the soteriological and Christological aspects of this vision, but now I draw these more fully into view. Christology is central to O'Donovan's vision. O'Donovan's account of Christ's person and work are strongly informed by his underlying convictions about creation, which is why I withheld discussions of Christology for this chapter in order to show how a contrasting set of convictions about the nature of Christ's identity are part of a wider tapestry of theological conviction that are mutually informing of each other.

In O'Donovan's case, I will argue that his account of Christology is closely related to his conviction about creation's stability: Christ vindicates God's original purposes for creation, and renews the goods of creation that remained good even amid the distorting power of sin. My exploration of Christology in O'Donovan's writings begins with the important theme of representation. This theme has significant wider political resonances in his writings but has a primarily Christological meaning: Christ is the one in whom the people of God are represented, and the one in whom God is decisively and authoritatively active within the world. This theme leads us to consider the typological significance of Israel's history in O'Donovan's Christology. Christ is a recognisable typological recapitulation of all that God has done for Israel. Central to his account of Christ's relation to Israel, I will argue, is a sense of unfolding continuity. Christ's representative role is given particular typological significance as the one who represents both unfaithful and faithful Israel, for the sake of the whole world's renewal and salvation.

This discussion will lead us into a wider consideration of the connection of Christ's incarnation to created order. I will argue that the strengths and limits of his Christology are due to its close relation to his account of moral agency: Christ's uniqueness as Lord and Saviour is concerned with Christ's authority as the one in whom history and the goods of creation coincide, such that the time and world of human action can be intelligibly seen and inhabited through faith in Christ. This emphasis means that many of the disruptive or novel aspects of Christ's identity are diminished in O'Donovan's Christology, as he prefers instead to emphasise Christ as the intelligible basis for how we are to think about how to act. Salvation in Christ can in no way be understood, for O'Donovan, as an undoing or negation of created reality. The gospel is transformative and significant for creaturely life only insofar

as it tells of a renewal of *this* world, and insofar as Christ restores truthful human engagement with the good order of God's making. The distinctiveness of these convictions will in turn inform my treatment of the Christian life in O'Donovan's writings, as the basis of a life that finds its joyful and satisfying coherency in Christ.

If there is a central theme and instinct that textures O'Donovan's Christology, then we might point to the pervasive language of *representation*, and to Christ's *representative* role. The language of representation seeks to do justice both to the typological roots of Christ's person and work in the religious and political life of ancient Israel, whilst also capturing the full significance of Christ's incarnate identity: representation seeks to convey Christ's identity as the one who is filled with the fullness of God (Col. 1: 19), who reveals God's absolute faithful presence with humanity; and, Christ is the one whose body places him amongst humanity as a fellow creature.<sup>4</sup> To lose either aspect of Christ's identity as the singularly unique and authoritative representative of God to humanity, or as the perfectly obedient representative of humanity before God, would be to lose the sense in which Christ's person and work are truly transformative for humanity. In this respect, Christ's *representative* work and his *restorative* work go hand in hand.

Representation draws together a number of interwoven and interlocking ideas in O'Donovan's writings with significance beyond Christology.<sup>5</sup> Representation describes the nature of political authority, and of the relationship between community and their representative leaders;<sup>6</sup> representation likewise involves a description of the wider nature of

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<sup>4</sup> For this reason, O'Donovan rejects the connection of Christology to moral theology in terms of upholding Christ simply as a moral exemplar: 'Christology', O'Donovan writes, 'that could be cashed out wholly in terms of moral reason – Christ as the perfect exemplar of obedience or pioneer of human realisation, for example – could hardly be adequate to the miracle of God's presence in human nature.' O'Donovan, *SWT*, 82. Likewise, though O'Donovan takes seriously the teaching ministry of Christ, this is always connected narratively and theologically with the wider shape of Christ's work to seek and save the lost, and to recreate the world through his life and death. He argues that 'The meaning of Jesus' life and teaching must be a worldly meaning, a reality of human existence which can command our lives and reorder them in the restored creation.' *RMO*, 143. See likewise O'Donovan's discussion of the eschatology of Jesus' ministry alongside his teaching ministry *RMO*, 155. These exemplary strategies fail to do justice to the reality of Christ's incarnation. But they also fail to do justice to the resources that the gospel offers to the task of human living. The Christ who is Lord of Creation – who has redeemed and restored creation in the face of sin – is the One who has authority to direct the shape of human lives, and the one with the redemptive power to free human lives to become all that they were meant to be.

<sup>5</sup> For broader discussions of this theme see O'Donovan, *WJ*, 157-163; O'Donovan, 'Representation', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 29:2, (2016), 135–145; O'Donovan, *DN*, 126-144.

<sup>6</sup> The theme of representation is central to O'Donovan's political theology: 'the government exists to preserve and secure its people, not vice versa, and the condition for doing so is that it is "ours", i.e that it "represents" the people.' O'Donovan, *WJ*, 157. The political understanding of representation as it emerges in Western liberal democracies has its roots firmly in the Christian tradition, and especially in Christ as the representative of the people of God. *Resurrection and Moral Order*, *Desire of the Nations*, and *Ways of Judgement* could be read as a development of this concept from the primarily soteriological and doctrinal in *RMO* to more thorough

authority, as a person, figure, or symbol able to draw the affective loyalties of a people around a common centre.<sup>7</sup> There may be ‘representative objects, representative persons, representative histories, and representative ideas’ all of which have authority to ‘express what the society is, and they express what it is good for’.<sup>8</sup> The authority of these diverse forms of representation is that they ‘constitute the central core of the society’s common ways of seeing the world and living in it’.<sup>9</sup>

Representation describes the manifold ways through which God makes himself known and present to his people – and through which God allows his people to become wholly present and committed to God’s purposes. This theme ultimately finds its most truthful and potent concentration in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the central and authoritative representative who makes God known to his creation, and is the one who represents all that human beings were created to be. O’Donovan’s rich description of Christ’s representative identity takes several forms, which nevertheless coalesce around a fundamentally united conviction about the consonant relationship of Christ’s person and work to the reality and fulfilment of creation. In the rest of this section, we trace the theme of representation in terms of Christ’s relation to Israel, his wider relationship to creation, and finally we consider the soteriological and ethical significance of these discussions.

The early Church’s theological understanding of Christ’s representative role emerges, O’Donovan argues, from the life and history of ancient Israel.<sup>10</sup> Christ’s identity is *typologically* continuous with the political and religious roles in the life of Israel. For O’Donovan, Israel and Israel’s social structures possess a ‘prophetic symbolism’ which anchors all subsequent narration of God’s workings through Christ and the church.<sup>11</sup> Israel’s categories for their political and social life were the ‘paradigm for all others’ in the early church.<sup>12</sup> The continuity of Christ’s work with the history of Israel is understood, with a

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consideration of the theological and political interwovenness of this theme in *DN*, before reaching its more concentrated political examination in *Ways of Judgement*.

<sup>7</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2002), 29-32 and 53-57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> O’Donovan, *Common Objects*, 32. This particular definition is worked out in the context of O’Donovan’s exploration of Augustine’s definition of a people as “a gathered multitude of rational beings united by agreeing to share the things they love”. *Ibid.*, 25. Representation and the representative act are central to his Augustinian understanding of what creates and sustains political community.

<sup>10</sup> This is a central argument in *Desire of the Nations* and extends well beyond Christology. See O’Donovan, *DN*, chapters 2-4 especially.

<sup>11</sup> O’Donovan, *DN*, 25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



strong Reformed inflection, mainly around the three offices of priest, prophet and king.<sup>13</sup> This schematic for understanding Christ's person and work has important resonances with Old Testament themes. In Christ the 'priestly and royal functions' of Israel are united.<sup>14</sup> Christ's role as '*mediator of God's rule*' focusses on Christ as the true 'Davidic monarch', and as the faithful kingly ruler of God's people. Christ also mediates and embodies the 'priestly and administrative' roles of Israel.<sup>15</sup> In Christ is also embodied the true prophetic vocation. Like the prophets of Hebrew Scripture, Christ 'represents the people before God.' Yet this particular prophetic representation is characterised – like the Hebrew prophets – by a 'lonely faithfulness': '[Christ] carries the tradition of the people, its fate and its promise, in his own destiny.'<sup>16</sup> The story of Israel and the person of Christ are mutually revealing in O'Donovan's writings. God's rule over creation and God's people, and the faithfulness of Israel's response to God's rule, are both met in the person of Jesus Christ who himself is the '*mediator of God's rule*' and the obedient '*representative individual*' human being who stands before God.<sup>17</sup> Christ is both 'the *decisive* presence of God and the *decisive* presence of God's people'.<sup>18</sup>

In occupying this representative role, Christ represents both judgement and salvation: in him is the true expression of Israel's obedience before God, and also the one who shares, through his death, in the consequences and judgements passed by God on Israel's unfaithfulness. In embodying these three roles of priest, prophet and king, Christ, in some sense, embodies *all* of Israel in his own person, including unfaithful Israel. Christ bears the promise of Israel, their hope and trust in YHWH, and on the cross he bears their failings to fulfill their covenantal faithfulness before God. Christ represents 'before God the longing expectation of the penitent people'.<sup>19</sup> As such, Christ must take 'upon himself the role of Israel' in all their failure and promise 'before he appears as Israel's Saviour'.<sup>20</sup> In his death and resurrection, Jesus reveals 'the judgement of God against Israel and for Israel: the overcoming of Israel's sin and the affirmation of Israel's new identity in its representative.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The resonances here with a Reformed understanding of the *munus triplex*, are, I think, strong and helpful to note. See especially G. C. Berkouwer's *The Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), 58-87.

<sup>14</sup> O'Donovan, 'Representation,' 137.

<sup>15</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 123.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Central to O'Donovan's interpretation of Israel's history is the hope that God's promised blessings to Israel would extend to the whole creation.<sup>22</sup> 'Israel's identity was not an enclosed identity, but an identity with God's purposes for the whole world'.<sup>23</sup> The rule of YHWH was central to Israel's identity, and yet always worked out in tension with Israel's threatened status amongst its surrounding neighbours, as well as the particularity of its history and calling: 'the rule of YHWH was conceived internationally; it secured the relations of the nations and directed them towards peace. But at the international level there was to be no unitary mediator.'<sup>24</sup> The demonstration and enactment of YHWH's rule over Israel had three elements: 'salvation, judgement and possession.'<sup>25</sup> It is in Christ that these elements of God's rule displayed through Israel over the whole world are revealed and enacted.<sup>26</sup> In Israel is the promise and hope of redemption representative of God's desire to redeem all of the fallen creation and humanity:

Jesus belonged to Israel; and Israel was, for him as for his followers, the theatre of God's self-disclosure as the ruler of the nations. Always implied in the hope of a new national life for Israel was the hope of a restored world order. The future of the one nation was a prism through which the faithful looked to see the future of all nations.<sup>27</sup>

The events which define Israel's beginning and subsequent travails and journeying as a people are irreducibly particular to *this* story of *this* people. But this story, in all its particularity, also has universal significance since this people's God is the *creator* of all things, who promises through this people to bless *the whole world*, and to reverse the effects of sin and death which permeate through *all creation*.<sup>28</sup> Christ's identity, continuous with the prophesied Son of Man in the book of Daniel chapter 7, indicates how the Messiah's identity as the 'representation of Israel' also 'opens out to the representation of the *human race*'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 46.

<sup>23</sup> O'Donovan, 'Travelling to Jerusalem,' *WSB*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. See *DN*, 93-113 for a wider discussion of these themes in relation to the life and ministry of Christ, in whom is a recapitulation of Israel's own history in the defining dramas of his ministry.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>28</sup> N. T. Wright and O'Donovan are known to be close theologically, and their respective projects are very closely aligned in a number of ways. This particular theme is shared between both thinkers. Wright expands the basic thematic structure of O'Donovan's project, paying wider and more focussed attention to the connectedness of salvation history in relation to Adam, Abraham, the history of Israel and Israel's fulfillment in Christ. See especially, Wright, 'Adam, Israel and the Messiah', in *Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 1991), 18-40; and Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1992), especially chapters 9 and 10.

<sup>29</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 130.

Jesus Christ's person and work are consonant with God's purposes in creation. Creation is central to the narrative of Israel, including the work of Christ. For O'Donovan, creation is present as a kind of *cantus firmus* through the subsequent history of Christ and Israel. The meaning of Christ, Israel and creation are conjoined together inseparably. Christ fulfils 'all that God intended in Creation'.<sup>30</sup> Christ's fulfils humanity's vocation given in Adam to 'assume his (*sic*) proper place within (the created order), the place of dominion which God assigned to Adam'.<sup>31</sup> Christ's renewal of Israel's life is a direct fulfilment of creation itself: 'Christ is the life-giver; he restores Adam's children to the life for which they were created.'<sup>32</sup>

Christ's work restores, vindicates and assures the stability of created order in the face of sin and death, but Christ also *reveals* the moral order of creation. Christ offers a concentrated vision through which we come to see and understand the contours of created order: 'in Jesus we meet the moral order itself revealed as incarnate.'<sup>33</sup> The person and work of Jesus Christ are therefore 'irreplaceable' in knowing the moral order of creation,<sup>34</sup> since 'Jesus is not only a witness to the restored moral order' but is also 'the one in whom that order has come to be'.<sup>35</sup> Only in Christ can human beings 'apprehend that order in which we stand and that knowledge of it with which we have been endowed'.<sup>36</sup> Christ is the culmination and fulfilment of the history of creation and Israel. In him are the purposes of God to bless creation realised and revealed. In Christ, also, are the hopes and longings of humanity articulated and fulfilled. Because Christ represents both God and humanity – Christ is a 'unique presence of God to his creation' and 'the whole created order is taken up into the fate of this particular representative man' – it means that in this man is the key to 'the redemption of all'.<sup>37</sup> We turn in the final paragraphs of this section to these particular soteriological inflections of O'Donovan's Christology.

The disruptive elements of O'Donovan's Christology and soteriology typically serve as a re-emphasis of the restorative and stabilising aspects of his vision. In the face of sin and death, O'Donovan frequently stresses that the salvation of humankind requires a work from 'outside' the world 'by God's gracious intervention'.<sup>38</sup> Humanity has neither the capacity or

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>31</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 24.

<sup>32</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 142.

<sup>33</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 147.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>37</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> *RMO*, 143.

potential to free itself from the bondage and emptiness of sin. As such, salvation takes a characteristically Barthian tenor in O'Donovan's writings, as both a 'Yes' and 'No' towards human beings. Salvation is both an affirmative declaration of God's faithfulness to redeem and fulfill creation in the face of sin, and it is also a word of judgement towards human co-operation with the destructive powers of sin and death.<sup>39</sup> God's salvation of the world must also involve God's judgement on sin and unrighteousness. As such there is a disruptive quality to grace which O'Donovan would still maintain. The work of grace is first a work of judgement: Christ's death and resurrection signal 'the judgement of God against Israel.'<sup>40</sup> The cross especially shows Christ to be 'set in opposition to the guilty Israel'.<sup>41</sup> The consequences of sin are born in the body of Christ. The opposition Christ experienced from the religious and political authorities of his day signals a divine judgement upon works and structures of unrighteousness. However, the resurrection also displays the Father's vindication of Christ's innocence, and is a work that shows both 'the overcoming of Israel's sin and the affirmation of Israel's new identity in its representative'.<sup>42</sup> The gospel contains a divine work of judgement against unrighteousness and the distorting effects of sin in the cross. But the resurrection signals God's enduring and faithful commitment towards creation, such that its sin can be forgiven, and the world renewed. The disruptive judgement of Christ's work against the world is ultimately a penultimate step towards the ultimate aim of Christ's 'restoration of creation'.<sup>43</sup>

As such, the saving significance of Christ's person and work in O'Donovan's writings tends towards affirming the integrity, stability and goodness of the created order. The nature of the salvation achieved in Christ is one that positively honours and reaffirms the goodness of creation: 'It was the mark of Christ's Lordship that, so far from overthrowing the given order of things, he rescued it from the "emptiness" into which it had fallen (Rom. 8:20-21).'<sup>44</sup> What is judged by Christ, and all that which Christ 'pronounces an authoritative No,' is against all that is 'ungrounded, deceptive and destructive *of creation*'.<sup>45</sup> The negative judgement of Christ against sin is therefore an essential feature of the gospel, and critical in

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<sup>39</sup> O'Donovan writes that '[w]e will speak of his wrath only in relation to the primacy of his love, the great Yes, pronounced on creation from the beginning, of which the No is merely the reverse side, the hostility of the Creator to all that would uncreate.' *On the Thirty-Nine Articles: A Conversation with Tudor Christianity 2nd Edn*, (London: SCM, 2013), 25.

<sup>40</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 141. (emphasis mine).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 141. (emphasis mine).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Opening of the Kingdom,' in *WSB*, 43.

understanding how Christ's authoritative work restores and renews the created order. The disruptive element to God's salvation achieved in Christ is 'more than an irruption: it is the foundation of a renewed order.'<sup>46</sup>

It is this restorative quality to Christ's person and work that establishes his unique moral authority in O'Donovan's writings. The 'incarnation' is 'the foundation of Christian ethics' because it displays the work of God not as a '*mysterium tremendum* which simply destroys all worldly order'.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ restores human knowledge and access to such an order, reassuring humans that the world in which God has placed them remains hospitable for the task of holy living. In Christ, humanity are given the gift of 'judgement' – to know, name and inhabit the world as God as made it for the sake of flourishing human living.<sup>48</sup> It is in union with Christ and in the power of the Spirit that human beings are given freedom and authority 'to make moral responses creatively', to 'designate the character of reality which [they] encounter' rooted in truthful correspondence with the created order.<sup>49</sup> As a result of Christ's authorisation and renewal of creation believers are able to practice a form of judgement that is 'insightful, merciful, creative and utterly true, so different from the mixture of prejudice, anxiety and ignorant self-assertion that passes for judgement' in its sinful and dominant guise.<sup>50</sup> Being equipped to make this kind of judgement is likewise to be 'equipped for the part God has given mankind in the created order'.<sup>51</sup> This theme is given explicit Christological and incarnational articulation – following the logic of dual representation elaborated so far in this section – when O'Donovan argues that the proper love of human beings towards creation is itself a 'fruit of God's presence within us, uniting us to the humanity of God in Christ, who cherishes and defends all that God the Father has made and thought'.<sup>52</sup>

O'Donovan's approach to Christology has been critiqued for diminishing a sense of the liveliness and dynamism of Christ's active presence, which becomes sublimated within an idealist conception of created order.<sup>53</sup> For O'Donovan, this means that Christology can sometimes tend to restate, or gesture back to, the authoritative and foundational realities of creation in ways that make creation order determinative of Christology. This is a reasonable

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<sup>46</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 143.

<sup>47</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Like the theme of representation, judgement is a term with loaded broader political resonances, more than I am able to fully explore here. See O'Donovan, *WJ*, 3-12.

<sup>49</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> O'Donovan, 'The Opening of the Kingdom,' *WSB*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *RMO*, 26.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Christopher Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T & T Clark, 2012), 96-98.

concern especially regarding O'Donovan's earlier work. Occasionally his Christological explorations locate Christ within the underlying structural orientation of creation, in ways that don't always express how the *transformational* aspects of Christ's identity, not simply his *restorative* and *vindicating* works, can also nourish and guide Christian moral reflection.

Yet there is also an important strand that has developed in O'Donovan's writings that articulates a more robustly Christological vision of created order, and a more robust sense of Christ's authority in relation to creation. It is true that O'Donovan's account of Christology is heavily shaped by the moral concerns of his work. He writes in a recent piece on Christology and ethics that the question 'How does Christ save us?' can lead 'in two directions'.<sup>54</sup> Firstly, this question can be explored in terms of the objective character of Christ's work – as a dogmatic question concerned with 'soteriology'. Or the question may lead to an exploration of 'how our lives are reoriented by faith in Christ, to live and act as those whom Christ has saved,' which is the domain of 'Christian ethics'.<sup>55</sup> The second road is the one which O'Donovan tends to walk. Ethics is not determinative of the content of doctrine, but it does shape how doctrine is emphasised and presented for the service of moral concerns. As such, Christ is most relevant to the moral life as the one in whom the shape of history is revealed, as the one through whom the world's goods are cohered, and the one who summons, heals and empowers human beings to be agents capable of wise living. There remains an excess to the work of Christian doctrine which cannot be wholly contained in moral theology, which can only be properly recognised as a work of praise: 'Deliberation [...] is subordinated to the prior act of moral acknowledgement, which is to say, worship.'<sup>56</sup> However, O'Donovan's emphases in Christ's position in Christian ethics retains a focus on Christ's authority to summon and shape human living, in accordance with the world's goods, and as the one who directs practical human action: 'the Christological reorientation of practical reason must not subvert either its practical or rational character.'<sup>57</sup> It is this conviction which anchors O'Donovan's treatment of Christological themes in his work, namely that disruption and instability in our vision of reality are not conducive or constructive for the exercise of practical reason and moral deliberation.

Christ is, for O'Donovan, the *intelligible* centre of history and creation, and, therefore, Christ's person and work are foundational for informing and guiding wise and truthful moral

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<sup>54</sup> O'Donovan, 'Christ the Categorical Imperative' in George Westhaver and Rebekah Vince (eds.), *Christ Unabridged: Knowing and Loving the Son of Man* (London: SCM, 2020), 234.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

action. The question posed by this dialectic is how the unchanging and given structures of creation that structure moral awareness of the *good*, can be intelligibly understood within the provisional, confusing and disruptive passing of time. These background questions give significant shape to O'Donovan's Christological reflections in the later trilogy. Christ is the one in whom the good of creation and the course of history find their reconciliation. Christ's resurrection is the 'event at the centre of history which vindicates the created order and heals the rift between the history and the good'.<sup>58</sup> The 'testimony' which shows us the 'meaning of world and time' is 'given supremely and first in the *coming of Jesus*'.<sup>59</sup> It is in the person and work of Christ that the intelligibility of history and creation can be seen:

when we love Jesus as the Christ [...] we find his life and teaching to be the form that the whole history of God's saving work displays. We discover in him the representative moment in history that gathers the intelligibility of world and time into itself, and sets other happenings, however unintelligible or misunderstandable, in relation to it.<sup>60</sup>

It is in Christ that the purposes of God in creation, and the disruptions of time and history, are cohered. Christ's relationship to creation continues to be one which stresses *continuity* and the *stability* of created order. The 'sovereign rule' and reign of Christ over history and creation 'supervenes not as an innovation on the world we know, but as a disclosure of what is and always and everywhere the truth'.<sup>61</sup> The newness of Christ's person and work is a diminished quality in favour of the *confirming* and *assuring* qualities. Through faith in Christ, we receive the 're-attunement and reconstruction of our moral imaginary, bringing the world before our eyes as created, redeemed, and destined for fulfilment'.<sup>62</sup> Christ has a unique and authoritative presence, precisely because he is Creator, Sustainer and Lord, *of* creation

It is ultimately in the resurrection where we see most clearly the 'worldly' nature of God's saving work, as an event that offers deep structure and guidance for the task of human living and deliberation. For it is in the resurrection that Christian proclamation speaks of the world's destiny and nature, and in a way that deeply affects how human beings make sense of the goals, aspirations and shape of their own lives. And so here, our agency looks for a sense of the world's intelligibility in order to guide and frame our action, and it finds this in Jesus

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<sup>58</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 116.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-127.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 127.

Christ, especially his resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is this centre, the moment that points “backwards” ‘to the beauty and order of the life that was the creator’s gift’ which is restored here; and also the resurrection opens “forward” ‘from the empty tomb to a new moment of participation in God’s work and being.’<sup>63</sup> Resurrection is – congruous with O’Donovan’s Christology – a representative act.<sup>64</sup> The resurrection is an event which alters the situation of human beings in relation to their past and their present. It redeems the failure of human beings to live out their Adamic vocation, whilst opening a future of life with God that was impossible apart from Christ. The resurrection therefore involves a moment of ‘recovery’ and a moment of ‘advance’.<sup>65</sup> Christ’s resurrection restores creation not as a ‘repudiation’ of the ‘old creation’, but as a restoration of creation ‘back into a condition of newness’.<sup>66</sup> Creation recovers its ‘lost integrity and splendour’. But, likewise, the resurrection advances the human condition by leading it ‘to the goal which before it could not reach’ by bringing human beings ‘into the presence of God’s rule’.<sup>67</sup>

The heartbeat of O’Donovan’s Christology is a robust assertion of Christ’s person and work as a ‘once for all’ accomplishment by God in Christ for the sake of the world (Hebrews 10:10). Christ’s death and resurrection are a ‘single happening’ that are ‘decisive for all of history’.<sup>68</sup> Christ restores, fulfils and renews the promises of God to Israel. Christ’s person and work are matters of cosmic significance, and fulfill God’s original intent in creation. Central to O’Donovan’s account is the language of Christ as the *representative*. Christ bears in his own person the cries of a longing humanity, and simultaneously embodies God’s active purposes to forgive and restore that same humanity. O’Donovan’s Christology, in congruence with his wider moral theological project, possesses strongly *moral* accentuations in its emphases and convictions. O’Donovan’s exploration and articulation of Christological themes are typically held in close conversation with the moral question which pervades his work: how are we to *think* about how we act? As such, O’Donovan’s Christology tends to focus on the ways in which human living, by faith, become conformed to all that Christ has achieved. His work is focussed on the ways in which ‘the restoration of human agency in

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> See especially this passage from *RMO*, ‘The raising of Christ is representative, not in the way that a symbol is representative, expressing a reality which has an independent and prior standing, but in the way that a national leader is representative, expressing a reality which has an independent and prior standing, but in the way that a national leader is representative when he brings about for the whole of his people whatever it is, war or peace, that he effects on their behalf.’ O’Donovan, *RMO*, 15.

<sup>65</sup> O’Donovan, *TNA*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 27.



Christ is wholly God's work' enacted as '*one* work' firstly 'in Christ and consequently in us'.<sup>69</sup> The task of moral deliberation is, therefore, one which finds its decisive orientation through 'the authoritative light shed [...] by the narrative of Christ'.<sup>70</sup> The moral significance of Christ is also tethered closely to O'Donovan's account of creation's stability and permanence: Christ is the way, truth and the life for moral action precisely because in Christ is seen the true character of the world in which we act and the shape of history in which we live.

## 5.2 'To Stand Where Christ Stands': Williams on Christ, Creation and Filial Existence

The themes of Williams' work considered thus far are integrally related to his Christology. The Christian life of learning, growing, finitude and limit which texture Williams' writings is one that takes has its basis and orientation in Christ – the one in whom the infinite abundance of God and the finitude of creaturely life become wholly united. 'Here is a human life so shot through with the purposes of God, so transparent to the action of God, that people speak of it as God's life "translated" into another medium. Here God is supremely and uniquely at work.'<sup>71</sup> Christ's life displays the lack of natural competition or dissonance between Creator and creation. Indeed, creation's fruition can be reached only through loving and joyful obedience to the loving and life-giving will of the Creator. Central to Williams' account of Christ's person and work, I will argue, is the concept of non-contrastive agency. At no point is the creation's relation to God one which requires a negation or diminishment of the creature. Likewise, divine action through Christ is not an interruption or cessation of finite causality. Christ's life is akin to an uninterrupted performance of God's presence and purposes wholly translated into another medium, that nevertheless retains its integrity as an authentically creaturely life.<sup>72</sup>

The language of non-contrastive agency is also the way he makes sense of the saving difference that Christ makes: Christ is the one who has no interests or territory to defend, who lives wholly for the other, and through whom divine forgiveness and mercy disrupt human habits of sin, violence and self-deception. Because there is no sense of competition between the finite and infinite in Christ, this means that, for Williams, Christ is available wholly for

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<sup>69</sup> O'Donovan, *ER*, 76.

<sup>70</sup> O'Donovan, 'Christ the Categorical Imperative,' 242.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *TT*, 57.

<sup>72</sup> Williams, *TT*, 72-75; see also Brett Gray's rich discussion of this theme in *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 30-33.

the other. To know Christ as the incarnate Lord is to know him as a haunting presence that reveals my own failures, and complicity in sin. True response to Christ must involve continual repentance and conversion. However, Christ's presence also brings about in new generative and joyful possibilities. Through Christ a new creation is coming to be. Of particular importance for Williams is the way that Christ makes possible a renewed solidarity in relation to my neighbour. The Church seeks to witness in its own life the liberative and reconciling power of Christ, whilst also being open to the disruptive work of the Spirit to renew the Church's life from outside of the Church's provisionally imposed borders. In sum, the Christian's journeying with Christ is one that continually reckons with an abundance which exceeds final understanding. To follow Christ involves continual growth in awareness of sin and frailty, but also growing with Christ into the fullness of life with God and neighbour.

Williams' Christology is worked out in close recourse to his vision of creation, since the person of Christ accentuates the dimensions and renews the nature of created being.<sup>73</sup> It is not always clear whether to begin with Christ or creation in cohering Williams' writings into a systematic vision. Every beginning is, as Williams insists, riven with difficulty. Christ is ultimately the centre of creation, and the one in whom all things cohere (Colossians 1:15-16).<sup>74</sup> However, this does not mean that the doctrine of creation can become merely an extended exercise in Christology. Making sense of Christ's incarnation requires equally serious consideration of the 'logic of createdness' displayed in the Son's incarnation in human flesh, as well as consideration about how the incarnation is likewise the Creator's self-revelation in the person of Christ.<sup>75</sup> Williams's career has been marked by deep historical work to show how the metaphysical understanding of Christ's identity as fully God and fully human – something which is central to evangelical proclamation – was not something immediately obvious and available to the early church. It took time, creativity and labour to come to this conclusion, and these qualities are still required for the sake of Christian proclamation today.<sup>76</sup> Christology requires creative engagement with the widest vistas of the biblical witness in making mobile connections between Christ and the wider scriptural

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<sup>73</sup> What he describes as the "grammar" of createdness. Williams, *CHC*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Williams expands on this phrase 'Christ the heart of creation' to mean that Christ is 'the one in whom the movement or energy of eternal filial love and understanding is fully active in and as finite substance and agency.' Williams, *CHC*, 223.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 5.

<sup>76</sup> For more on this theme, see Williams, *Arius*, 235-237.

narrative of God's redemptive dealings with His people, and the beginning of that history in the act of creation from nothing.

The doctrine of creation is, therefore, highly relevant to Christology. It becomes strongly implicated in Christology specifically because Christ takes on human nature – the Creator becoming a creature. The incarnation, Williams writes, is 'above all the crown of the creation: when the Word is united with a human identity, creation enters into its heritage, becomes what it was made to be – the partner of the Word, united to the Word's relation of joy and intimacy with the Father.'<sup>77</sup> But Christ also refigures how we are to understand creation itself. In Christ's person and ongoing work is becoming manifested a "new creation" – which is 'an event that makes a radical, decisive, and unforeseeable difference in the human world: something is brought out of nothing, life from death.'<sup>78</sup>

The heartbeat of Williams' Christology is the insistence that 'there is no sense in which we can suppose any "competition" between humanity and divinity in Christ'.<sup>79</sup> The language of Chalcedon, as a key staging-post in the development of the church's thinking on this Christological theme, takes a certain priority in Williams' thinking.<sup>80</sup> In the person of Christ is 'one hypostatic agent' who holds 'the two forms of action inseparably together'.<sup>81</sup> To speak of Christ as fully God and fully human in the language of hypostatic union involves a recognition of a 'single movement in Christ', which 'bring about activity that is divine and activity that is human'.<sup>82</sup> In Jesus the human activity which is the 'integral human individuality of Jesus [...] in no sense ceases to be human because of the source which activates it'.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, 'the eternal act' that is manifested in Christ's human life 'remains unchanged by the fact that the agent of this act also activates human nature'.<sup>84</sup>

So, in the person of Jesus is both a movement of God's eternal identity – of the Eternal Son of the Father, made present among human beings – but also a human being who

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<sup>77</sup> Williams, 'Against Anxiety, Beyond Triumphalism,' in *OtJ*, 275.

<sup>78</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 240.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 120.

<sup>80</sup> The priority of Chalcedon, for Williams, is no uncritical commitment to a particular formula as a mere end in itself. Instead, the Chalcedonian formula is authoritative, for Williams, because it is *generative*. It offers a grammar of God's relationship to creation in the person of Christ which makes sense of the gospels, Christ's relation to Israel, and the worship of Christ as Lord. Williams' vision is close to that of Sarah Coakley's, as articulated in 'What Does Chalcedon Solve and What Does It Not? Some Reflections on the Status and Meaning of the Chalcedonian "Definition",' in Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, Gerald O'Collins (eds.) *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 143-163.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 103.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

shows in maximal intensity a complete transparency to the presence of God. To make sense of this relationship of divine to human, of the eternal to the temporal, Williams draws on the language of *filiation* to describe the Son's relationship to the Father, that in turn makes sense of human existence *in Christ*. This language will become important as the language of this eternal relationship is worked out in the historical movement of the Incarnation. Williams argues that

The *esse* of the divine Word [...] as the second Person of the eternal Trinity, is what it is in virtue of its eternal relation to God the Father – an eternal living-out of divine life in the mode of “filiation”, the eternal self-sufficient life that is God's realising itself as “Son”, as the divine life receiving divine life as eternal gift and eternally giving it in return.<sup>85</sup>

This mutual indwelling – marked by a relation of giving and receiving – defines the relationship of Father and Son.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, this *filial* quality ‘is what makes the Word or Son exist as identifiably distinct within the Trinity’.<sup>87</sup> Drawing on Maximus the Confessor, this theme of filiation is also developed to make sense of the shape of the Son's earthly and embodied existence:

Christ's human nature receives the gift of “subsisting/being hypostatised” in a divine way (*huphestanai theikos*), so that it is not moved by anything unnatural to it: the actuality of the eternal Word is his eternal and stable actualisation of divine life in this particular relational mode. This “act of subsisting” then realises the *logos* of human nature in the relational mode, the finite and historical embodiment of unbroken filiation, that is Jesus.<sup>88</sup>

Central to this understanding of the incarnation is Williams' conviction that Christ's person and work display the shape of true creaturely obedience and response to the Father. The Spirit works to draw human beings into deeper levels of dependent harmony, in union with Christ, into loving and dependent relation to the Father. The relationship of Son to Father becomes authoritatively paradigmatic for the whole ‘Creation's relation to God’.<sup>89</sup> Christ, as the one who is absolutely accessible, is drawing all things together to cohere and find life through loving obedience to the Father. It is the Spirit which uniquely ‘makes

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>86</sup> Williams, *TT*, 65-67.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 101. Williams helpfully distinguishes ‘*logos*’ and ‘*tropos*’ in Maximus as the difference ‘roughly that between the invariable and variable.’ Williams, *CHC*, 101.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 221.

possible in all the innumerable histories of human subjects that diverse participation in and reflection of the eternal life of divine filiation'.<sup>90</sup> All of creation is being drawn by the Spirit into a deeper relationship of loving dependence within the Triune life. The flourishing and fruition of creation attains its fullness when it follows this pattern of life and relationship. Here is where the significance of *filial* existence returns to the foreground:

creation is most fully itself when it is aligned with, sharing in the kind of dependency which the Son has towards the Father: the fully responsive and radically liberating dependence that is the filial relation in the divine life is the ground of all created dependence on the Creator, and so the logic of creation includes a natural trajectory towards this kind of life-giving responsiveness.<sup>91</sup>

The language of filiation and non-contrastive agency are tightly woven together and begin to move us towards what is *salvific* about Christ's person. The language of non-contrastive agency has already been noted. This appears in many forms in Williams' writings in varying vocabulary, often in terms of non-competition, God's lack of "interest," and selflessness toward the other. In the Christian vision, God has: 'no territory or interest to defend over against the created order [...] the divine life [is] intrinsically selfless or self-displacing'.<sup>92</sup> A 'natural development' from this underlying grammar of divine action is an understanding of Christ's identity as a life lived 'radically and exhaustively *for the other*'.<sup>93</sup> Because there is no 'ontological insecurity' in the person of Christ *as* the unique embodiment of God, he has 'literally nothing to defend'. Christ's is 'a human agency that is characterised consistently by availability [...] for the other'.<sup>94</sup> The lack of competition between the two natures of Christ is analogous to the absence of abrasive contrast between God and creation, and also between God and the human community formed in the church. In Christ the untruthfulness of the "zero-sum" perspective – that the fruition of one covenant partner must inversely coincide with the diminishment or negation of the other – 'is disturbed and reshaped by the fact of the Incarnation'.<sup>95</sup> This conviction has far-reaching implications for Williams' understanding of salvation and church, which will be considered in more detail in the rest of this section.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 120.

We turn here to address more closely this question which is raised regularly in Williams' writings: what is the *difference* that Christ makes in human lives?<sup>96</sup> What is it that God has worked in Jesus Christ which 'no particular agency within creation could have done in virtue of its own immanent finite capacity?'.<sup>97</sup> Williams take it as basic to the task of Christology, and to the task of theology itself, that Christ is not 'an illustration of something we could know by other means'.<sup>98</sup> Christ does not stand for anything which may be abstracted from the historical and human person of Christ, from the confession that in this man the fullness of God dwells, and that through this man a change has been wrought for the whole world's sake. Central to Williams' work is the conviction that Christology must articulate the full depth of transformation that has been reckoned in Christ, a transformation that 'ultimately demands and moulds a new language for itself'.<sup>99</sup> Here I trace how Williams seeks to do justice to the difference that Christ makes, whilst also showing how his non-contrastive Christology tethers the novel work of Christ to the finitude of creaturely life.

It is, of course, the union of divinity and humanity in Christ that is essential to what Williams considers to be *salvific* about Christ's person and work. Christ is a creature who becomes a part of human history yet 'cannot be described as an episode in history among others'.<sup>100</sup> There is a singular uniqueness to the way in which 'the world has changed comprehensively because of him'.<sup>101</sup> The transformative power of the incarnation, for Williams, is rooted in the simple and infinite reality of God's infinite, creative, and loving presence becoming wholly present in the life of Christ. There is something properly natural and fitting about the coherent presence of divinity and humanity in Christ, yet there is also something radically novel about the incarnation. Christ is 'the place where God is active with an intensity that is nowhere else to be found. Here God's active freedom impinges on creation so as to bring about a change that is undoubtedly manifested in an historically tangible way'.<sup>102</sup> In this respect, for Williams, what Christ achieves through his obedient life and atoning work is not strictly something which God *does*. The transformative and salvific elements of Christ's person and work are because God has become *present* in a unique and singular fashion. It is the presence of God in the life of the Christ which is foundational to

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<sup>96</sup> Williams, 'Maurice Wiles and Doctrinal Criticism,' in *WA*, 287-290.

<sup>97</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Williams, 'Authors Introduction,' *WA*, xviii-xix.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii-xix.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 6.

Christ's transforming work. To think of divine action rightly requires thinking about the sheer presence of God amidst creation and human history: 'what God does is nothing other than God's being actively real'.<sup>103</sup> This connects with a wider theme in Williams' doctrine of God and Christology, namely that God's work is never reactive to, or determined by, the life of creatures.<sup>104</sup> There is nothing *arbitrary* about God's work to save humanity. It is not an expression of pure will, nor is it an action determined by creatures. It is rather a work which is grounded in the divine life, and an expression of the fullness of this infinite life within a human person that utterly transforms history.<sup>105</sup> Incarnation is therefore essential to the character of salvation in Williams' vision. The salvific efficacy of Christ's life is integrally connected to the particular kind of creaturely freedom displayed in Christ's life, that makes his life to be one shot through with divine presence. The 'particular kind of freedom' displayed by Christ is one that 'releases divine action to transform the created world' through 'an act of full openness to divine purpose and divine love'.<sup>106</sup>

Holding together the non-competing humanity and divinity of Christ in understanding salvation is connected to how Williams holds together the disruptive and restorative aspects of Christ's person and work. Christ's work is at once singularly novel and transformative, yet also essentially *non-alien* in relation to creation:

The only *decisive* redemption – as opposed to continual acts of grace or pardon – is the transfiguration of the human condition from within, the union of grace with the body, as Athanasius puts it. The argument returns to the point of the absolute newness and difference of redeemed humanity; for this newness to make sense, we must suppose a critical rupture in the continuities of the world; and for this, God alone is adequate – yet God acting upon us not 'from outside', but in union with human flesh.<sup>107</sup>

We will see that the language of non-coercion and non-contrastive agency is a grammar that makes sense of what is achieved in Christ's life which brings something *new* into the situation of the world, whilst is nevertheless a transformation *from within*, which works with the grain of the Creator's identity and purposes.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows,' in *Wrestling with Angels*, 268.

<sup>104</sup> See Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows,' *WA*, 266. For a development of this theme in relation to creation, see "'Good for Nothing:" Augustine on Creation' in *OA*, 72-78.

<sup>105</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 160.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

<sup>107</sup> Williams, *Arius*, 241.

<sup>108</sup> Williams points, for example, to certain Lutheran Christologies as failing to do justice to *both* the transformative nature of the Incarnation, and the integrity of finite creaturely agency. Lutheran Christologies frequently veer more towards the transformative elements of the Incarnation, whilst 'finitude itself is

The sense in which Christ is at once congruous with the purposes of creation, and also transformatively renews creaturely existence, is analogous to the sense in which Christ is both continuous and disruptive in relation to Israel's history. Israel's life is marked by a responsiveness to God's new and surprising works – be it the Exodus, the giving of Torah, or the prophetic renewal of the covenant. Christ's incarnate life, death, and resurrection following a similarly disruptive and renewing pattern. On this theme Williams writes that 'Christological speculation begins from the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was seen and understood as acting in the place of Israel's God'.<sup>109</sup> Williams goes on to unpack this claim arguing that Christ was 'seen as bringing about the kind of change associated with God in his own tradition – the creation of a people, the acting-out of covenant faithfulness even in the face of betrayal.' He then suggests that Christ's resurrection is a 'restoration or reaffirmation' of God's covenant with Israel that should be seen in 'continuity with the Exodus or the return from Babylonian exile'.<sup>110</sup> Christ and the major events of Israel's history are continuous with each other, precisely because both represent moments of disruption and renewal. Williams expands on this when he writes that '[Jesus] functions not simply as a god but as the *God of Jewish scripture* in two respects: he creates a people by *covenant* [...] and by a summons that makes something *radically new*.'<sup>111</sup> Christ is at once wholly continuous with the life and history of Israel – representing the God of Israel and the hopes of the people in his person. And yet, his Incarnation also represents a moment of judgement and renewal in relation to this prior tradition. Christ makes a claim to be both the Creator of the world (and, by extension, one with the God who called Israel into existence), and also the one who calls Israel (and the Church) into an unforeseen and open future.

Christ's entrance into history manifests something completely unprecedented, and yet utterly aligned with the witness of God's covenantal promises to Israel. Christ is:

“produced” by the history of the covenant people in a way that is continuous with, even internal to, the history of its conflicts, yet, as the focal point for the unity of a new people with a new history, he is also for the believer a gratuitous and unpredictable moment in the whole process.<sup>112</sup>

And, in a very similar vein:

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compromised or implicitly undervalued, as if it cannot be transformed without ceasing to be what God made it to be.' Williams, *CHC*, 161.

<sup>109</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 219.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>111</sup> Williams, 'Incarnation and the Renewal of Community,' in *OCT*, 231.

<sup>112</sup> Williams, 'The Discipline of Scripture,' in *OCT*, 58.



Jesus' existence depends on God's initiative: it is the climax of Israel's story, yet it is not in the order of nature, not a predictable part of the world's process. Jesus is a "miracle", an unpredictable surprise.<sup>113</sup>

This novelty which marks Jesus' relation to the history of Israel is one that extends to the character of Christ's incarnation and salvific work in relation to the whole of creation and human history.

The novelty of Christ's person and work is, to use a favoured term of Williams' vocabulary, characterised by Christ's *generative* nature in relation to creation and history.<sup>114</sup> Williams' understanding of revelation centres on what is 'generative' in our experience of creation and history: 'events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life.'<sup>115</sup> This understanding of revelation focusses on how revelation 'poses fresh questions rather than answering old ones'.<sup>116</sup> To describe Christ's person and work as generative involves understanding Christ in continuity with the kind of creative possibilities marked by God's wider work as Sustainer and Preserver of the universe: God's provident role in creation is characterised by his faithful leading of God's people into an unseen, liberative, and transformative future.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, to speak of Christ's person and work as *generative* invites a way of understanding revelation and Christology that emphasises a radical disruption and reorientation of how meaning and language are to be understood. Christ's generative nature produces both a sharpness in how Christ's judgment and call to repent shape the task of human understanding, but also a sharpness in terms of the renewed and abundant possibilities generated through seeing all things in relation to Christ. Christ's entrance into history, in Gray's words, 'injects a disruptive novelty that is transformative'.<sup>118</sup> There is both a sharpness and discomfort in how Christ's presence is received in human lives, but also a joyful aspect in the way that Christ renews and transforms creaturely life from within.

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<sup>113</sup> Williams, 'Born of the Virgin Mary,' in *OtJ*, 25.

<sup>114</sup> Williams, *TT*, 71.

<sup>115</sup> Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' *OCT*, 134. It is important to clarify that this significance of novelty for this understanding of revelation is not simply a sacralisation of 'striking new ideas.' Rather, this sense of novelty tries to capture the sense that the original agency and 'initiative' behind revelation 'does not lie with us.' This understanding of revelation is founded on the freedom of God, and so challenges the 'myth of the self-constitution of consciousness.' *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>117</sup> See Williams, *TT*, 71; Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' in *OCT*, 139.

<sup>118</sup> Brett Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 33.

The discomfort in knowing Christ is, for Williams, based on the inseparability of relating to Christ separate from prayerful habits of repentance, conversion and sanctification. Christ's life conveys the reality of God's judgement towards an unbelieving and broken world. To know Christ as the incarnate Lord of creation is to hear a word of judgement, and a call to repentant and humble obedience: 'Christ's divinity is essentially what is affirmed by the practice of repentance, radical change of life, or obedience or, most simply, love.'<sup>119</sup> The Church finds reason for its existence solely as part of this gospel. Christology 'will be misunderstood to the extent that it has ceased to connect with any awareness of a new identity and a new historical community formed in confrontation with the story of Jesus'.<sup>120</sup> As such, the Church's worshipping life must continually open itself to the judgement of Christ, recognising its ongoing need for repentance, forgiveness and renewal through Christ.<sup>121</sup> This also means that Christological doctrine must avoid at all cost becoming a settled, rigid, ideological construct which is separate from the living and unsettling reality of the risen Christ's presence and work.<sup>122</sup> The sense that the Church's work of repentance remains continually unfinished is concomitant with the ever lively presence of the Risen Christ in the world's midst. 'God can only live in the grammar of religious talk when that talk expresses God's freedom from it'.<sup>123</sup> To speak of Christ at all must reckon with the limits of language, and the disruptive liveliness of the risen Christ's presence among us.

This emphasis naturally fits with Williams' dialectical understanding of Christ's authoritative uniqueness. This quality of Christ's identity is not, for Williams, because Christ represents a fixed and unchanging account of meaning. The uniqueness of Christ is precisely found in the fact that he 'reveals the God whose nature is not to make the claim of unique revelation as total and authoritative meaning'.<sup>124</sup> Instead, Christ's uniqueness and authority is to do with his character as 'God's question' to the world.<sup>125</sup> To know the truth of Christ's person is inseparable from hearing his call to conversion and repentance. There remains something unsettling, unable to be contained in speech and system about Christ's identity.<sup>126</sup> In other words, claims to Christ's exclusivity in the Church's speech can easily veer into an avoidance strategy from Christ's unsettling message and identity, which in turn undermines

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<sup>119</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 272.

<sup>120</sup> Williams 'Beginning with the Incarnation,' *OCT*, 82.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-85.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>123</sup> Williams, 'The Finality of Christ,' *OCT*, 106.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-100.

the Church's mission to live in humility. For Williams, Christ is no guarantor of a timeless, or ahistorical system of meaning that ensures a clearly delineated sense of the Church's boundaries.

But there is also a more celebratory note to the meaning of Christ's generative character. To know Christ as the incarnate one is not just to know him as judge, but also to know him as the embodiment of the infinite abundance of creative and transformational divine love. 'Peace and praise, reconciliation and delight; these are the purposes of God.'<sup>127</sup> In Christ, the fullness of God's life, love and light are being made transformatively present amidst a world broken by sin's distortion, the fallenness of human self-deception, and the violence that mars human existence. The nature of revelation, and the very meaning of God's active presence in the Church, involves understanding 'more deeply the shape and the nature of the liberty it is there to generate'. Williams goes on:

"God reveals himself" means that the meaning of the word "God" establishes itself among us as the loving and the nurturing advent of *newness* in human life – grace, forgiveness, empowerment to be the agents of forgiveness and liberation. This advent has its centre [...] in the record of Jesus; it occurs among us now as the re-presentation of Jesus through the Spirit.<sup>128</sup>

The transformative presence of the Risen Jesus is made apparent and real most uniquely in the life of the church: 'Life in the Holy Spirit is life where Jesus is alive in the company of others.'<sup>129</sup> Following Christ is inseparable from seeking to offer and receive the love of Christ in relationship and community in which 'each person, by the energy of the Spirit, gives the promise and possibilities opened upon by Jesus to every other'.<sup>130</sup> In other words, 'the Church [...] is a reality' in which 'everyone "ministers" Jesus' reality' to one another'.<sup>131</sup> The Church is the embodiment and witness to all that God has done in Jesus Christ – bringing into being a community alive with the peace of God, the praise of the Father, the reconciliation wrought through the cross of Christ, and the delight which marks the eternal Triune life. Within the difficulty, particularity and broken history of the church are the abundant purposes of God being made known and made real.

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<sup>127</sup> Williams, *TT*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' 145.

<sup>129</sup> Williams, *TT*, 135.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

To speak of salvation and the difference that Christ makes is to speak of the community that bears Christ's name and seeks to make him known in the world. In a lengthy passage from a recent work, Williams draws many of these threads about Christ's relationship to the Church together:

the transforming effect of Jesus' presence is in the entire process by which he gathers a community that comes to see itself as bound together by kinship with him as if "in" an ancestor's body [...] the process of gathering a community is understood as reaching its climax in Jesus' execution and its aftermath, as if the terminally violent breaking of the community's bonds in the crucifixion had to be shown as overcome by the unbreakable union between Jesus' human identity and the divine act. That (embodied) identity returns on the other side of death to re-establish the new kindred, the extended 'Body' of the Church. No account of the foundational story of Christianity can avoid having to come to terms with this central drama of breakage and restoration, violent death and restored shared life.<sup>132</sup>

This gathering of the human community in Christ places human solidarity at the centre of Williams' Christology. The gospel is inextricably connected to the discovery of infinitely renewed bonds of solidarity between human beings who have become co-heirs with Christ. The kind of 'relatedness' with God that Jesus' life embodies is shared 'in some measure' in the lives of believers, which in turn establishes 'an organic interdependence that radically changes our involvement with and responsibility for others, inside and outside the visible community of faith'.<sup>133</sup>

Discovering the depths of human solidarity promised in Christ's death and resurrection is accompanied by the work of *discerning* and *naming* Christ's saving work which may be seen *outside* of the Church's borders:

The work continues [...] of discerning and naming the Christ-like events of liberation and humanisation of the world *as* Christ-like, and at the level of action, expressing this hermeneutical engaging in terms of concrete practical solidarity. And this unending rediscovery of Christ, or representation of Christ, the revelatory aspect of the "hermeneutical spiral", is, in Trinitarian perspective, what we mean by the illuminating or transforming operation of the Spirit.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 118.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>134</sup> Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' 143.

This means that full understanding of Christ's person and work in the life of the Church will remain unfinished.<sup>135</sup> The full scope of God's saving purposes are, for Williams, always breaking beyond the boundaries of Church, and disrupting the Church from outside of its boundaries: 'it's as if the power of Christ and the newness of the gospel always escape across the frontiers of the Church and come back to challenge the Church from unexpected quarters.'<sup>136</sup>

Christ's work – and the life of the Church – are, for Williams, ultimately concerned with the fruition and flourishing of human beings. In a way that parallels his theological hero Bonhoeffer, Williams could be described as essentially *humanistic* in his instinct.<sup>137</sup> By this I mean that to be concerned with Christ, and the fate of the world as it relates to him, involves being utterly concerned with the flourishing and dignity of human beings. As a community, 'the Church must first understand its distinctiveness and separateness – not from the human race but from all communities and kinships whose limits fall short of the human race'.<sup>138</sup> Following Christ involves a deep and complete 'reconstruction of one's humanity: a liberation from servile, distorted, destructive patterns in the past, a liberation from anxious dread of God's judgement, a new identity in a community of reciprocal love and complementary service, whose potential horizons are universal.'<sup>139</sup>

Christ's humanity, and the focus of the church's life, are not concerned with supra-human possibilities which would seek to transcend, escape or diminish human living. An important element of Williams' Christology is the embrace of limit and finitude in the task of human living. 'Christology,' he writes, 'is done in the practice of lives that embrace their finitude and materiality without fear, lives that enact the divine self-identification with those who endure loss, pain and contempt.'<sup>140</sup> The embrace of our finitude is also what leads us more deeply into fellowship and solidarity with one another. Attempts to escape finitude, to escape the bonds of solidarity to time, place and people can easily become a destructive element in human living. In sharing and embodying Christ's life, the Church is invited to lose any aspiration to escape finitude, in order to gain the renewed vision to live *as creatures*: 'what must die in the encounter with Christ is precisely *not* finitude or createdness but the

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<sup>135</sup> Ben Quash's work *Found Theology* builds on Williams' understanding of revelation in order to understand the way in which God leads the Church through history through novel 'findings' more deeply into the givenness of Christian truth. See Quash, *Found Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>136</sup> Williams, *TT*, 129.

<sup>137</sup> Jens Zimmerman, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christian Humanism*, (Oxford: OUP, 2019).

<sup>138</sup> Williams, 'Incarnation and the Renewal of Community,' *OCT*, 233.

<sup>139</sup> Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation,' *OCT*, 138.

<sup>140</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 250.

delusion that we can live in denial of our finitude, our dependence of infinite agency.’<sup>141</sup>

Another word for embracing the finitude of our lives is *humility*. To live as God’s creatures in the world that God has made, and to do so following in the way of Christ, requires an embrace of humility, together with an acceptance of ‘the impossibility of fully living in that order without humility, the recognition that we encounter God truly *only* when we accept our mortal fragility for what it is.’<sup>142</sup> We should ‘not seek to escape’ this recognition of our mortal fragility, but rather we should let this realisation lead us into a deeper experience of ‘trust in a God who speaks and relates to us through flesh’.<sup>143</sup>

And so, we return to where we began in this section on Williams’ Christology. Befriending mortal and moral limit are essential precisely because God has made God’s self absolutely present to the fullness of creaturely life in Christ. Just as God is made known through becoming a creature, inhabiting all the fragilities and limits that characterise humanity, human frailty becomes transfigured as a meeting place with Christ. In Christ, humanity meets a God who has drawn unimaginably near, promising God’s unfailingly faithful presence. Christ’s person reveals both the inexhaustible abundance of divine freedom at work in the world through this human being, and also the true character of creaturely existence held open to all. In this one man is the hope for all creation’s redemption, as the one through whom God’s power has been made known through weakness, and through whom God’s victory over sin and death has been achieved through sacrifice. In Christ are God’s creative purposes seen most fully, as all creaturely existence is drawn through Christ into continually more consonant harmony with the infinite love at the heart of the Triune life. In a fine summary of Williams’ Christology, Brett Gray writes that: ‘In relation to Christ, all things [...] slip their moorings as objects and are drawn into the divine orbit. The world becomes endlessly iconic, but not less creaturely.’<sup>144</sup> Christ’s presence is disruptive to human beings caught in habits of sin and self-deception. His truth can be known only through habitual repentance. And yet, Christ’s work is ultimately aimed at the renewal of all things, beginning with the Church as the people whose vocation is to witness to the risen Christ. There is an endlessness to understanding the depths of connection and solidarity between humanity that Christ has gathered in his own person. Christ calls humanity out of the disorder of their lives, and into the endlessly generative abundance of his grace.

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<sup>141</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 191.

<sup>142</sup> Williams, ‘Augustine on Creation,’ *OA*, 70.

<sup>143</sup> Williams, ‘Augustine on Creation,’ *OA*, 70.

<sup>144</sup> Gray, *Jesus in the Theology of Rowan Williams*, 171.

### 5.3 Conclusion

Exploring the themes of Christ's person and work in these thinkers has shown an intensification of the critical contrasts between Rowan Williams' and Oliver O'Donovan's that have already been seen thus far. The central movement of the Christian life in Williams' work – of responding to the call of God that draws human lives out of disorder, and into a life of unceasing discovery of the infinite abundance of God – is ultimately a way of making sense of human journeying with the risen Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Christ's identity is therefore central to Williams' understanding of the Christian life. The fullness of God that is encountered in Christ is a life made graciously available to humankind. The freedom of God at work in Christ is seen in the ongoing experiences of human beings who encounter the liberating, renewing, and disruptive grace of union with Christ. Christ's incarnation is continuous with the story of Israel's history – yet provides a radically transformative development to this story. Likewise, Christ is the Creator, one whose presence is familiar to human beings, but to human beings caught in the disorder of sin. Christ's living and transforming presence can be encountered only as a disruptive and surprising grace. The endlessness of learning to journey in Christ's presence is a path which leads inevitably towards community, towards deeper relationship with neighbour and enemy alike, as God's reconciling and renewing purposes set forth in Christ draw the whole creation into the orbit of Christ's person.

Christ is, for O'Donovan, the one in whom we see the truth, unity and centre of God's purposes in creation and redemption. O'Donovan's understanding of Christ is developed in close connection to creation – as Christ reveals the full dimensions of created order and restores creation to be all that it was created to be. Christ is the fulfilment of Israel's history, answering the cries of penitent and unfaithful Israel, and renewing Israel's life. The redemption of Israel in Christ is not for Israel alone but is offered and extended to the whole of creation. Creation is the *cantus firmus* to which all subsequent divine action honours, restores and fulfils – the person and work of Christ are no different. In Christ, human beings find the restored sense of stability and orientation required to live their lives truthfully, responsibly and freely in harmony with the truth of all that God has done in creation. The disorientation of the Christian life is found in history – in the disruptive throes of time. It is in the person and work of Christ through which the Christians' hold on history is anchored. And it is in Christ that the coherency of God's purposes and the individual particularity of human living look for their direction and promise of future resolution.

The questions and tensions provoked by these two thinkers' Christologies are wide-ranging. In one vision, we have Christ as a disruptive and surprising presence. He does not assuage the human longing for assurance and consolation. Instead, he provokes and challenges human beings to leave behind familiar, inhibitive and destructive patterns of life, as the only possible way to experience the fullness of eternal life. Williams' vision of Christ is one who is unceasingly provocative – a stumbling block to human pretensions of innocence, finality, and self-deception. Yet there is also to be found in Christ the promise of an endlessly generative love, which produces infinitely rich and complex ways of viewing the world. Christ confronts humanity with the painful truth of their brokenness, and the endlessly immersive reality of his acceptance and grace. O'Donovan's understanding of Christ as the central truth of human existence is altogether more settled, more stable, and tends more towards viewing Christ as the renewed foundation for the task of human living. Christ restores human beings to truthful and fruitful participation in the reality of the world which God has made. In him the redemption of reality and created order has begun. The sense of dynamism and provisionality that do feature in this account return to the stable reality of creation, Christ's restoration and renewal of this order, and the joyful possibilities for Christian living that Christ's person and work make possible.

The basic contrast of these visions centres upon their tendency to affirm a certain kind of stability or disruption as the basic motifs of the Christian vision. This chapter has approached these contrasts in a primarily dogmatic mode and has shown how this theme is developed within their respective understandings of Christ's person. The differences in how O'Donovan and Williams view the landscape of Christian belief, especially the central contours of creation and Christology, are rooted in several theological convictions about the different ways of seeing creation in relation to Christ. Each emphasise different aspects of the narrative of salvation history as more determinative for seeing the whole. The differences in how each thinker understands the whole scriptural narrative of salvation in Christ are partly to do with the different approaches to time that shape their telling of the Christian gospel. For O'Donovan, the heights of creation and redemption provide vistas from which to intelligibly survey, though not exhaustively cohere, the intricacies and challenges of our lives. The gospel offers us an orientation that directs us towards fulfilment. As human beings come to see that the world in which they live and act is also the world of God's making and redeeming, they come to see that the goodness of this world is a secure and intelligible basis to direct their lives towards fulfilment. Flourishing involves glad and wise inhabitation of an order which is already in view, and so creation is a *cantus firmus* in making sense of how our



lives come to inhabit the purposes of God. For Williams, the person of Christ is similarly the key to cohering the whole narrative of God's redemptive dealings with the world. But the character of this narrative coherency is one that stresses the still unfolding shape of God's actions in the world.

In the chapters that follow, these doctrinal contrasts will remain significant. However, the focus will begin to broaden to the wider *affective* dimensions of these two visions. In their respective accounts of the resurrection, we will begin to see that the central difference between these two visions, in terms of Christology and creation, take on a significantly more *affective* tenor. The differences in how they narrate the resurrection as a matter of dogmatic theology are, in fact, remarkably similar. The more significant difference becomes how each thinker envisages the lived affective response to Christ's resurrection. For O'Donovan, the resurrection of Christ as the restoration of creation which displays Christ as the one in whom creation's joy and gladness are made complete. For Williams, the resurrection as the foundational promise of Christ's ongoing presence which heals through endlessly purgative and provocative disruption of human histories and habits of sin. The contrasts here will develop in the final chapter on their wider visions of the Christian life, one which stresses *stability* as a central motif – as human beings find glad and sure orientation within the purposes of God – and the other in terms of *disruption* – as God draws human lives into endless abundance and repentance.

My strategy is not to resolve these tensions between Williams and O'Donovan, or argue for a preference for one particular thinker's vision over the other. Their convictions are so coherently woven within a wider vision, such that harmonisation might diminish certain key aspects of their works. My proposal is instead to consider how both voices *together* can nourish that task of Christian faithfulness and wisdom at different times and in different ways. This essay has sought to explore the rich intellectual territories into which these thinkers invite us – to explore, to draw connections within and between each thinker's vision, and to point to their wider significance for the task of wise and faithful Christian living. It is in this vein of exploration that we continue into the final chapter of this work, homing in on the further Christological theme of resurrection and then widening our angle to the doctrine of the Christian life.



## **Chapter 6.**

### **Practicing Resurrection: The Christian Life in Oliver O'Donovan and Rowan Williams<sup>1</sup>**

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the centrepiece of the Christian visions offered by Rowan Williams and Oliver O'Donovan. It is the turning point of history, the reality by which the Church stands or falls, and the grounds for faith, hope and love in the face of sin and death's effects in the world. It is a distinct yet indivisible part of the seamless whole of Christ's work involving his complete incarnate and obedient life, which culminates in death and resurrection. O'Donovan and Williams agree on the absolute centrality of Christ's resurrection for the Christian life and vision, and it receives frequent attention in each of their works. And yet, the resurrection is also a key point of creative tension and contrast between them. The character of this contrast is at once doctrinal in its basis and affective in its implications. The theological instincts that texture Williams' and O'Donovan's visions of realism, creation, and Christology converge here in their respective accounts of Christ's resurrection. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the dominant themes in their readings of Christ's resurrection, before tracing their accounts of the Christian life that emerge from the resurrection, and ending with the character of selfhood and prayer in their respective visions. Though this chapter centres on the theme of resurrection, this will develop into a discussion of the fundamental attitudes that are, in O'Donovan's and Williams' visions, proper responses to the resurrection. This, in turn, will develop into a wider exploration of the practices and pattern of Christian life and prayer that express and cultivate those attitudes. Throughout this chapter, I will continue to argue for the significance of the contrasts in their works, between a vision of Christian faith and life based on restored stability and purposiveness (O'Donovan), and another based on the endless journeying into abundance and novelty (Williams).

In sections 1-4, I shall argue that, for both Williams and O'Donovan, the resurrection represents the culmination of their contrasting visions traced so far in this essay and is the foundation for their respective accounts of Christian living. For O'Donovan, the resurrection represents the restoration of creaturely participation in created order. The resurrection is the vantage point from which our lives can be intelligibly understood and is the basis for stable and purposeful living. The dominant motifs of O'Donovan's account of the resurrection of

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<sup>1</sup> To borrow the final line of Wendell Berry's 'Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,' in *New Collected Poems* (Berkley: Counterpoint, 2012), 174.

Christ – the joy and gladness which characterise this event, the renewal and fulfilment of creation, and the completeness of God’s works – underpin his account of Christian living. For Williams, the resurrection is characterised by disruption, disorientation and painful reminder of guilt. The way to human transformation in Christ is inseparable from the painful work of the Holy Spirit’s purgation of corporate histories and individual habits of sin. Resurrection life is received only through walking the way of the cross with Christ. In the final third of this chapter (sections 5-6), I end with a discussion of O’Donovan’s and Williams’ respective accounts of prayer and selfhood. Though these sections explore beyond the strict focus of resurrection, they develop the motifs established through their accounts of the resurrection and accentuate the important contrasts of their accounts of the Christian life.

### 6.1 The Restoration of Creation: Christ’s Resurrection in O’Donovan

In this section we trace the character of the resurrection in O’Donovan’s thought. The motif of Sabbath completeness offers a strong typological framing in O’Donovan’s interpretation of the resurrection of Christ. As the dawning of new creation in the world, Christ’s resurrection is both a moment of completion of the original creation and also the promise of its future fulfilment in the new creation of Christ’s coming kingdom. The sense in which resurrection both affirms and accentuates the completeness and stability of created order is central in O’Donovan’s writings. We trace the tension between the note of eschatological and transformative *newness* present in the resurrection in relation to the original *stability* of creation.

In approaching the topic of resurrection in O’Donovan’s writings, we encounter a set of themes already very familiar to this essay. This familiarity is not just a superficial point about the surface or presentation of O’Donovan’s vision, but instead it reveals something about the content of his vision which veers towards the given, the stable and the familiar aspects of God’s working. In a sense, Christ’s resurrection is a republishing of the essential truths of creation, *and so* a restatement of themes already covered in earlier chapters: that God is the ruler of the universe; and, that God will lovingly and faithfully guide his creation towards its final ends, even in the face of powers which would reject God’s rule and undermine creation’s flourishing.

The nature of what is *new* in Christ and the new creation, and what truly and effectively *changes* in the world as the result of Christ’s resurrection is often downplayed at

the expense of stressing its assuring authority of realities already known and given.<sup>2</sup> Christ's resurrection vindicates, restores and assures us of the stability of created order. The resurrection is an assurance of 'the stability and permanence of the world that God has made';<sup>3</sup> and, it 'directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates.'<sup>4</sup> The resurrection 'restores the life of all mankind, reversing the effects of sin', and it 'it reorders the disorder of which death is the emblem'.<sup>5</sup>

This sense in which the resurrection directs our attention back to creation reinforces the basic reading of O'Donovan advanced in this essay. The problem which resurrection overcomes for O'Donovan is not something fundamentally broken in creation itself. Sin brings about an 'inescapable confusion' in human 'perceptions' of the created order.<sup>6</sup> The problem of sin which is typically emphasised in O'Donovan's works is the way that sin's power distorts human perceptions of the world, and its diminishing of the power of human agency.<sup>7</sup> However, sin is less frequently described in cosmic terms as a power which has radically altered or undone the very fabric of creation.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, O'Donovan's way of understanding the salvific significance of the resurrection of Christ is primarily concerned with the ways that our moral perceptions of the world, marred by sin and death, are restored in Christ's resurrection. The resurrection affirms and reinforces the anchoring presupposition of creation as the order to which human beings are called to live in alignment.

O'Donovan frequently engages with the "backward" glance of the resurrection in relation to created order. His concern, by now familiar, is that God's work to redeem the world might be expressed in ways disconnected from God's work as creator, in a way that

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<sup>2</sup> This critique of O'Donovan's early work *Resurrection and Moral Order* is articulated by Stanley Hauerwas in a typically acerbic (and potentially apocryphal) note when he said that the work contained 'too much moral order, [and] not enough resurrection.' William Cavanaugh, 'Stan the Man: A Thoroughly Biased Account of a Completely Unobjective Person' in Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>3</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 31. Elsewhere, O'Donovan writes of how the resurrection 'vindicates God's original act of creation.' See O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 142.

<sup>5</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> For a more developed discussion of this theme, see O'Donovan's discussion of the variety of the New Testament witness in terms of rightly and wrongly ordered love towards the world. O'Donovan, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 72-75.

<sup>8</sup> This element of sin is present in O'Donovan's works. But O'Donovan's distinctive *moral*-theological approach more frequently emphasises sin in its 'subjective' dimension, and in terms of its distortive and seductive place in the dramas of moral agency. The cosmological dimensions of sin are present in O'Donovan's writings, but greater focus is given to its place in the moral life. For an important discussion of these themes, see O'Donovan's discussion of the 'objective' and 'subjective' aspects of sin in *Self, World and Time: Ethics as Theology*, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 82-84.

undermines the meaning of redemption and creation. The vindicating nature of the resurrection involves a ‘vindication of those regularities in the face of the mysterious course of history; it is the demonstration that the God who rules the world is the same as the God who made it, and that the outcome of history will affirm and not deny the order of its making.’<sup>9</sup> Resurrection cannot be merely ‘improving or perfecting a world that was, as it stood, simply inadequate’.<sup>10</sup> Creation remains, in O’Donovan’s familiar vocabulary, the “presupposition” of resurrection. Christ’s resurrection ‘presupposes the created order’ and describes ‘the recovery of something given and lost’.<sup>11</sup> O’Donovan frequently returns to a precise arrangement of how the ‘newness’ of redemption and the ‘primitiveness of the [created] order that is there affirmed’ are held together. Creation and redemption are utterly interwoven, meaning that the theologian must resist the temptation to ‘overthrow or deny either in the name of the other’.<sup>12</sup>

The resurrection’s vindication of creation points to an essential unity between these two works of God. The Creator’s purposes to make a world filled with goodness and life have now been restored and renewed in Christ’s resurrection from the dead. This act has cosmic significance as it restores creation’s original purposes, as well as directing creation towards its ultimate fulfilment in God.

Creation’s original Sabbatical completion – a theme central to O’Donovan’s doctrine of creation – is taken up and developed as an important typological framing for the Father’s raising of Christ, and the salvation achieved for humanity through this event. The resurrection, like creation, is marked by a sense of completeness.<sup>13</sup> The weekly rhythm of Sabbath points believers to the cosmic Sabbath of creation’s completeness, and its final and eschatological consummation. The Sabbath celebrates not only God’s complete and finished work in *creating* the world, but also God’s work in *redeeming* and *renewing* it:

From the pre-exilic understanding, the holy day celebrates creation in its comprehensive completeness: the putting of work aside marks the acceptance of God’s finished work, which is the presupposition for all our own. But now it is Christ’s resurrection that completes creation and vindicates creation order.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> O’Donovan, *DN*, 143. O’Donovan’s critique of historicism is strongly in view here. See also *RMO*, 60-63.

<sup>11</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> O’Donovan, *RMO*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Though there is also a *disanalogy* between resurrection and creation insofar as creation alone is a work of God *ex nihilo*. The resurrection’s likeness to creation is precisely its *accentuating* and *vindicating* quality in relation to the steadfast presupposition of creation.

<sup>14</sup> O’Donovan, *DN*, 186.

Just as justification is a work wholly achieved by God, that human beings can share in by faith, so too does Sabbath signal the completion of creation as the basis of human existence, and the gesturing forward of creation to its final fulfilment in God through the resurrection. In both justification and creation, the work of God is complete, sufficient, and finished. Human life within these doctrines is an ever deepening and growing apprehension, understanding and inhabitation of realities *already* present and achieved.

The eschatological notes of Christ's resurrection are often diminished, but nevertheless present, in O'Donovan's writings. O'Donovan is concerned not 'to lose the balance between what has been accomplished and what remains to be accomplished' through the resurrection.<sup>15</sup> Christ's person and work in the cross and resurrection are *finished*. The benefits of Christ's work to save the world are, on one level, accomplished and complete. However, from the human perspective as creatures in time, this accomplishment takes the form of *promise*. It is 'only from within the perspective of our time-frame [that] anything remain[s] to be accomplished at all. Christ's triumph is complete, and in that event mankind has been brought into the presence of God's glory.'<sup>16</sup> The resurrection of Christ gestures forwards toward the promise of resurrection for all humanity. This 'unfolding of the resurrection into its two moments warns us against a complacent settlement in the present. The Christ-event, thought accomplished, is still an event for the future, and our faith in it must still be marked by a hope, and not a hope for our own private futures only but for the future of the world subject to God's reign.'<sup>17</sup> O'Donovan gestures in his recent work towards this sense of renewed eschatological expectation generated by the resurrection. In Christ's resurrection, he writes, 'we are taught to look for new activity, new deeds, new possibilities that prepare the way for a new heaven and a new earth'.<sup>18</sup> The resurrection points forward to new creation which is more than the original work of creation. However, there remains a strong sense of the continuity between creation and redemption – between human action in the present, and what they will be made within the Kingdom as a result of the transformational effects of the resurrection.

This returns us to the familiar tension in O'Donovan in accounting for the *completeness* of creation, and the *novelty* of resurrection. The restoration of humanity in Christ's person and work 'is not an innovative order that has nothing to do with the primal

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<sup>15</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 144.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>18</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 93.

ordering of man as creature to his Creator'. Christ's work rather 'fulfils and vindicates the primal order in a way that was always implied, but which could not be realised in the fallen state of man and the universe'.<sup>19</sup> In some sense, creation is *finished* – which means that it contains all that is necessary to make all the *kinds* that constitute creation. History and time are not finished, but the underlying structure of the world and identity of creation *is* fixed and established. It is from the perspective of creatures within creation and in the course of history in which God's full purposes in creation and redemption appear yet to be accomplished. O'Donovan begins to develop more substantive ways of relating creation and redemption, however his apophaticism about eschatological transformation can tend towards falling back on the givenness of created order without a deeper sense of what difference the resurrection has made.

The home that human beings find with God is a one that is familiar in its origin and orientation: God himself, and the world of His making in which human beings find flourishing and fulfilment. And yet, humanity's home is ultimately dependent on the coming of God – something strange, alien and apparently foreign to the limited imaginative capacities of human beings marked by finitude and marred by sin. The Lord's presence amongst his people is always present as a *promise*: that God will be 'all in all' is a reality not wholly present in history.<sup>20</sup> This means that the journey of God's people towards final rest in Him will require deep engagement with the contingencies and crises that history contains – something which O'Donovan's thought, on occasion, too quickly diminishes against the reassuring and stabilising backdrop of creation. And, yet God's consistent faithfulness to His creation must remain central to the Christian imagination. It is precisely the subjunctive quality of God's faithfulness to creation, within a resolution that remains unseen, which O'Donovan's apophatic sense of future resurrection hope seeks to convey. However, there is a danger that Christ's resurrection can become all too easily a restatement of what is given in creation, rather than a genuinely new and transformative moment in salvation-history.

## 6.2 Christ the Living Stranger: Resurrection in Williams

Williams' writings on the resurrection offer a sharp contrast with O'Donovan's. The tension isn't a matter of contradiction – he and O'Donovan are agreed that the resurrection is

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<sup>19</sup> O'Donovan, *RMO*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. 15:28.



of ‘first importance’ (1 Corinthians 15: 3-4). Rather, it is in their more developed accounts of the affective dynamics of the effects of Christ’s resurrection, and the shape of human response to this reality where the differences lie. This is arguably the central point on which their distinctive theological visions and instincts diverge. Christian proclamation ‘should begin and end in wonder’.<sup>21</sup> There is a real sense of the *goodness* of Christian proclamation in Williams’ writings. Yet this sense of awe and wonder is something more shocking, more disruptive than in O’Donovan’s vision. The heart of Christian existence is to let oneself be ‘*surprised*’ by Christ, a surprise of knowing oneself amidst the chaos and darkness of life to be upheld by the love of God.<sup>22</sup> There is a sharpness, a pain, something profoundly *wounding* about this surprise, since it also entails continual confrontation with my own failures and brokenness.<sup>23</sup> We trace this disruptive element in Williams’ writings, focusing especially on his engagement with the resurrection narratives. His account seeks to hold together the profound novelty of the resurrection, the way it reveals the memories of sin and violence in the first disciples, the way it disrupts the human habit of sense making, yet also the transforming grace which the risen Christ offers to a repentant humanity.

Williams’ emphasis in his theology of salvation is unrelentingly upon ‘the *cruciform* nature of Christ’s presence’, even in the risen Christ.<sup>24</sup> The cross remains ‘the final control and measure and irritant’ of Christian language.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, all Christian speech ‘must pass under the judgement of this fact [of the cross]’.<sup>26</sup> Christ’s death on the cross is central to his whole life and work, and an unassailably disruptive element in Christian theology. It displays the saving work of God to be one that involves a confrontation with the fallen human powers of falsehood, violence, and the will to control. God’s salvation of the world comes through judging it in its fallen and sinful state. That which exists in rebellion to God’s loving rule must be judged for it to be saved. Likewise, Christ’s presence in his risen body, and his ongoing life in the world after his ascension, continues to be present in this cruciform manner. Christian experience, for Williams, involves being ‘drawn again and again to the central and fruitful darkness of the cross’.<sup>27</sup> The cross reveals to us our distance and

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<sup>21</sup> Williams, ‘Incarnation and the Renewal of Community,’ in *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000), 238.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Higon’s phrase ‘disarming acceptance’ is helpful in capturing this dynamic of Williams’ vision. See Mike Higon *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM, 2004), chapter 1.

<sup>24</sup> Derek W. Taylor, ‘*Crux probat omnia*: Rowan Williams’ scriptural hermeneutic’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69:2, 2016, 140-154, 141.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *WK*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

alienation from God wrought by the power of sin but does so for the sake of our salvation. In a Lutheran key, Williams writes that ‘Every moment of grace and forgiveness rests upon the experience of *accusatio sui*; before you can be reconciled, you must see your alienation.’<sup>28</sup>

In one sense, the resurrection sustains and extends the motifs of the cross of Christ. The disciples’ encounters with the risen Jesus are marked by a strangeness – an alien and disorientating quality – which characterises the whole of Jesus’s incarnate life. The resurrection is a vindication of Jesus despite his crucifixion, and the false judgement passed upon him by the powers of the world. The resurrection displays the love and power of God in the face of sin and death: ‘the resurrection is not a triumphant instance of divine power so much as the bare fact of the impossibility of defeating and extinguishing the divine presence in Jesus: *as* the incarnate and crucified, he lives.’<sup>29</sup> This presence of God in Christ enacted in the cross and revealed in the resurrection makes and effects genuine and novel transformation within human history.

But in another sense, the resurrection represents a disruptively new and particular event in the narrative of salvation – even in relation to the cross. The very narrative logic of resurrection involves a stark confrontation with newness and surprise. There can be no sense that resurrection is an expected or anticipated conclusion to Jesus’ death. There is something ‘irrepressibly vulgar about the gospel of the Resurrection’. The ‘exalted and sombre emotion and tragic endurance’ of the cross could not clash more sharply with ‘Paschal joy’.<sup>30</sup>

Williams compares the narrative logic of the Resurrection with that of Job. The suffering, struggle and death which pervade the narrative are not somehow cancelled out, ignored or lessened by the ending. For Williams, the risen Messiah remains the crucified Saviour. The one who meets the disciple carries the scars of violence, sin and human evil on his body. Likewise, the joy and renewal of the ending of Job’s and Christ’s respective stories are not an expected or natural progression from the prior narrative of struggle and suffering: “‘happy endings’ are not earned by the logic of a narrative.”<sup>31</sup> There is a sharp incongruity and non-comparability between the joy and the sorrow of the gospel. This means that in contrast to the sorrow of the cross, there is a ‘startling novelty’ about the resurrection. It does not offer a ‘a

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 242.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, ‘Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed’: A Response to Comments on The Tragic Imagination’, *Modern Theology* 34:2 April 2018, 280-288, 280.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

comic resolution', but neither is the resurrection 'a simple re-presentation of the catastrophe' – the resurrection is 'a new fact' altogether.<sup>32</sup>

The risen Christ who appeared to the first disciples came to them as one 'suddenly unknown'.<sup>33</sup> The meaning of Easter, for Williams, involves:

coming to the memory of Jesus, looking for consolation, and finding a memory that hurts and judges, that sets a distance, even an alienation between me and my hope, my Saviour. Easter occurs, again and again, in this opening-up of a void, the sense of absence which questions our ego-centric aspirations and our longing for a 'tidy drama': it occurs when we find in Jesus not a dead friend but a living stranger.<sup>34</sup>

The difficulty of the gospel involves encountering a kind of grace that simultaneously convicts and justifies us; that judges us and reconciles us; that wounds and heals us. For grace to be truly grace, confrontation with our own sin, our own tendencies towards harmful illusion, and our place in systems of violence and injustice is always a necessary precursor and accompaniment to hearing God's word of pardon and restoration in our lives.

There is an inescapable strangeness and otherness to the Risen Christ. He challenges the disciples' visions of the world, including their prior understandings of Jesus himself. Williams is fascinated by those moments in the resurrection narratives in which the disciples do not recognise Jesus. The Synoptic accounts especially stress the 'otherness' and 'the unrecognisability of the risen Jesus'.<sup>35</sup> We might think of the disciples not aware that they are meeting the risen Jesus in Luke chapter 24, and also Mary mistaking the raised Jesus for a gardener in chapter 20 of John's Gospel – who fail to recognise their friend and Lord. It is as if Jesus 'condemns the inadequacy of' his disciples' 'earlier understanding'. In meeting him risen from the dead, they realise that 'he is not what they have thought him to be, and thus they must "learn" him afresh, as from the beginning'.<sup>36</sup> Williams looks especially to John's Gospel and the way in which Jesus' resurrection encounters with the disciples "'as if' returned to their earliest circumstances.' The Jesus who called Simon, Andrew, James and

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 68.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 75. We might also add to this the sense of Jesus' *elusiveness*. The risen Christ of the Four Gospels is one who walks through doors, makes himself present and absent again in unexpected and unplotable ways.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 75.

John when at their boats fishing, returns to them whilst doing the same – ‘it is as if Jesus has never been. Their recovery of him is as drastically new as was their first encounter.’<sup>37</sup>

The redemptive love of God displayed in the resurrection works with the raw material of human memory of failure and guilt, not simply eradicating the memory or reality of sin, but transforming it through the power of God’s infinite and saving love. As with Simon Peter’s restoration, so with the Church’s ongoing life: new life and hope are received only through honest confrontation with the past.

Risen life in and with Christ is not entirely fresh, full of what we could never have foreseen or planned; yet it is built from the bricks and mortar, messy and unlovely, of our past. God is faithful: it is his hand that will uncover in all our experiences the golden thread of his covenant love, and so point us to a future where our memories can be healed and transfigured.<sup>38</sup>

The return and subsequent proclamation of the risen Jesus to those he encounters in body involves confronting these people with their own complicity in violence, and their failures. Jesus’s resurrection is an occasion for deep discomfort to those in political and religious authority. Williams stresses that the ‘crucified [Jesus] is God’s chosen: it is with this victim, the condemned, that God identifies.’<sup>39</sup> As such ‘grace is released *only* in confrontation with the victim’ called Jesus Christ.<sup>40</sup> The primary voice of history that has been silenced by humanity is that of humanity’s Saviour, Jesus Christ. In Christ, God shows solidarity with all human victims of violence, oppression and sin.<sup>41</sup> In Christ, God bears witness to the suffering of every human being whose suffering is forgotten, whilst also making possible redemption and transformation for victims and perpetrators alike. To attend to the difficulty of history is to refuse to tell our story or navigate our existence without attending in repentance to the injustice of structural oppression, as well as self-recognition of one’s own failings and culpability within those systems: ‘the authentic word of forgiveness, newness, and resurrection is audible when we acknowledge ourselves as oppressors and “return” to our victims in the sense of learning who and where they are.’<sup>42</sup> Christian proclamation must avoid any self-justifying vision of inherent individual or ecclesial sanctity, but must speak

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, ‘Building Up Ruins,’ in *OtJ*, 79-80.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>41</sup> ‘In the resurrection we learn that victims are not lost: God takes their side, their “perspective” becomes one with God’s.’ Williams ‘Remembering the Future’, in *OtJ*, 242.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 14.

honestly of the church's present and historical failings. 'The gospel will never tell us we are innocent, but it will tell us we are loved.'<sup>43</sup>

This means that woven into Williams' account of resurrection is an ecclesiology based upon a solidarity of all people standing under the judgement of God:

Even a 'confessing' church [...] bears the burdens of historical guilt and the risks of failure, and confesses also its solidarity with the weakness or sinfulness of the whole historical community [...] by continuing to place itself under the same judgement of baptism, preaching and Eucharist.<sup>44</sup>

The distinctiveness of the Church is not its separation from the world, but precisely the fact that they *are* of the world, yet recipients of God's promised mercy. The difference between Church and the world is not ecclesial innocence, but precisely that it knows itself *as a sinner* who is simultaneously caught up in God's work to justify and recreate God's fallen world. The sense of what the Church's mission is becomes problematic when it sees itself as somehow redeemed from the same histories of sin in which the world finds itself. The difference of the church is not one of origins or recognition of achieved holiness; instead, the difference between the church and world is a matter of eschatology and promised justification manifesting itself in present faith, hope and love, opening out into service of God's world.

The resurrection invites one to see everything about Jesus and oneself afresh – including one's past. Although the resurrection is startlingly and inherently novel, this does not make the past unimportant or meaningless to the proclamation of the risen Christ. The newness of the resurrection is precisely its power to take the past and memory as the material for new life and redemption. It is the past which so often keeps humans captive in the power of sin. Our memories 'may show us how we have been "trapped" at various points in the past'.<sup>45</sup> For the disciples of Jesus, following his death, their memories of him had evidently become memories of 'false hope, betrayal and desertion'.<sup>46</sup> Jesus' return, far from cancelling out such memories, intensifies them and confronts them with the power of grace. In John and Luke's Gospels, Jesus' meals with his disciples 'echo specific occasions of crisis, misunderstanding, illusion and disaster'.<sup>47</sup> Memory is an essential material upon which grace works, and through which the gospel brings hope.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, 'The Discipline of Scripture,' in *OCT*, 57.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Res*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 34.

If forgiveness is liberation, it is also a recovery of the past in hope, a return of memory, in which what is potentially threatening, destructive, despair-inducing, in the past is transfigured into the ground of hope [...] it makes it possible for us to remember, because we are assured that our destructiveness is not the last word.<sup>48</sup>

The figure of Simon Peter exemplifies this perhaps most intensely. ‘Simon has to recognise himself as betrayer’ in order to receive Christ’s word of forgiveness – ‘that is part of the past that makes him who he is.’<sup>49</sup> Jesus’ famous threefold question and Peter’s response (‘Peter, do you love me?’) which parallel Peter’s threefold denial demonstrate precisely this intensification of memory and grace in the wake of Jesus’ resurrection. Christ’s resurrection involves a ‘transition from [the] destructively familiar to the creatively strange’, as our memories of failure are met with a word of pardon, and we are led into a future of new possibility and hope in Christ.<sup>50</sup>

### 6.3 Christ’s Resurrection as Restoration and Transformation

These initial sections have traced Williams’ and O’Donovan’s handling of resurrection, showing it to be an intensification and concentration of their wider vision and theological instincts. For Williams, the resurrection is a central moment of disruption, surprise and challenge. It involves an irruptive movement of the human condition from the ‘destructively familiar’ world of sin, death, violence and guilt, and into the ‘creatively strange’ world of costly grace, renewal, repentance and pardon.<sup>51</sup> For O’Donovan, the resurrection of Christ is the dawning of new creation – the promised fulfilment of creation in the eternal and glad sabbath rest of God. The resurrection accentuates, clarifies, and restates truths about God’s character already known: ‘What God has whispered in the darkness was now shouted from the rooftops. The greatness of his mercy reached to the heavens and his faithfulness to the clouds.’<sup>52</sup> In the resurrection, God’s absolute faithfulness is displayed, and the possibilities of creaturely life are renewed. The resurrection contains the hope of every human life as practical reason is healed, renewed and set on a path for a life of wisdom, flourishing and right action accompanied by Christ’s faithful presence.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>52</sup> O’Donovan, ‘The Opening of the Kingdom,’ *WSB*, 37.

The concerns and themes of each thinker's work are proximate to the other. They are both concerned with fundamentally familiar tellings of the Christian gospel, which are theologically united in many significant ways. The differences between these visions are the *affective dynamics* at work in their presentations of Christ's resurrection. For Williams, the resurrection is marked by its utter surprise. Christ returns to his disciples as they are experiencing deep trauma, aware of their own sin and failings. Early Christian proclamation sought to capture this dimension of the resurrection: the Christ that has been raised by the Father was a victim of religious and political powers embroiled in self-deception and violence. The ongoing presence of the risen Christ in the Church and the world continues to provoke, to reveal the depths of individual and corporate failings, all as part of Christ's healing and redeeming work. Life with Christ can, therefore, never become a settled, secure or comfortable state – we are called repeatedly to hear the challenge to repent afresh, never letting our desire for consolation render us immune to the disruption of the grace that Christ offers. The risen friend who evokes deep gladness in O'Donovan's reading is not completely alien in Williams' account. Williams describes the risen Christ, despite his strangeness and unsettling nature, is who is also 'deeply familiar'. The risen Jesus is both 'a question to what we have known, loved, and desired, and yet continuous with the friend we have known and loved'.<sup>53</sup>

Likewise, the surprise and judgement of the risen Christ's appearance to the disciples is somewhat apparent in O'Donovan's homiletic work. The resurrection is difficult true encounter with the risen Christ, and involves 'learning to be at the receiving end, to be the object, not the subject, of what is going on'.<sup>54</sup> The shock of the resurrection in Williams' work has to do with humanity confronting their histories of sin and failure that is represented in the raised and crucified Messiah. For O'Donovan, there is a similar sense of being surprised by the resurrection: 'the risen Lord and the new world of his resurrection catch us out, surprise us, find us unready, looking the other way.'<sup>55</sup> Yet this dizzying aspect of meeting the risen Jesus is precisely because through him we come to see the world as it truly is – a good world which disrupts our fallen and distorted perceptions of it. As if waking up from a paralysing blindness, seeing the world truthfully through the resurrected Jesus is to awake to a world 'which is joyfully, painfully, objective'.<sup>56</sup> The shock of the resurrection in

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<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Res*, 84.

<sup>54</sup> O'Donovan, 'Seeing the Risen One,' *WSB*, 35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

O'Donovan's work has to do with humans being challenged with a truth of what has always been – the reality and goodness of God's world, and God's persistent faithfulness towards creation – a truth undermined by the distortive and confusing power of sin. Evangelical gladness in O'Donovan's vision is founded in the new and stable place in which humans stand before God – reassured that the purposes and longings of their lives find the promise of realisation through the risen Christ. The issue that is helpfully posed by each thinker's works, but remains unresolved when considered together, is: to 'what degree and in what way is salvation the preservation and harmonisation of the rhythms of creation, a patterning of some sort, and to what degree and in what way is salvation an apocalyptic interruption that deforms creation as we know it in confrontation with its corruption?'<sup>57</sup>

The theological questions posed in these accounts are significant and rich; so too are the *affective* differences in these accounts of what human lives engaged with the risen Christ will experience. How are we to proclaim the goodness of all that Christ has done – as a proclamation of what *he* has done to accomplish, that takes this work seriously as something characterised by finality and decisiveness on behalf of the world – a work of healing, joy and restoration; and, alongside this, to recognise that this work is something earth-shatteringly disruptive and transformative, and which challenges many of our deepest and most illusory imaginings in ways we may only begin to comprehend?<sup>58</sup> Considering both Williams and O'Donovan side by side invites deeper reflection into how the Christian gospel gives believers both a secure place to stand – upon the truth of resurrection hope, and a life of endless joy with Christ – whilst also recognising the endlessly challenging strangeness of the risen Jesus in our midst, who calls into question our propensity to avoid difficult truths about ourselves and our world. In Williams' and O'Donovan's writings we see not just two distinctive theological ways of seeing the gospel, but two distinctive ways of affectively appropriating and inhabiting the gospel story. The unity of these dissonant aspects is not a straightforward one: both are essential for Christian wisdom and faithfulness that seeks to inhabit the fullness of the gospel. I trace, in the sections that follow, the significance of these affective dynamics at play in their accounts of the resurrection, and the significance of these themes for their accounts of the Christian life.

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<sup>57</sup> Lexi Eikelboom, *Rhythm: A Theological Category* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 203-204.

<sup>58</sup> Douglas Harink speaks of the task of theology in Paul's letters as a 'standing in the midst of the theological earthquake of the gospel' and attempting to give 'an account of what is going on while the quake is still happening.' See Harink, 'Partakers of the Divine Apocalypse,' in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology*, 79.



#### 6.4 Gladness and Praise: Resurrection and the Christian Life in O'Donovan

We shift in focus here from the question of creation's relation to resurrection to the distinctively *affective* account of resurrection life in O'Donovan's moral theology. The resurrection is *good news* – which tells of the joyous fulfilment of creation through the raising of Christ from the dead. Joy is not a superficial element of the gospel's character, but essential to understanding the character of salvation as that which restores creaturely flourishing. The cornerstone of God's joy-bringing work is the Father's raising of the Son from the dead in the power of the Spirit, which offers the promise of renewal and resurrection to all of creation. When the disciples see the risen Jesus in John's Gospel they were 'glad when they saw the Lord (Jn. 20:20)'.<sup>59</sup>

The significance of praise as a response to all that God has done in raising Christ from the dead continues a theme from the Old Testament. 'Praise is a kind of proving or demonstration of the fact of God's kingly rule'.<sup>60</sup> Praise recognises the *completeness* of God's working on behalf of the people of God. It responds to the '[v]ictory, judgement and possession' enacted by God in history: 'everything is complete when [God] has done them.'<sup>61</sup> Praise is the 'final-cause of God's Kingdom'.<sup>62</sup> It is through the praise of God by which the 'kingly rule of YHWH takes *effect*'.<sup>63</sup> It is the community's celebration of God which unites and constitutes the people of God *as a people* – as more than isolated individuals. As a communal activity, praise recognises the breadth and scope of God's work, as a work effected for the whole of creation: 'God's reign is directed towards [...] an acclamation that unites the whole community.'<sup>64</sup> The joy of the resurrection is therefore a recognition of God's finished work that transforms the whole context of human life.

The Church's witness to the truth of all that Christ has achieved in his death and resurrection follows the shape of Christ's representative act. The Church's life recapitulates Christ's person and work: 'In Christ's triumph every aspect of his work was given to the Church to share in.'<sup>65</sup> The Church's witness to all that was achieved in Christ's restoration and resurrection is *gladness and joy*. The Church's life is 'based on delight at what God has

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<sup>59</sup> O'Donovan, 'Evangelicalism and the Foundation of Ethics' in R. T. France and Alastair McGrath (eds.) *Evangelical Anglicanism* (London: SPCK, 1993), 96.

<sup>60</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 48.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

done'. This delight is not simply 'a matter of contemplation and reflection only, but of active celebration'.<sup>66</sup> The gladness of the resurrection is what summons creatures into an obedient and active response to all that God has done for human beings through Christ. Evangelical 'joy' by 'itself is not important; it is merely the subjective response.' The joy of the first and subsequent disciples is an indicator of immersion into the reality of a world made new in the risen Christ: 'It is the world out there, forcing itself in on you though you cannot see it, which renews you and makes you part of its life'.<sup>67</sup>

Joy shows the perfection and completeness of God's work as a restoration of all that was intended in creation. 'Gladness points us to the meaning of the resurrection as a *'recovery of creation order'* since gladness 'belongs essentially to the creature, as glory belongs to the creator'.<sup>68</sup> In raising Christ from the dead, creation has discovered its fulfilment in the person and work of Christ: 'If the Church's gladness is the gladness of creation, that means it is the gladness of Jesus himself; for this renewed order of creation is present in him.'<sup>69</sup>

This active celebration in response to all that God has done is what makes the resurrection so *morally* significant for O'Donovan – uniting the noetic with the affective, combining theoretical with practical reason, orienting understanding and will through love. Gladness is also a 'a moral attitude, a disposition of the affections appropriate to the recognition of God's creative goodness'.<sup>70</sup> Gladness recognises all that God has accomplished for the world through Christ. Praise recognises the *goodness* of this work and enables human beings to see through the risen Christ, despite sin and death, that creation also is *good*. Likewise, O'Donovan later writes that 'joy is the creature's natural assent to creation, the form of the rational agent's participation in the work of providence. It attests God's completed work and initiates our uncompleted work.'<sup>71</sup> Joy at all that God has done, joy that signals renewed human participation in the good order of creation – this is the beginning of the moral life. The true character of 'resurrection gladness and hope is not a matter of momentary ebullience of spirit, but of a settled and resolute attitude. Joy must master our purposes.'<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>67</sup> O'Donovan, 'Seeing the Risen One,' in *WSB*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 181.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>71</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 142.

<sup>72</sup> O'Donovan, *DN*, 182.

The joy of Christ's resurrection, as the dawning of his coming Kingdom, returns us to the important theme of Sabbath in O'Donovan's writings. Praise and thankfulness are central to human participation in the completeness of all that God has done. Creaturely agency is drawn into participation in God's gracious and providential ordering precisely as it joins with creation's praise of its Creator. Gratitude and love are the integral qualities of a life transparent to God's purposes. It is only when such works are indeed offered as a sacrifice of praise that we can truly entrust our works to God as constructive offerings within his wider purposes: 'it is in praise that we enter God's rest, both within the ordinary weekly rhythm of work and rest and within history as a whole, which culminates, as we are taught to hope, in eternal praise.'<sup>73</sup> Sabbath is a shorthand way of describing the fullness of God's works, and the final rest for which all human working strives. The completeness of God's works, in creation and resurrection, are the foundations for human living, and point forward to the promise of final fulfilment: 'When we understand our work truly, we see it set within the whole purpose of God, a moment within his work of bringing to perfection all he has made.'<sup>74</sup> God's initial work to create the world is marked as complete in his Sabbath rest, and this act provides an assurance that our lives in turn have a promised end and rest in God's good purposes for the world. In God's own Sabbath rest, God 'extended to mankind his glad rest in his accomplishment' in order that humankind may also 'rest in accomplishment'.<sup>75</sup>

Drawing together the threads of O'Donovan's understanding of Christ's resurrection, we see these various themes coalescing around a set of familiar convictions in his writings. In a summary from a recent work, O'Donovan writes:

The risen life of the last Adam gives hope to the first Adam in the midst of God's created work. The risen life of the last Adam inaugurates the Creator's purpose to consummate all life, past, present, and future, in the reign of life. In the empty tomb we are shown heaven and earth, we are promised that they shall be restored, not destroyed and brought to nothing.<sup>76</sup>

The resurrection of Christ directs human attention back to creation. In its beginning, middle, and end, the Christian life in O'Donovan's writings looks to the works of God in creation and redemption as the foundations that orientate our vision, summon our affections, and

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<sup>73</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 128.

<sup>74</sup> O'Donovan, 'Sanctification and Ethics,' in Kelly Kapic (ed.) *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2014), 165.

<sup>75</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 128.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

empowers our wills for every good work. Praise and thanksgiving – the *métier* of the Christian life in O'Donovan's writings – find their coherence in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Through this event we are justified and forgiven. We are offered freedom from past guilt, for the sake of renewed obedience and holiness. In Christ's resurrection our moral visions are restored and renewed – able to see and name the world truthfully as the world of God's good making, which is hospitable to every good and wise purpose of our lives. And, finally, the resurrection establishes God's promise that the goodness of our lives will be drawn, at last, into the eternal and loving purposes of God. To see our lives open to God's creative and redemptive purposes is, for O'Donovan, to see our lives with renewed purpose, with a deepened and joyful sense of coherency, and with a promise of future fulfilment. In our smallness and their greatness, our failings and successes, our lives are secured in Christ as the one who makes all things new, and works all things for good.

#### 6.5 Spirit, Cross and Conflict: Resurrection and the Christian Life in Williams

The resurrection of Christ is both *difficult* news and *good* news in Williams' writings. To lose either of these aspects of Christian proclamation would be to risk one of two dangers: either of finding in the gospel consolation free from challenge, or to find in the gospel a tragic vision that is not ultimately redemptive. This sense of the strangeness, disruptiveness and challenge of the risen Christ textures Williams' whole vision of the Christian life, his understanding of prayer, and his vision of human relationships in Christ.

The strangeness of the risen Christ met by the disciples is not a singular or momentary aspect of Jesus' risen identity. It is instead a constant and ongoing characteristic of meeting Jesus. The strangeness of the risen one meets the church and world in constantly novel and surprising ways:

Jesus grants us a sold identity, yet refuses us the power to 'seal' or finalise it, and obliges us to realise that this identity only exists in an endless responsiveness to new encounters with him in the world of unredeemed relationships; to absolutise it, imagining that we have finished the making of ourselves, that we have done with desire and restlessness is to slip back into that unredeemed world.<sup>77</sup>

On both counts, the resurrection is disruptive and healing precisely because it tells human beings that they are not in control. The otherness, the strangeness, the newness and the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 76.

disruptiveness of Jesus all cut firmly across human aspirations to mastery over self, environment and neighbour. The resurrection compels humanity to recognise the ‘impotence of our fantasies of control’, but also the trustworthiness of God’s redeeming love.<sup>78</sup> ‘The resurrection calls forward into a life that is genuinely new and effectively changed by a grace which both displaces the ego from its central and domineering position and grounds the self more and more profoundly in the accepting love of the Father.’<sup>79</sup> The judgement of the resurrection is accompanied by restoration: ‘to speak of the resurrection is also to speak of one’s own humanity as healed, renewed and restored, re-centred in God.’<sup>80</sup>

It is these two aspects of the gospel – its word of challenge and repentance, as well as its word of comfort and hope – which Williams’ account of spirituality seeks to articulate. The very task of theology is one that only makes sense as part of a life of prayer. God is the ‘source, ground, terminus of vision and prayer.’<sup>81</sup> To pray begins with this recognition of knowing oneself as a beloved child of the Almighty Father. In prayer, the Spirit works to draw human beings more deeply into the self-giving, and cross-shaped obedience of Christ – a work that is sharply disruptive of human pretences to comfortable or falsely consoling security. To pray is to accept Jesus’ invitation to speak to his Father as one’s own father – to occupy and share with Jesus his place within the divine life. It is, in a particular way, to ‘stand where Christ stands,’ sharing in his eternal place in the life of the Holy Trinity.<sup>82</sup> Prayer and Christology are mutually revealing. ‘Christology’ Williams writes, ‘is done in a practice of prayer and worship that does not approach God as a distant and distinct individual [...] but acts out of a recognition of adoptive filiation and the intimacy that flows from this.’<sup>83</sup> Williams understands prayer as a sharing in the life of Christ as the doorway to participating in God’s very life: ‘for the Christian, to pray – before all else – is *to let Jesus’ prayer happen in you* [...] We begin by expressing our confidence that we stand where Jesus stands and we can say what Jesus says.’<sup>84</sup> To pray as Jesus to the Father with the Spirit is a work involving the fullness of God’s Triune being: ‘We stand before God the Father, clothed in the identity of Jesus by the gift of the Spirit.’<sup>85</sup> As humans are caught up with the Spirit’s work to draw

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<sup>78</sup> Williams, ‘Resurrection and Peace, *OCT*, 275.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 80.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, *Res.*, 111.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, ‘Word and Spirit,’ *OCT*, 124.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, ‘To Stand Where Christ Stands,’ in Ralph Waller and Benedicta Ward (ed.) *Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1999), 1-13.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 250.

<sup>84</sup> Williams, *Being Christian: Bible, Eucharist and Prayer* (London: SPCK, 2014), 62. See also Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002) 51-52.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *TT*, 117.

all things into Christ's same filial relation to the father, the 'Spirit *includes* us and our experience, setting us within [God the Father's] own life in the place where Jesus his firstborn stands, as sharers by grace in that eternal loving relation, men and women made whole in him.'<sup>86</sup>

The Holy Spirit's work not only brings humanity to this place of security and assurance before the Father, but also into conformity with the self-giving obedience of Christ which draws humans into continual confrontation with the cross. 'Jesus' own sonship is inseparable from conflict, decision and suffering, from the cross. The paradox is that it is precisely Jesus' intimacy with the will of his Father that presses him towards the dereliction, the "Godlessness", of the cross.'<sup>87</sup> The foundation of prayer is the assurance of knowing oneself united to Christ, loved by the Father, and guided ever deeper into that love through the Holy Spirit's work. But this sense of assurance can never become, for Williams, the grounds for understanding human identity as something fixed, secure or settled. The assurance gained through knowing oneself in relation to God is always attained as part of a simultaneous engagement with human vulnerability and limit, and as a human life is lived truly for the sake of others. The Spirit's work leads humanity 'towards Christ's relation with the Father, towards the self secure enough in its rootedness and acceptance in the "Father", in the source and ground of all to be "child".' Yet to be led into this knowledge also involves a call 'to live vulnerably, as a sign of grace and forgiveness, to decide for the cross of powerlessness.'<sup>88</sup> The sharing of resurrection life always arrives on the far side of dying to ourselves and living wholly for the sake of God and neighbour. To stand where Christ stands means to follow him in the fragile, vulnerable struggle of being human in a world marred by sin. Receiving the love of God in Christ does not enable humanity to escape from the suffering of the world, but enables us to know that God is actively and redemptively present amidst a world filled with sorrow:

To discover in our "emptying" and crucifying the "emptying" of Jesus on his cross is to find God there, and so to know that God is not destroyed or divided by the intolerable contradictions of human suffering.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Williams, *WK*, 182.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, 'Word and Spirit,' *OCT*, 121.

<sup>88</sup> Williams, 'Word and Spirit,' *OCT*, 124.

<sup>89</sup> Williams, *WK*, 182.

Likewise, the Spirit does not enable humans to escape from the darkness of the world. The Spirit's work to draw humanity into the Triune life involves inviting humans into an endless journey of transformation – one that brings both joy and struggle.

Following the way of Christ and sharing in God's very life will draw humanity into ever deepening 'change wrought by anguish, darkness and stripping.'<sup>90</sup> The central transformational markers of a Christian life – conversion, baptism – are stark and disruptive in Williams' vision. These 'involve going down into the chaotic waters of Christ's death, so that the Spirit can move to make "new creation"; being unmade to be remade.'<sup>91</sup> The holiness of the saints is testified in their 'readiness to be questioned, judged, stripped naked and left speechless' by God.<sup>92</sup> Following Luther's conviction that the law must convict in order for grace to bring life, Williams similarly insists that this painful transformation in the Christian life must involve painful honesty and awareness of failure and guilt: 'Every moment of grace and forgiveness rests upon the experience of *accusatio sui*; before you can be reconciled, you must see your alienation.'<sup>93</sup>

As such, prayer can be no guarantor of the world working to serve the desires of the individual ego – except the guarantee that whatever happens in life, the one who prays is opening themselves to God's loving work, and is being transformed into the likeness of God's Son. The difficult parts of human living do not find immediate resolution or consolation in Christ. Rather, Christ enables us to 'reflect on our sufferings and our failures with some degree of hope [...] with the knowledge that there is a depth to the world's reality and out of that comes the light which will somehow connect, around and in Jesus Christ, all the complex, painful, shapeless experience of human beings.'<sup>94</sup> In the fullness of Christ's person we learn 'to see everything in our experience as open to God – so that we need not fear that God is bound to disappear.'<sup>95</sup> Christ's incarnate identity displays how God's presence 'is *compatible* with every bit of human life, including the inner terrors of Gethsemane (fear and doubt) and the outer terrors of Calvary (torment and death).'<sup>96</sup> Prayer does not immediately gratify human needs for escape from struggle. Writing about the Desert Fathers, Williams describes the strengths of St Antony's vision in these terms:

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>94</sup> Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), 10.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 12.

The right prayer is for strength, not deliverance. The quality of Christian life is unease, battle [...] The positive side of it is a realistic acknowledgement of conflict as the means of growth [...] it is a warning against complacency, against a static and self-oriented spiritual life.<sup>97</sup>

Prayer changes the world insofar as it changes the one who prays – challenging their desires away from wishing for a world that serves them, and opening themselves to the transforming work of God to serve the world as it is, to take up their cross and follow Christ in the world.

There is no sense that one graduates or develops past this experience of dependent vulnerability cultivated in prayer. ‘Christian experience,’ for Williams, doesn’t involve a neat ‘move from one level to the next and stay there.’ Instead, it involves being ‘drawn again and again to the central and fruitful darkness of the cross.’<sup>98</sup> It is within this ‘constant movement outwards in affirmation and inwards to emptiness’ that ‘life and growth’ are possible.<sup>99</sup> St Paul’s vision of growth is interpreted by Williams in a way which subverts the notion that growth is an ‘achievement, a “thing” acquired.’ Growth instead involves the constant return to a sense of ‘being daily grasped in his helplessness by a totally demanding and transforming fact, the death and life past death, of Jesus the Messiah.’<sup>100</sup>

There is this tension in Williams’ work between the hopeful, joyful and life-giving aspects of faith, and how these can be known only amidst the suffering of life, the difficulty and struggle of prayer, as we meet with Christ in the darkness of the cross. This tension in Williams’ vision is one that, I think, he consciously and tantalisingly refuses to resolve. In one of the sharper summations of the texture of the Christian life, Williams writes that:

In the middle of the fire, we are healed and restored – though never taken out of it. As Augustine wrote, it is at night that [God’s] voice is heard. To want to escape the ‘night’ and the costly struggles with doubt and vacuity is to seek another God from the one who speaks in and as Jesus crucified. *Crux probat omnia*.<sup>101</sup>

Only as part of this painful process of transformation, healing and self-purgation can prayer also be seen as an enrichment of our new life in Christ. Indeed, it is only by ‘being reconciled, being accepted, being held [...] by the grace of God’ which makes such pain, struggle, and tribulation possible.’<sup>102</sup> As humanity is drawn into the Triune life through

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<sup>97</sup> Williams, *WK*, 97.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



prayer, Williams seeks to capture the sense in which prayer both assures and challenges human beings. Prayer involves recognising the absolute security of one's identity, worth and purpose within the steadfast love of God. And yet, to realise the truth of our belovedness will inevitably involve coming to a painfully disruptive awareness of our own limits, our own sin, and our own vulnerability. To pray is to recognise in affirming and destabilising ways that I am not the master of my life or my environment but am being continually drawn to Christ in whom my life and the whole universe cohere in endlessly surprising ways.

### 6.6 Sanctification, Prayer, and Active Self in O'Donovan

In the final sections of this chapter, I want to trace the theme of prayer and selfhood in the writings of O'Donovan and Williams. I recognise that this is something of an addition to the theme of resurrection traced in the chapter so far. However, the focus of this chapter is *both* the resurrection of Christ, *and* how these Christian thinkers develop their interpretation of the Christian gospel into a wider picture of the Christian life that is lived faithfully and wisely before God. In this respect, to end with a brief exploration of each thinker's account of prayer and selfhood is to draw out the fullness of their accounts of Christian faith as intimately as possible to the actual lived, felt and embodied shape of living that responds to the reality of the risen Christ. 'Prayer [...] constitutes personhood', as Graham Ward argues.<sup>103</sup> 'Prayer affects, and the effects of those affects colours our moods and emotions, our imaginations, our thinking and our doing.'<sup>104</sup> And, as Karl Barth writes, to speak of prayer and the Christian life is to speak about 'one and the same thing'. Prayer is 'a need, a kind of breathing necessary' for the Christian life.<sup>105</sup> I have been suggesting throughout this thesis that the contrast between these two thinkers is a matter not only of theological conviction, but more importantly to do with the affective dynamics of Christian living interwoven with their doctrinal visions of the Christian landscape. This section develops the affective significance of these theological contrasts.

In O'Donovan's writings, we find a picture the self made ready through prayer for *active*, stable and purposive living. The Spirit works to draw human beings into renewed vision of reality, and a restored moral confidence to live and act well in the world. The self who calls on God in prayer, for O'Donovan, is the self that is being made ready by God for

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<sup>103</sup> Graham Ward, *How the Light Gets In* (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 174.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Karl Barth, *Prayer*, ed. Don E. Saliers (Louisville: WJK Press, 2002), 15.

*action* – called to responsible moral life in congruity with the good, created order of God’s making. This self is one that is *stable*, equipped and resourced by God for ‘every good work’.<sup>106</sup> In Williams, we find a picture of the self that is marked by receptivity, that is typified by porousness to the Spirit’s surprising and challenging work, and a radical openness to the disruption and renewal of the Spirit’s working in the world and my neighbour. Williams’ account of prayer focusses frequently on the *divine* work of prayer, and the decentring and purgative aspects of Christian prayer. Williams’ vision of the prayerful life is one that attends more closely to the disorientating, disruptive, and difficult quality of God’s active presence. The self which calls on God’s name is always in the process of being constructed through one’s engagement with God (and, in turn with one’s neighbour).

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O’Donovan’s moral thought understands right living as that which acts in accordance with the truth of all that God has done – rooted in the realities of God’s good creation and God’s redemptive works. The human life that is caught up with these purposes is one that is drawn into a renewed vision of reality, and a restored sense of moral confidence. The central themes of his recent trilogy – self, world and time; and faith, hope and love – are O’Donovan’s way of describing that Christian life is at once dependent on the work of God, yet also empowered with its own integrity to work for the good. Central to this movement is the “renewal” of human agency in Christ – the restoration of our ability to perceive the world’s goods, the ability to form and enact good purposes.<sup>107</sup> In the section that follows I explore the character of human selfhood in his recent writings. This theme draws our attention back to a familiar set of motifs that we have already seen in O’Donovan’s vision, but helpfully focusses our attention more specifically on his account of the Christian life.

In a recent essay on self-knowledge, he offers a fine summary of the theological and moral significance of agency for his vision:

God’s summons that we should know ourselves calls us to live and act as his children within a world he has created and redeemed. Knowing ourselves is a matter of hearing, and of accepting responsibility before God for what we hear. It involves belief, but not in ourselves. Self-knowledge accompanies obedience at every stage of practical reason, beginning at the beginning with the discovery of faith that we are

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<sup>106</sup> 2 Timothy 3:17. Cf. Hebrews 13:20-21

<sup>107</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 42.

given to be competent agents, called by God's word to live and act within the frame of world and time.<sup>108</sup>

Contained in this short passage are many of the essential features of his account of the Christian life.

The basis and foundation of the Christian life begins with seeing ourselves 'as agents summoned by God to answer him in action'.<sup>109</sup> The self that is formed in prayer, the one called and claimed by God as his child, is, for O'Donovan, also the *active* self – the agent who is ready and equipped for every good work. To be an agent is to live with an awareness of the seriousness of moral decision, with every action a choice between moving towards or away from flourishing: 'To know ourselves as agents is to know that we may win our souls or lose them; our lives shall at the last have been well lived or wasted.'<sup>110</sup>

However, the work of human agents is frustrated and inhibited by the powers of sin, and 'death' which are 'the enemy of all our purposes.'<sup>111</sup> Yet, it is "The Spirit [who] comes to our aid in our weakness" (Rom. 8:26)', and through whom 'our sickened agency is restored.'<sup>112</sup> The Spirit is the one who makes present in our lives the power of Christ's resurrection, and so 'the Spirit's power is of a piece with our *moral* recovery, the restoration of imperilled or decayed agency.'<sup>113</sup> It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that the moral lives of human beings are able to take on a renewed sense of moral purpose and potency. The Spirit rescues humanity from a 'futile passive-reactive immanence,' and restores them to their 'active life with its active purposes.'<sup>114</sup> The fruit of the Spirit's working in human lives is, for O'Donovan, a renewed capacity and confidence for our moral agency: 'Intelligence, articulateness, authority, understanding self-command and self-disposal, the framing and execution of purposes that overcome death and decay, these are all elements of life in the Spirit.'<sup>115</sup>

The Christian life begins with prayer, and the exercise of faith – as we hear and respond to God's call, as we hear of all that God has done, and are beckoned to all that we are called to do. 'Ethics begins with calling on God, the first human act.'<sup>116</sup> O'Donovan points to

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<sup>108</sup> O'Donovan, 'Know Thyself!' in *The Authority of the Gospel*, 268-269.

<sup>109</sup> *FS*, ix.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples as a model for how the moral life is drawn, by prayer and the power of the Spirit, into flourishing congruity with the loving purposes of the Father. Through prayer human beings come to know ‘their agent-identity as united with that of the Son’, enabled to pray by the ‘Spirit of adoption’, such that we may know “‘Our Father” [as] the source of our being.’<sup>117</sup> As we learn to see ourselves as agents summoned by God, our identity as agents is synonymous with coming to know ourselves as God’s children. And so the one who prays does so not simply as an *agent* ready for action, but as a son or daughter of the living God, who occupies a place of acceptance and dignity before the Father. Prayer orients the agent’s vision of reality within the purposes of God revealed in Christ. In prayer, as the full realities of the gospel are brought into view, moral agency is empowered by God to become all that it was meant to be, grounded in the resurrection life of Christ, led by the Spirit who gives life.

With these themes in the background, we can begin to understand O’Donovan’s claim that faith is the ‘root of action’ since faith is based on the recognition of all that God has done for us, and is the beginning of every good work of God in us.<sup>118</sup> Our conscious sense of our own agency and identity is ‘perfected in faith.’<sup>119</sup> We come to know ourselves as agents led by God, and capable of responsible agency and selfhood, only once we recognise that the ‘root of our human action is the objective act of God alone, summoning our agency into being.’<sup>120</sup> Faith is the posture of openness to God’s renewing work centred in the resurrection of Jesus, that is realised in human lives through the renewing power of the Spirit. Faith ‘is a response to the summons of God, at once action and reaction, response and initiative, cognition and intention,’ therefore making it ‘the root of action.’<sup>121</sup> This is what it means to speak of human beings as “justified by faith” in Christ. The Reformer’s insistence on justification by faith was driven, O’Donovan argues, by an intent to find a ‘fuller narrative that could integrate good acts into good agency [...] what makes a life as a whole worth living, acceptable to God as a totality.’<sup>122</sup> The grace which justifies and restores our relationship with God does not leave us passive but empowers us to become all that we were made to be. ‘Believing that we are loved precedes our loving. The self is held before our mind because we have learned that we are ourselves the objects of God’s demanding and

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>118</sup> O’Donovan, *SWT*, 105.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>121</sup> O’Donovan, *FS*, 24.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 26.

perfecting love.<sup>123</sup> Faith, so O'Donovan following the Reformers argues, constitutes 'the moral centre of the life, around which other acts cohere and find their larger justification.'<sup>124</sup>

An important condition for knowing ourselves as agents, and as those who are capable and equipped for deliberate and wise action, is, therefore, that we may know ourselves *intelligibly* – able to survey our lives, to know ourselves, and act in ways which make sense of our God-given identities. Sin and death threaten to disturb and disrupt how we see our lives – with memories of past guilt and shame, or through the threat of our life's unwelcome end. That we can see our lives intelligibly is, therefore, a working of divine grace, which heals, restores and sanctifies not only our agency but also our perception. Faith begins with a trust that we are justified – that we are forgiven and healed in Christ's death and resurrection. Sanctification describes the active working of God in our lives, in all their failure and erring, under the gracious and restorative power of Christ: 'God has drawn our inconsistency under the control of his own consistency.'<sup>125</sup> As such, "[s]anctification" is the dynamic operation by which God takes hold of us with all our moral imperfection, and by correction, chastening, teaching, and strengthening brings us to safety'.<sup>126</sup> It is God's sanctifying work in our lives which makes it possible to tell our life's story, with all its failings, and to do so with *thanksgiving* for God's grace: 'The whole burden of thanksgiving is that sin, which blasphemes God and resists his working, has not been given the last word in the shaping of our lives.'<sup>127</sup>

Perceiving the work of God in our lives, seeing them intelligibly, and growing in faithful obedience to Christ, is strongly bound up with O'Donovan's familiar emphasis on *gladness* and *joy*: 'To speak of sanctification is to speak of living thankfully.'<sup>128</sup> At every level of moral experience thanksgiving is integral:

To speak of sanctification [...] is to speak *continuously*, since the work of sanctification for which we are thankful and the work of thanksgiving for sanctification are one ongoing work [...] The very way in which (God) sanctifies us is by leading us to thankful reflection and recognition of his work, so that thanksgiving itself becomes a continuation of his sanctifying work.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> O'Donovan, 'Know Thyself!' 273.

<sup>124</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 26.

<sup>125</sup> O'Donovan, *ER*, 85.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

Thanksgiving and praise are essential to the Christian life since it focuses human imagination and attention on what God has done, what he has achieved for the good of human beings.<sup>130</sup>

The task of perceiving our lives as a *whole* – not an incoherent assemblage of fragments – and the work of thanksgiving, are strongly interwoven for O'Donovan.

When we speak of “experience” we speak of a continuity given to our life as a whole, which may draw on its past to address its future. Though in facing the future we are vulnerable to disruption and loss of what we have attained, we face it with experience behind us, and that experience, if we take the trouble to draw it down, is at each stage a somewhat ampler resource than before. For those who are capable of learning, the next future is approached with new experiences added to the old, and in that respect, at least, better equipped.<sup>131</sup>

Central, therefore, to O'Donovan's account of moral agency is this conviction that through prayer and the Spirit's work, we are able to perceive our lives coherently, that we may see, learn and appreciate them for the sake of growing in holiness. More than this, we are also equipped to *act* and *live* in ways that are made intelligible by God's gifts of grace. Responding to God's summons, receiving our agency renewed and restored in Christ, is to perceive all that God is making of our lives: ‘God asks ourselves of us precisely in order to bestow an identity upon us, making of us a definite somebody. Whatever follows [...] will unfold that first offering and make a history of it.’<sup>132</sup> The sense that our lives may be constantly “always beginning again” – in which the Christian life never moves beyond the experience of passivity in the face of sin and grace, is not what the life of faith looks like for O'Donovan. This offering of our lives to God may be ‘repeated, but not *de novo*, since he has taken in hand the active life of the one who offers it’.<sup>133</sup> Faith as ‘a beginning must envisage a continuation, the logic of the initial act worked out and elaborated’.<sup>134</sup>

We recall the earlier summary from O'Donovan that humanity are not only summoned to be agents, but are called to by God ‘to live and act as his children within a world he has created and redeemed’ and to ‘live and act within the frame of *world* and

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<sup>130</sup> In this way we could talk about a variety of kinds of dependence in O'Donovan's vision. Faith is an active dependence which recognises and responds to God's work on behalf of human beings – the work which coheres and justifies a human life through trust in the work of God. The kind of dependence O'Donovan explores here refers more to the ongoing work of disciplining human attentiveness and gratitude, as a work which develops and grows over time.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>132</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 37.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 38.

*time*'.<sup>135</sup> It is here that I turn to the wider context of O'Donovan's account of moral agency, and in particular the role of love and hope, and of the world and time shaping moral agency. Faith is the basis of the Christian life. 'Self, world and time are all gifts of God, but world and time could not be gifts *to us* unless we were first given to be agents fit for world and time.'<sup>136</sup> There is, therefore, 'a certain priority' to faith, as the 'prior giftedness of the active self.'<sup>137</sup> But faith is not the sum total of the Christian life. Faith looks to the world in which human beings live and act: 'not called to a life in a vacuum but to life in the world, we are called, therefore, to know and love the world.'<sup>138</sup> Likewise, within the world in which we are called to live, we are called to the time of *this moment* which always faces in the direction of the future, and so we are called to exercise hope 'in the certain knowledge that whatever the future holds, it holds the coming of the Son of Man'.<sup>139</sup> The movement of the Christian life in O'Donovan's vision, from faith in Christ to love for the world and hope for the future, is the theme of this section

Love for the goodness of creation is that which directs 'the ordering of human action' towards its final 'accomplishment' in Christ.<sup>140</sup> Love, for O'Donovan, is closely aligned with knowledge as both are 'wholly absorbed in its object.'<sup>141</sup> In other words, they are concerned with reality: 'Love is the reflective moment of practical reason turned outwards to reality, taking stock of the good that is objectively given.'<sup>142</sup> Love tethers human living to this underlying givenness of creation: 'Love's sovereignty lies in its reflective power to subsume our action into the intelligible whole of God's world.'<sup>143</sup> The good purposes that make up a human life are, for O'Donovan, those which find their intelligibility and direction within the underlying reality of creation. Prudent action is that which bears an 'intelligent relation to reality' and brings this 'order to bear on the future horizon of action'. Our action must be grounded in a truthful response to the way things are within the situation we find ourselves in. But more importantly, they must seek to find harmony with an underlying order which gives an intelligible basis and direction for us to act: 'it is within the created world that the goods we love, the ends for which we act, the reasons we discover for each purpose we form,

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<sup>135</sup> O'Donovan, 'Know Thyself', 268-269 (emphasis mine).

<sup>136</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 105.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>140</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 125.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

arise'.<sup>144</sup> The goodness that God shares in the world of his making is a good which invites our 'participation.' The goodness to which our lives aspire in deliberation and action is a 'subsisting reality' to this one.<sup>145</sup> The purposes which define and direct our lives are fundamentally *responsive* to the basic good of creation that captivates our whole being: '[w]e form purposes only because we recognise that there are goods to be aimed at'.<sup>146</sup> The purposes which our lives seek to enact, and the goods to which they seek to conform, are ultimately those God-given purposes that are solidly, objectively and stably present: 'The right purpose is a purpose obedience to God's purpose, but it can be so only if it is sufficiently determined objectively, by such indications of God's purpose as are given to us'.<sup>147</sup>

It is through Christ, and his death and resurrection, that we are assured that the goods that invite our admiration are secure indicators of flourishing and fruition for our lives. Through faith in all that Christ has achieved, we are able to view the world as 'hospitable to our purposive action'.<sup>148</sup> In Christ, 'the world is given back to us again no longer as a broken world but as a world repaired, we are drawn in love toward God and into the world in one motion, for it is as the work of God's redemption that we receive the world's good.'<sup>149</sup> Through prayer, we begin to receive the 're-attunement and reconstruction of our moral imaginary, bringing the world before our eyes as created, redeemed, and destined for fulfilment.'<sup>150</sup>

In turn, love also describes that movement as humans become not simply respondents to goodness, but initiators and active cultivators of goodness in the world: 'Love is the leading out of restored agency in worldly activity.'<sup>151</sup> Love turns our attention to the world and awakens in us an admiration for all that God is and has done, guiding our efforts within the good purposes of God:

In reaching out to the world as good we are reconciled to it, as those who have previously found it deceptive and opposed to any good of our existence. Now we can enter it with joy as the sphere of our existence, in which we have been granted to act and to live. Humankind quickened from death is given life – so much we may say in speaking of faith – but quickened from death to life humankind is then given a place

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<sup>144</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 113.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>147</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 184.

<sup>148</sup> O'Donovan, *ER*, 4.

<sup>149</sup> O'Donovan, 'Sanctification and Ethics,' 158.

<sup>150</sup> O'Donovan, *FS*, 127.

<sup>151</sup> O'Donovan, 'Sanctification and Ethics,' 158.



to live, a worldly context stamped with the resurrection of Christ, opened in hospitality to the service God's people are called to render.<sup>152</sup>

The other central dimension to O'Donovan's account of the Christian life is the passing character of *time*, which is met and discerned with the virtue of *hope*. As faith grounds and directs our self and agency in God's grace; and as love grounds and directs agency within the good creation of God's making (a world which is hospitable to the task of living); so hope 'focusses our awareness of *time* upon the "works prepared before us to walk in" (Eph. 2:10).'<sup>153</sup>

If faith takes its direction from God's call to the self, and love looks for its orientation to the good reality of creation, then hope shapes human attempts to understand the formless future within the horizon of God's promises. Hope looks to God's promise of a future that can only ever be provisionally known and that is ultimately 'remote' and "'new" as no extrapolation of temporal form can be new.'<sup>154</sup> Since hope does not offer the believer an immediately secure perspective on past and present, what our lives will become is unclear even against the promised horizon of eternal life with Christ. All we can do is trust in the promise of God to make of a human life what God will.

Hope is of things not seen. It leads obedience beyond love, over the edge of knowledge into the darkness of ignorance. It confronts the future, which is not visible or comprehensible, and confronts it with a promise of God, a promise that love has learned of in its attention to the work and words of God but that it is not in a position to grasp of itself. Promise is our access, and our only access, to an eschatological moment beyond the reach of the wisdom given before death.<sup>155</sup>

The future is, in O'Donovan's later writings, something which remains disruptively unfamiliar for moral theology.

Hope is a chastening aspect in O'Donovan's account of the Christian life. Though the Christian life is assured, through Christ, of the ultimate ends of creation, the penultimate course from the present onwards will forever remain obscure to us. Hope should not lead, O'Donovan argues, to unthoughtful embrace of grand social programmes or strategies, based on the extrapolating lines of continuity from the present to the unseen future of the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> O'Donovan, *SWT*, 102. (emphasis mine)

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>155</sup> O'Donovan, 'Sanctification and Ethics,' 161.

Kingdom.<sup>156</sup> Hope does not find its sustenance through an ability to see a straight line of optimistic possibility from present into a better future. Rather, hope rests in the promises of God – unseen in their resolution, and received only by faith. For O’Donovan, hope is manifested by endurance, patience, and a rejection of anxiety. When greeting the formless future, the life of endurance is not a matter of ‘passivity,’ but instead is marked by a ‘constantly receptive attention, resisting the threat of meaninglessness with a readiness to respond to meaning with meaningful action’.<sup>157</sup> ‘Endurance confronts the emerging future in watchful expectancy, looking for the light of promise shining back on time and the moment of purposeful self-disposal it will show up before our feet.’<sup>158</sup> If time and novelty are the great disruptors of life’s purposes, then hope meets the future with a steady, consistent application of ourselves to what our context demands: ‘Banal and routine tasks of life, devoid of interest if we are looking for spectacular possibilities, provide the access, narrow but direct, to the promise that will “fit us for perfect rest.”’<sup>159</sup> Hope draws our attention, O’Donovan argues, to even the most apparently insignificant of tasks, all of which afford the chance for patience, and self-denial.

This exploration of the different aspects and movements of the Christian life in O’Donovan’s writings coalesce around this running thread of assurance – that human agency is ennobled and dignified within God’s purposes. To be an agent, (‘a person, the subject of a history’) is to ““make” beginnings and continuations’.<sup>160</sup> It is to be one who is the seat of freedom and responsibility, one who is the source of action, and able to carry such action through to a flourishing and life-giving end. To live this way is to live ““in the image of God”, who begins, continues and perfects all things.’<sup>161</sup> Integral to moral agency is a particular continuity of individual identity over time, alongside the cultivation of certain moral qualities that make such a life possible: ‘a capacity to create a coherent narrative around oneself by direction and taking responsibility for one’s active powers so as to own one’s doing and living, planning what one does, acknowledging what one has done, sustaining a policy of doing one thing from one circumstance to the next, and so on.’<sup>162</sup> The moral accomplishment of becoming an agent is, for O’Donovan, intrinsically concerned with

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<sup>156</sup> This is the heart of O’Donovan’s critique of Jürgen Moltmann’s eschatology. See *FS*, 159-166.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-168.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 177. Quoting John Keble, ‘Morning’ *The Christian Year*, (Oxford: Benedictine Classics, 2009), 12.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

‘living and acting as the continuous self one is given to be, in likeness to oneself.’<sup>163</sup> It is within all that God has done in creation, redemption and all that he promises to do, through which life’s meaning is secured: ‘To espy heaven is to see our life and work within the purposes of God, a contribution which, of grace, he has permitted our agency to make to his universal plan.’<sup>164</sup>

The stability of human agency, and the object of its fulfilment, is promised and secured within God’s purposes. The eternal Sabbath rest that is promised in Christ’s resurrection is a real point of fulfilment for all human rational and moral longings. Indeed, O’Donovan argues that Sabbath is the primary reality which gives life its direction since it promises a moment of completion for all human working and striving:

Until in the end we have brought our lives to God’s view, we cannot complete them. Rest, which enjoys the blessing of God, can be entered as we contemplate God’s works with him and see them as he does. Satisfaction needs its object, something real to repose upon; our own works, our lives, do not possess that objectivity when they are kept to ourselves.<sup>165</sup>

Knowing that our work may find a promise of completion gives a sense of dignity to human living, since it offers the hope that our lives and works are meaningful to God whilst also completely dependent on him: ‘As completed work our agency has a place within the world and can be offered back to God in praise as the contribution to the world’s preservation and redemption which he has been pleased to accomplish through us.’<sup>166</sup>

### 6.7 Prayer, Silence and the Receptive Self in Williams

Williams’ vision of human selfhood that emerges from his account of the Christian gospel, and from his vision of Christian spirituality, is of a self that is always in the process of being formed, and one always open to the interruptive presence of God and neighbour in my life. The beginning of self-awareness in his writings is therefore a confrontation with the limits and deceptions present in our lives. Human beings typically begin ‘in error or at least ignorance’ about the nature of their true selves.<sup>167</sup> The self seeks a secure buffer to negotiate

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> *SWT*, 130.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>167</sup> Williams, “‘Know Thyself’: What Kind of An Injunction?” in Michael McGhee (ed.), *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 211.

and cope with the difficulty of reality. Understanding myself, therefore, cannot begin by looking to my life ‘for justification and coherence.’ Instead, we must attend, Williams suggests, to ‘those silences and bafflements that deny me the dangerous luxury of a satisfying self-portrait and draw me away from the self-conscious struggle to be or know myself and towards God, in that act of praise and wonder and bewilderment whose very possibility ought constantly to surprise us.’<sup>168</sup>

The true end of prayerful self-reflection – namely praise and worship of God – can easily become distorted by the powers of sin, self-deception and idolatry. This human refusal to recognise truth about themselves and their world and to construct a self-serving imagining of the world from their own resources is the essence of idolatry. Coming to knowledge of oneself involves ‘practice of criticism, specifically the criticism of the way the subject distorts its self-perception into fixity by fixation upon the meeting of needs.’<sup>169</sup> In the history of humanity’s response to God we inevitably create, construct and trust in images of God that serve our desires, our egos, that place our own longings at the centre of our imaginative universes, including our vision of God. And yet the lesson of God’s dealings with his people is that God will actively and painfully deliver us from such idols, in order to bring us more thoroughly into the truth of his identity and his love. ‘[I]f we are to be kept from idols,’ Williams writes, then ‘we must be surprised, ambushed, and carried off by God.’<sup>170</sup> It is only when ‘false images of God, the world and myself have been truly broken that I can be truly free’ and once ‘God in this terrible darkness breaks through, he begins to displace and destroy that dominating and manipulating self; then he sets me free to be loved and to give myself to him and to my brothers and sisters.’<sup>171</sup>

The risk of idolatry is continually present precisely because there is provisionality and riskiness involved in self-discovery. Coming to grips with one’s true self is, for Williams, about recognising that a ‘self’ is ‘constructed in and only in contingency, and intelligible only as responding address from beyond itself, never self-creating.’<sup>172</sup> Personal identity will never be a quality that is self-originating. It is instead something received in gift and interaction. As human beings confront the limits of understanding and survey their whole lives from any stable perspective, they are invited to an act of *trust* ‘that my entire history is “received” and

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<sup>168</sup> Williams, ‘Time and Self-Awareness in the *Confessions*’, *OA*, 20.

<sup>169</sup> Williams, “‘Know Thyself’”, 223-4.

<sup>170</sup> Williams, ‘Advent,’ *OtJ*, 10.

<sup>171</sup> Williams, ‘The Dark Night,’ *OtJ*, 99.

<sup>172</sup> Williams, “‘Know Thyself’”, 223. See elsewhere his discussion of the self ‘formed in relation and transaction.’

held by the act of God'<sup>173</sup> knowing that 'we are present to a love which holds together what we cannot unify or sustain by our own resources'.<sup>174</sup>

Coming to grips with the limits of my self-understanding can therefore become the occasion for a wider vision of God's goodness within my life. Faith does not provide an easy escape from the unresolved questions about my life. Recognising the limits of self-knowledge is an act of 'surrendering into God's hands my hopes of seeing myself whole.'<sup>175</sup> Trust requires giving up the security of ever finding a fixed or certain perspective on one's life. Such a lack of finality is a constructive aspect of human transformation. Williams writes of how:

The inaccessibility of the divine perspective is paradoxically liberating: there is always a resource for renewal or conversion or enlargement of myself independent of what may happen to be my resources at any given moment, and there is always the possibility of more adequately ordering the telling of my life as I draw towards a perspective on myself undistorted by my self-interest.<sup>176</sup>

The limits of human vision challenge desires for security and certainty. However, such limits in our perception are also essential aspects to a hopeful vision of God's slow and unseen works of remaking and renewal in the world. Habits of prayer are the human attempt to engage in the kind of healthy enlargement and disciplining of imagination that Williams speaks of. In prayers of confession and repentance humans attend to their sin. In prayers of praise and adoration humans name the goodness of God's ways and works. Prayer is a doorway to the enlargement of the self, as the Spirit draws human beings into deeper engagement with the brokenness and beauty of the world.

But the growth of the self in prayer will inevitably involve confrontation with painful and difficult truths, and an ongoing engagement with the 'the disturbing presence of grace.'<sup>177</sup> The human work of prayer begins with becoming open and receptive to the disruptive and decentring work of God. Following Teresa of Avila, Williams argues that Christian spirituality 'begins when the self is *surrendered* at a radical level to the activity of God, so that it can no longer be thought of as acting from a centre separated from God.'<sup>178</sup> To engage truly with '[d]ivine presence' involves 'the recognition of a prior relatedness, a

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<sup>173</sup> Williams, 'Time and Self-Awareness in the *Confessions*', *OA*, 19.

<sup>174</sup> Williams, 'Time and Self-Awareness in the *Confessions*', *OA*, 20.

<sup>175</sup> Williams, 'Time and Self-Awareness in the *Confessions*', *OA*, 18.

<sup>176</sup> Williams, "'Know Thyself'", 223.

<sup>177</sup> 'Word and Spirit,' *OCT*, 124.

<sup>178</sup> Williams, *Teresa*, 144.

relatedness that has already established the very conditions for awareness and is acknowledged only in being appropriated in some way, through the disorientation or displacement of the individual ego.’<sup>179</sup> All of Christian living must recognise ‘the constant possibility of its own relativising interruption, [and] silencing’ by God through prayer.<sup>180</sup>

It is for these reasons that prayer and silence are especially connected in Williams’ vision. Silence leads us towards the way of dispossession, a wounding reorientation of our ego, as we seek to let the life of Christ take form within us. The spiritual life therefore involves navigating painful disruption and irresolution – all of which are woven into the purposes of God. Looking to the Carmelites and early Jesuits, Williams sees their understanding of prayer as: ‘a process which *begins* with drastic interruptions of “ordinary” speech and action [...] There is a *strategy* of dispossession, suspicion of our accustomed ways of mastering our environment.’<sup>181</sup> Christian speech must therefore maintain constant readiness ‘to admit failure before God, ’and therefore also ‘to show the judgement of God – or rather, exposure to the judgement of God.’<sup>182</sup> Prayer doesn’t guarantee that such language will retain its truthfulness and integrity – prayer cannot become a self-justifying act for theology. But is it at least the place to begin: ‘Language about God is kept honest in the degree to which it turns on itself in the name of God, and so surrenders itself to God.’<sup>183</sup>

What then can we say of the shape of the Christian life, amidst the ambiguities and hiddenness of God’s work? How do we begin to make sense, when fixed and settled accounts of identity and coherency are so significantly unsettled in Williams’ writings? There can be, Williams argues,

no answer to such questions [...] so long as we persist in looking for a unified picture of our lives which our consciousness can take in without any difficulty, so long as we think of our relation to God primarily or actively as a matter of individual self-awareness coming to fulfilment and integration.<sup>184</sup>

There can be no hope for fulfilment in our individual lives apart from a willingness to surrender, to live without a sense of control over securing our own fulfilment. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for the sake of following the way of Christ’s surrender will find it. The hiddenness of our true sense of self in relation to God is ‘overcome

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<sup>179</sup> ‘Divine presence and divine action: reflections in the wake of Nicholas Lash.’

<sup>180</sup> Williams, ‘Theological Integrity,’ *OCT*, 13.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>184</sup> Williams, “‘An Enemy Hath Done This’”, *OtJ*, 91.

not by a moment of manifestation but by the commitment to this endless journey into divine reciprocity which we call faith, realised in the common life of the community that steadily holds itself responsible for announcing and embodying a hope without limit.’<sup>185</sup> To make sense of ourselves, our lives and our purpose cannot be immediately grasped as a singular or finished whole – but only in the endlessly generative journeying more deeply into God, and through loving solidarity with neighbour. ‘The goal of Christian life’ is not resolution or consolation in the face of ambiguity and struggle. Rather, Christian living should look for that ‘wholeness’ which involves ‘an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God’s creative work.’<sup>186</sup>

In the paragraphs that follow, we see that the limits and ambiguities that are encountered in self-knowledge develops an essential trajectory in Williams’ writings from the self toward community. Immersion in the interruptive possibilities of silence opens the individual self to the challenge of God and the neighbour. Contemplation is an integral part of learning to live in solidarity and community with others, by learning to quiet one’s own needs and desires, for the sake of finding fulfilment through joyful service in relationship with my neighbour.

The importance of silent and contemplative prayer, for Williams, has something to do with how we respond to the presence of God in a way that may require a deep unsettling of the self, as the self is drawn away from its detachment from the world and into community:

[P]rayer that is content to stay in and endure the darkness, to come back daily to look into the unmanageable blank mystery of God, can be and should be the true wellspring of love and service, because it is a constant questioning and weakening of the selfish ego<sup>187</sup>

Thus, contemplative prayer is central to cultivating an ethical life that is oriented towards sacrifice and service to my neighbour. This opening of the self to the mystery, difficulty and challenge of God is a kind of practice for readying oneself for the life of service.

The self that is killed by God in order to be made alive must experience this death in the social, the public world at the hands of other human beings. The daily dying, daily taking of the cross, is precisely this exposure of the self to the devouring need of others.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Williams, ‘Divine presence and divine action: reflections in the wake of Nicholas Lash.’

<sup>186</sup> Williams, *WK*, 2.

<sup>187</sup> Williams, ‘The Dark Night,’ *OtJ*, 99.

<sup>188</sup> Williams, *WK*, 157.

Contemplative and silent prayer make space for human beings to open themselves completely to God, to bring into awareness before God all within oneself that is resistant to God, and, ultimately, to let God's transforming love touch even those darkest places of the human soul. To receive this loving and healing call of God in human lives can only be received as something actively disruptive to our comfortably self-deceptive and illusorily comfortable grasp of our lives. Such transformation is an integral part of learning to love someone other and different to me: 'If we seek to talk about the presence of an active trinitarian God, it must be in terms of a particular kind of disruption of the self and its stories of itself, a disruption which creates what is in principle a radically unlimited space for a free but 'indebted' (receptive and responsive) other.'<sup>189</sup>

Truthful response to the living and active presence of Jesus in prayer, sacrament, neighbour and community will always involve following Jesus in this way of surrender and self-abandonment:

The only way of speaking truthfully about Jesus Christ is from that mutually defining relationship in which human existence responds to self-abandonment, life for the other, which is the life that Christ embodies, in history as in preaching and sacrament.<sup>190</sup>

The Christian life is, for Williams, one that, is be lived without reserve wholly for God and neighbour. Our life and death are, ultimately, with our neighbour and with God.<sup>191</sup> To be caught up in the life of the risen Christ, to stand where he stands before God, is 'to be caught up into the self-abandoning love both of the Son for the Father and of God for creation.'<sup>192</sup> The incarnation of Christ displays an interconnectedness and solidarity with human beings which is absolutely given, and yet which opens up possibilities for human life which are yet to be realised. Marilynne Robinson's novels, especially *Lila*, open up this question for Williams about 'what it might mean for any part of that great complex of creation to live into and to realise God's election, to discover reconciliation for themselves.' This process 'is a painful, uncertain, lifelong exercise, not just the affirmation of a guaranteed happy ending.'<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Williams, 'Divine presence and divine action: reflections in the wake of Nicholas Lash.'

<sup>190</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 195.

<sup>191</sup> Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2004), 22-24. See also 'Nobody Knows Who I Am Until Judgement Morning,' *OCT*, 286.

<sup>192</sup> Williams, *CHC*, 107.

<sup>193</sup> Williams, 'Beyond Goodness: Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace', in Timothy Larsen and Keith L. Johnson (eds.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2019), 160.



In Christ humanity is seen in its original God given purpose as a people made for belonging with God and one another. This vision of common life is blurred by sin, suspicion, darkness and frailty. However, it is Christ who offers to the world a hope that humanity may find a redeemed way of living together. In Christ God's purpose is set forth 'to reconnect us with one another at a level we can barely begin to reach in our imaginations.'<sup>194</sup>

As humans are invited to see afresh through Christ their relationship with the whole of creation, there is a radical openness which characterises the Christian life. This does not simply entail an openness to God in prayer, sacrament, word and worship – but also a radical openness to God's promised work in the world and through our neighbour. The incarnation shows that God reveals himself 'in this world of material bodies, *as* a material body,' and as such God will continue 'to use material things and persons to communicate who and what he is.'<sup>195</sup> We recall a previous discussion of Williams' understanding of 'Christ-like' events in the world – moments of liberation, redemption and hope which can be understood as instances of Christ's work in the world.<sup>196</sup> These themes are not simplistic appeals to an anonymous Christianity or naïve theological pluralism, rather Williams' argument is that these Christ-like moments in the world are attempts to attend to the lively and free work of the Spirit to draw all of creation into the active reality of Christ's saving work. The Christian looks for their salvation where 'Jesus is visibly active in the world.'<sup>197</sup> As such, the unsettling work of grace in a Christian life is something not only received through the familiar sources of Scripture, tradition, and ecclesial community – though even these elements are understood in Williams' writings in ways that disrupt and unsettle a falsely constructed sense of stability in Christian lives. The disruptive work of God may also be something which encounters the Church *from* the world, as the Spirit draws the Church out of its 'visible boundaries' in order to receive all that Christ wants to bless his creation with.<sup>198</sup> The fullness of the living Christ's reality exceeds the confines of the Church and goes into the world, in a way that can return to the Church as an invitation to greater repentance and transformation: 'the power of Christ and the newness of the gospel always escapes across the frontiers of the Church and come back to challenge the church from unexpected quarters.'<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>195</sup> Williams, *TT*, 140.

<sup>196</sup> See 'Trinity and Revelation', 143, see chapter 5 for a discussion of this article.

<sup>197</sup> Williams, *TT*, 128.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 129.

Openness to the judgement of Christ, and openness to the full truth and grace which Jesus offers to the world is inseparable from making oneself open to the judgement of the world, to learn afresh of how to speak of good news in a way that all of humanity – including myself – can be transformed by God. As the believer is led by the Spirit into ever deepening engagement with the world around them, they will learn to see how the longings and fears of humanity can lead to a deeper understanding of salvation in Christ. What the Christian receives through engagement with the world may be painfully disruptive, and an occasion for repentance. And yet, such disruption is essential to faithfulness to Christ who is drawing the whole world and Church into an unseen and assuredly redemptive future: ‘the Church judges the world; but it also hears God’s judgement on itself in the judgement passed upon it by the world.’<sup>200</sup> The Church seeks to bear witness to the world not from the basis of a fixed and secure possession. The judgement of God and the world will fall on the Church whenever it falls into this illusory position of stability and security in its identity. However, what the Church does offer to the world is a sense of shared hope – that the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ is drawing all things into a shared, loving and good future. The future may be unseen, yet this ‘unseen future has the face of Christ’.<sup>201</sup> The transformation of human vision through prayer leads us on a journey deeper into the presence of God, and deeper into the world of time and contingency in which the Creator has placed human beings: ‘there can be no escape from the world in which we have been put as creatures *and* that there is nowhere from which God can be finally exiled.’<sup>202</sup>

This sketch offered of Williams’ vision has centred around what the shape of the prayerful life entails. Prayer draws into view the believer’s immersion in the fullness of the Triune life. To pray is to call on God as the loving Father of Christ, to know oneself as co-heir and filial companion of Christ before the Father and led by the Spirit into all that God has created humanity for. The way of the Spirit leads human beings through the way of the cross, and into deeper conformity with the self-giving life of obedience and dependence which led Christ to the cross. Prayer leads the believer through a way of transformation. They are led both into the darkness and struggle involved in an obedient life lived amidst a compromised world of sin, but also more deeply into the abundance of the reality of new creation inaugurated in Christ’s resurrection. This way of life draws humanity out of self-centred, self-assuring love, and more deeply into the disconcerting yet utterly real love of

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<sup>200</sup> Williams, ‘The Judgement of the World,’ *OCT*, 39.

<sup>201</sup> Williams, *Dwelling with the Lights*, 34.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.

God. Prayer draws believers out of security, and into loving trust in Christ. Finally, prayer draws believers into community, into relationship, and into loving solidarity with neighbour. This way may entail openness to being interrupted by the world. But this engagement is essential to the life called by Christ out of the disorder of sin and self-deception, and more deeply into the infinitely generative and redemptive future of Christ's everlasting kingdom.

## 6.8 Conclusion

This chapter represents the thematic crescendo of this essay, with many of the core themes introduced in previous chapters coming to fruition in Williams' and O'Donovan's respective accounts of Christ's resurrection, and the shape of human lives that respond to this event. This chapter has sought to intensify many of the key contrasts between Williams and O'Donovan. The themes of previous chapters – the shape of learning and knowing in Christ, the character of creation, and Christ's relationship to creation – find a deeper coherence and significance when seen through Williams' and O'Donovan's account of Christ's resurrection. The wider theological convictions at play in their vision resonate with their respective tellings of the gospel, and the particular affective and existential accentuations to their interpretations of Christ's resurrection from the dead. For example, the disruption and novelty that characterises creation, God's work in creation, and Christ's identity in Williams' writings are rooted in his interpretation of Christ's resurrection as a jarring, disorientating and endlessly transformative event. Likewise, O'Donovan's convictions about the stability of created order, and the way in which Christ fulfils and restores creation, arise from an account of Christ's resurrection that emphasises the gladness of this event for the early believers, and the way in which Christ's resurrection becomes the basis for a renewed stability and purposefulness for human living.

The core instincts of their theological accounts of resurrection culminate in their respective accounts of Christian living. These accounts, and the pattern and practice of Christian prayer, express and accentuate their core convictions about Christian living that arise from their understanding of Christ's resurrection. The central contrast between these two visions is between seeing prayer as an inhabitation of joyful realities already achieved which call human beings to live in conformity with the finished work of God (O'Donovan); and another which views prayer as an attempt to respond to the continually disruptive presence of God in one's life (Williams). Rooted in this contrast are two visions of the

Christian life. In considering these two thinkers we consider a wider set of tensions between the disruptive and the stabilising character of divine grace in the Christian life.

On the one hand, O'Donovan's writings present a rich vision of the renewing and stabilising quality of God's grace – which works to draw human lives into freedom and responsibility. Their sense of agency is restored through truthful conformity to all that God has done in creation and redemption. In O'Donovan's case, humanity looks to God as the stabilising, reassuringly directive, and confidently empowering presence in one's life – guiding humanity towards their good and flourishing end in Christ. There are disruptive elements along the way. However, the life of faith, hope and love is secure in God's works of creation and redemption and looks forward to fulfilment through entering eternal Sabbath rest with Christ.

For Williams, the presence of divine grace in a human life is altogether more disruptive. The healing and forgiving work of God must first bring judgement. To know oneself as loved wholly by God is inseparable from painful commitment to understanding the depth of self-deception and sin which haunts individual and corporate lives. Understanding one's own brokenness is an ongoing journey that is sustained by the simultaneous awareness of knowing oneself as held by the love of God – a love which does not make life easy but draws us more deeply into transformation and joy. In this vision, God leads humanity into an unseen and uncertain future – yet one that is assuredly redemptive because Christ has been raised.

The basic contrast between O'Donovan and Williams' visions of the Christian life are their contrasting sense of the disruptive and stabilising quality of God's work in human life. The shape of faithful Christian living is contrasted in these thinkers' works in terms of entering into rest within the completed and established purposes of God, next to the purposes of God inviting human beings into continual wrestling with God amidst the silences and struggle of prayerful living. These contrasting visions signal a counter-note to the other – a contrast that is neither an unresolvable contradiction, nor one that is straightforwardly harmonisable without diminishing the distinctiveness of each thinker's vision. How then should we draw these thinker's visions together to nourish a Christian imagination that holds onto each of their primary instincts? We turn in the conclusion to tentatively explore this question of how both visions can be drawn together for the sake of Christian wisdom; and, to consider how both visions can nourish an account of discernment able to sustain the task of living faithfully before God amidst the complexity and variety of living.



## Conclusion

What then shall we do with these richly contrasting visions of Christian faith and life? An initial, and perfectly reasonable response would be to look for constructive ways of harmonising the two thinkers' work. Despite their differing emphases and approaches as theologians, O'Donovan and Williams occupy a very proximate confessional space to the other. Their writings present different ways of exploring and inhabiting what is essentially a shared landscape of Christian faith.

The central doctrinal loci of each thinker's visions of the Christian are recognisably similar such that an attempt to harmonise their visions would be thoroughly warranted. They share a commitment to orthodox Trinitarianism, to *creatio ex nihilo*, to Chalcedonian Christology, to accounts of grace recognisably in conversation with both Protestant and Catholic sources (especially with Augustine), and they share a commitment to the centrality of Christ's resurrection for the world's salvation. Aside from these general similarities, the particular concerns and instincts of each thinker are familiar to the other. For example, both agree that creation is central to understanding the character of God and the nature of the gospel. Creation is, for both, something intelligible. However, for O'Donovan creation is something *fixed* and *stable* apart from the passing course of time, whereas, for Williams, creation and time are two inseparable elements of a single and indivisible reality – meaning that our knowledge of creation can never rise above the limits of creaturely provisionality. Similarly, both O'Donovan and Williams recognise that the distorting power of sin means that the work of God can only be received in a human life through some degree of painful disruption – through trusting faith that takes the form of repentance and conversion. The difference is that this disruption is momentary and diminished in O'Donovan, but for Williams it is pervasively present. The note of resurrection joy found in O'Donovan is shared by Williams, but sharply tempered by the challenge of repentance and the darkness of the cross in the latter's writings. My point is that there are shared convictions between these visions. However, the differences lie in their *arrangement* of such themes. Each thinker makes central and pervasive a particular element that is, for the other, a more limited and qualified aspect.

The kinds of differences we have explored in these thinkers are not at the level of fundamental doctrinal disagreement, which would place them in terms of radically alternative visions of the Christian faith. The nuanced divergences between these visions are apparent, but there remains a sufficient degree of similarity in these thinkers' visions that would

warrant a constructive attempt at synthesis. Given the doctrinal similarity, and the presence of suggestions in each thinker's work of what is distinctive in the other, a systematic harmonisation between these visions is wholly possible. Such an attempt would attend closely to those elements of God's working which shapes each thinker's vision, before offering a conceptual framework by which to frame Christian living according to stability or disruption.<sup>1</sup> But this route is not the one that I choose to take. To harmonise these contrasts would be to miss the purpose of considering the inherent distinctiveness of these two contrasting visions.

The instincts towards either disruption or stability in Williams and O'Donovan are, we have seen, consistent through their entire visions. Beginning with creation, through to salvation, and finally in the shape of human living and growing – their theological instincts towards either stability or disruption texture their vision with a remarkable level of consistency and coherency. The task of harmonisation would miss the essential instincts of either thinker's work: of O'Donovan's vision in which the essential stability of the world of God's creating and redeeming is the *cantus firmus* of all theology and ethics, and where the glad entrance into Sabbath rest is the keynote; or, it would miss in Williams's vision the basic movement of humanity's ongoing and surprising journey of being led by the Spirit of Christ into the endless abundance, challenge and transformation which the gospel brings. To cohere such patterns of thought within the dominant motifs of either thinker, or to reconcile these contrasts by some third consistent note, would inevitably mean losing the distinctiveness of one or both of these very particular visions of how a Christian life is to be felt, and cultivated. The task of harmonisation would be a theologically creative and rich endeavour, but one that carries with it the risk of failing to see these two thinkers' writings as deep imaginative configurations of a life each involving very distinctive patterns of the *felt* shape of Christian faith.

In speaking of this felt quality of Christian living, I have in mind recent generative proposals concerning the 'affective salience' of Christian doctrine as a fruitful way of exploring the contrasting visions of Williams and O'Donovan.<sup>2</sup> This approach focuses 'on the practical emotional valence and the anticipated experiential impact of doctrines'.<sup>3</sup> In this

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<sup>1</sup> I envisage here a project similar in its approach to that of David Kelsey – characterised by its 'unsystematically systematic' approach to creation and redemption – which traces at great length and in great depth a way of holding together the interwoven yet distinct ways of God's relating to the world in terms of creation, reconciliation and consummation. David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Simeon Zahl, 'On the Affective Salience of Doctrines,' *Modern Theology* 31:3, July 2015, 428-444.

<sup>3</sup> Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), 37.

paradigm, the ‘implicit experiential factors in theological reasoning’ are brought to the foreground of theological exploration.<sup>4</sup> This approach is fitting for adjudicating Williams’ and O’Donovan’s corpus’. Each thinker’s theological convictions are clearly interconnected with a core set of moods and tenors that characterise their works. Williams’ theology, as we saw in chapter 6, attends more sustainedly to the challenge of the cross, the ways in which Christian faith challenges our dangerous and delusional beliefs, and the purgative and disruptive elements of the Spirit’s work in human lives. Joy, thanksgiving and assurance are present themes in his writings, but tend to be counterbalanced by the former set of emphases. O’Donovan’s moral theology, with its attention on the shape of moral living restored, ennobled and directed through faith in Christ is one that stresses to a greater degree the gladness and joy which underpins Christian living. Suffering, sorrow, and anguish are important to his writings, but are given coherence through the gladness of resurrection joy, and through our renewed imaginations in Christ. In sum, the major theological instincts of each thinker’s visions – their accounts of creation, Christ, salvation and resurrection – should be understood as interwoven with an underlying set of convictions about the dominant moods of Christian living in their works. To read each thinker in terms of the affective saliences of their theological convictions is to suggest that both Williams’ and O’Donovan’s patterns of thinking are not held together *simply* by conceptual connections. Their visions *are* held together by these things. But the ways in which each articulates the Christian faith is also shaped by their affective grasp of the Christian life. The approach by which I intend to draw these thinker’s works together, involves making explicit this set of affective dynamics in their works, and exploring what these different presentations of Christianity’s lived shape might offer for those concerned with the lived shaped of Christian wisdom and obedience.

Both are theologians of the Christian life, concerned with the character of faithfulness as a holistic expression of thinking, acting, and *feeling*. Doctrine can serve the Church’s work of proclamation, praise and formation in ways that shape individuals in emotionally helpful and vibrant ways. The task of doctrinal theology can also recognise that the contexts for Christian living may begin and continue within very different affective states. Faithful Christian reflection can begin as much in joy as it can in sorrow.<sup>5</sup> Engaging with the contrasts of Williams’ and O’Donovan’s works focuses our attention on the way that the affective

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>5</sup> ‘[T]he Church’s theology can begin from any of the joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties that people experience. We feel ourselves lost, or found, and find ourselves praying in moments of crisis or great joy [...] In these and countless other ways, people are always already engaged in God-talk.’ Frederick C. Bauerschmidt and James Buckley, *Catholic Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), xv.



dimensions of theology and living are complex – doctrine begins from these different affective states, and it can nurture different affections. The kind of wisdom that Williams and O'Donovan point towards is how to think with mobility, confidence, and sensitivity about how Christian faith interacts with contexts, especially the felt experience of being Christian, in ways that lead to human flourishing.

In adjudicating between Williams and O'Donovan's different theologies as a matter of affective salience, I will not argue for an overall preference or a superiority of one over the other on these terms. This is partly because the affective dynamics at work in the Christian life they both envisage are neither reducible to a contradictory set of emotions which clash with the others – joy, sorrow, repentance, conversion, love, surprise – these, and many others, can be found in each thinker's writings. The Christian life is sufficiently rich and complex such that neither thinker's account is exhaustive.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the wise ordering of Christian affection does not take a static or singular shape. Rather, the shape of a Christian life is always being formed through the task of ongoing discernment, attentive, openness and responsiveness.<sup>7</sup>

As such, perhaps a more fruitful and challenging way of reconciling these two visions is to suggest that together they display a set of constructively discordant themes which *together* are necessary for a Christian vision of wisdom, but which *together* require a mode of discernment to know when to draw on different affective dimensions of the Christian vision and faith depending on context. The central context of both these thinkers' vision is the embodied life of prayer, witness, and worship that constitute the lived shape of corporate Christian existence. Amidst the huge depth and variety of each thinkers' writings, we can see that both are writing *as* part of the Church, and *for* the sake of nourishing a depth of wisdom and reflection that can guide the Church's life.<sup>8</sup> Neither thinker's work should be seen as a

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<sup>6</sup> For a rich discussion of the variety, interplay and unity of affections in the Christian life, see Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Mathews, *Shaping the Christian Life: Worship and the Religious Affections* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2006), 45-58.

<sup>7</sup> As Higton helpfully suggests 'lest the word "shape" be taken to imply coherence and stability' in the character of belief, there is an additional complexity and mobility to Christian faith which means that such "shape" is not fixed or straightforward: 'our belief is an unruly sprawl of connections, constantly shifting, and traceable only with elaborate care. There is no layer of primitive, simple believing that does not already have some such complexity to it. Believing is always embodied in the knotted patterns of life that people weave together in particular locales.' Higton, *Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020) 125. David Ford's discussion about the shape of living is also helpful here. In his account, shape does not imply in a fixed or ahistorical ordering to which Christian lives must conform. Rather, 'shape' implies the character of human response to those moments of interruption and intensity that mark out our lives in ways that look for unfolding coherence over time. See Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2012), xv-xxx.

<sup>8</sup> In speaking of 'the Church' here, I am thinking primarily of the Anglican context of each thinkers' work – the concrete and tangible context of local and national ministry in the Church of England, and her bordering

kind of system separable from the lived shape of the Church's life and witness. In this respect, they are both theologians whose work involves developing theological resources *in media res* of the Church's life. Both O'Donovan's and Williams' work involves thinking *in the midst* of the Church's ongoing life, for the sake of resourcing and orienting that life.<sup>9</sup> Their underlying doctrinal visions, therefore, seek to display the fullness of Christian belief which they take for granted as one that is already being lived out in worship, prayer, sacrament, scripture and service. Theology is one part 'of the untidy weave of threads that make a Christian life what it is',<sup>10</sup> and serves that wider life by reflecting upon the conditions of *faithfulness* in the Christian life, as well as the character of Christian *wisdom* that can direct thoughtful *obedience* to Christ.<sup>11</sup>

The tensions and contrasts of Williams' and O'Donovan's work, when held together, serve precisely these ends – of seeking wisdom amidst the diversity of God's ways, and the particularity of human living. Taken together, their works display a set of deep theological resources for understanding how the same creeds, the same liturgies, and similar rhythms of individual and corporate Christian living can generate a rich diversity of resources, tenors, and emphases. When held *together* the diverse threads of O'Donovan's and Williams' writings can form a rich pattern of discernment able to shape a vision of the Christian life in which stability *and* disruption are brought to the fore to different extents in different moments and contexts.

This way of reading Williams and O'Donovan is, I think, helpfully located against a broader set of thinking about Christian wisdom as an ongoing task of integrating 'different and even contradictory experiences'.<sup>12</sup> Disruption and stability are something initially generated in engagement with resources of the Christian faith itself. Christian wisdom finds its foundation in the widest array of human experiences of God's active presence, in 'being

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provinces. Though the ecclesial context of each thinkers' work is also aimed at something broader: both a wider sense of the Church catholic beyond the borders of Anglicanism, and an eschatological reality of the Church both within and beyond the Anglican borders as a promised manifestation of Christ's Kingdom in the world.

<sup>9</sup> The depth of each thinker's conceptually rich articulations of the Christian faith are, nevertheless, endeavors that take place firmly within 'the midst of all this tangled and various life of the church.' For Mike Higton's rich elaboration on the ecclesial and lived context of doctrinal theology see Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Higton, *Life of Christian Doctrine*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> Romans 12:1-2 is a particular keynote for O'Donovan as the rationale for theology as a work of "rational worship and obedience" to Christ. See O'Donovan, *CWB*, 77; and 'The Moral Authority of Scripture', in *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics*, 174-175. Williams' understanding of obedience and discernment in the Christian life is expectedly contrasting to O'Donovan's, though no less central. See especially 'Making Moral Decisions,' and 'The Covenant in our Flesh' in *Open to Judgement*.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Ulrich, 'The Ways of Discernment,' in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds.) *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Honour of Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 188.

affirmed, being commanded, being questioned and searched, being surprised and opened to new possibilities, and being desired and loved'.<sup>13</sup> Wisdom is constantly attending to the diversity of God's ways, amidst the complexity of human living.

The task of reading Scripture is, for example, one that is conducted with attention to the diversity of God's ways ('a discerning practice keeping track of God's ways'<sup>14</sup>) done amid the particularity of human living. The unity of God's ways in Scripture is not immediately apparent and requires work to draw out this unity amidst the diversity which Scripture offers us. Indeed, even the character of wisdom itself is something present in diverse and varying ways. Wisdom, as it is understood in the book of Proverbs, is at once a divine attribute, which is also mediated and revealed in the creation and sustenance of the universe. Wise human living is that which is drawn into this directive, cohering, and empowering work of God for the sake of flourishing human living in the face of life's demands.<sup>15</sup> And yet, the 'power and wisdom of the cross' of Christ is something altogether more disruptive and destabilising. Its power is displayed through its radical 'reevaluation of what wisdom and power are', as it relativises all human achievement, and reorientates familiar norms.<sup>16</sup> The task of Christian wisdom involves constantly attending to the diversity of God's ways, the variety of Scripture, and the questions these challenges leave us with. Indeed, the task of Christian wisdom must continually return to and, to some extent, begin afresh 'new every morning' as it attends to the dizzying variety of God's disruptive and stabilising works as Creator, Preserver and Redeemer.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, attempting to hold together the contrasting visions of Williams and O'Donovan exemplifies an already familiar sense of the conditions of Christian wisdom: the continual attentive return to the fullness of God's ways in the world, for the sake of living well in the world.

Christian wisdom must also, following O'Donovan and Williams, be a habit deeply immersed in the complexities and varieties of human experience – both attentive and receptive to this experience, but also drawing human experience into the sanctifying and healing presence of Christ's truth. The character of *all* human experience involves seeking to

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<sup>13</sup> David Ford, *Desiring God*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich, 'Discernment,' 188.

<sup>15</sup> For a rich engagement with these themes in Proverbs, and more widely in the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, see Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, 'Theology: Creation, Wisdom and Covenant,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Wisdom and the Bible* (Oxford: OUP, 2021), 65-82. Of course, we might also point to the tension within the Hebrew Bible itself of the contrasting visions of wisdom between Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. For a longer discussion of this, see von Rad's classic treatment *Wisdom in the Life of Israel*.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 2:1-9. Richard Viladesau, *The Wisdom and Power of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts – Late and Post-Modernity* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), 385.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lamentations 3:22-23; Barth, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 103.

cohere and unify our experiences which are fundamentally disruptive of familiar patterns of understanding.<sup>18</sup> All human engagement with the world – oriented towards Christian wisdom, or not – seeks to assimilate that which is experientially disruptive within an interpretative framework that enables some form of continuity and concord, for the sake of living into a hopeful future.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, the significance of experience for both thinker's work is a matter of the *affective salience* of their respective doctrinal concerns, and the contrasting ways they each accentuate the doctrinal landscape of Christian belief.

Christian wisdom is engaged in this two-fold task of reckoning with the whole variety of God's works in creating, sustaining, and redeeming the world in search of some unifying whole; and that of wrestling with the questions and possibilities posed by our own contexts in ways that enable us to engage discerningly within them.<sup>20</sup> Being led by both Williams' and O'Donovan's work into a deep imaginative pattern of the Christian life is helpful for holding together a number of threads already familiar to Christian accounts of wisdom. Learning how to cohere the diversity of God's ways made known in Scripture, and to live in light of these works amidst the complexities of human experience are tasks with a unified end: each task is oriented towards the cultivation of a form 'of practical wisdom' that can resource the demands of Christian living.<sup>21</sup> Knowing when to bring the stabilising aspects of God's work to bear upon our lives, and when perhaps our situation requires drawing on the disruptive elements is a work of creative and engaged *discernment* 'so that the truth is uttered in such a way that it is apprehended by those to whom it is uttered'.<sup>22</sup> Williams' and O'Donovan's writings suggest that Christian habits of discernment requires attending both to those

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<sup>18</sup> Not only do human beings tend to cohere and render intelligible disruptive experiences, these themes – disruption and surprise, and stability and intelligibility – are not opposing aspects which exist in zero-sum polarity. Rather, each pair dynamically continually enrich and develop the other. Together Williams' and O'Donovan's work can guide such an approach. We might also look to the insights of phenomenologies of the 'event.' For example, see Natalie Depraz, 'Phenomenology of Surprise: Levinas and Merleau-Ponty in the Light of Hans Jonas,' in Thomas Nelson and Philip Blossner (eds.), *Advancing Phenomenology: Essays in Honour of Lester Embree* (London: Springer, 2010); and Françoise Dastur, 'Phenomenology of the Event: Waiting and Surprise' *Hypatia* 15:4, 2000. Similarly, for a suggestive theological development of this argument see D. C. Schindler, 'Surprised by Truth: The Drama of Reason in Fundamental Theology,' in *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), especially 49-51.

<sup>19</sup> Gay Becker's seminal anthropological work on disruptive experience explores this argument in particularly powerful ways, see Becker, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Hardy's description of this two-fold movement is helpful. Theology continually attends to both the 'intensity of God's life and purposes in the full sweep of biblical understanding' and 'the extensity of life in the world – the fascinations of its range and variations'. Modern experience bifurcates these two aspects of theology. However, holding the 'two together may bring us to a more intensive awareness of God and God's purposes as they permeate the extensities' of life. Hardy, *Finding the Church*, 234.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

disruptive and stabilising aspects of God's work, as well as to those stable and disruptive aspects of our own lives. The contrasts that appear between each thinker's work which initially appear in dissonance to the other can in turn be drawn together as a counter melody for each other, in such a way that the form of wisdom they can generate can resemble a more harmoniously polyphonic theological imagination.<sup>23</sup>

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I end this essay with a brief meditation on Williams' and O'Donovan's respective accounts of joy and suffering in the Christian life, in order to display the fruitfulness of my argument for irresolution, as part of a Christian account of wisdom and obedience.

O'Donovan's work helpfully emphasises the joy and truth of the gospel in a way that can stabilise and sustain someone amidst the struggles of life – rooted and grounded in God's sufficient and finished work in Christ's death and resurrection. However, Williams' work highlights the ways in which the gospel will also call me into painful confrontation with my neighbour's suffering – in ways that will unsettle my sense of stability and security.

O'Donovan's work emphasises that the Christian gospel, if it is to be worthy of that name, must be a glad telling of all that God has done to redeem human beings in the face of sin and death. Joy is an essential lived response to all that God has done, and praise is the heartbeat of Christian living. The foundation of all human purposes should be this joy that permeates the life of those who know themselves justified and accepted in the risen Christ. The joy and the truth of Christ's completed work is the basis for O'Donovan's vision of human agency. In faith, human beings are renewed and reoriented within the given world of God's good making and redeeming, and are empowered for every good work in reoriented alignment with God's good purposes for creation. All moral intents and purposes find their beginning, orientation and fulfilment in what the Father promised and achieved in the resurrection of Christ. O'Donovan's vision is a comforting word to 'the postmodern self' that has lost its 'stability' and 'stable identity', which 'lives daily with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or "totalizing" discourse'.<sup>24</sup> To hear the

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<sup>23</sup> The language of polyphony was suggestively raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in relation to joy and suffering in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (SCM Press: London: 1971), 305. Its theological significance has been further explored in David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 259; and, in Jeremy Begbie *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 160-161.

<sup>24</sup> Thiselton, 'The Postmodern Self and Society,' in *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 562.

words of Christ that ‘it is finished’ – that mercy reigns triumphant in the body of the scarred yet Risen Nazarene, is a word of comfort to the sinner, a word of hope to those in tribulation, and a word that promises that the ‘fragments of life “do not fly apart but find their coherence in Christ, in whom the broken themes of praise are restored”’.<sup>25</sup> O’Donovan’s vision, rooted in the stability of creation and the gladness of resurrection, reminds us that the Christian faith should be one marked by transformative *joy*.<sup>26</sup>

This note of stability is especially pertinent for the Church’s life in displaying the resources of the Christian faith to sustain those who are suffering. O’Donovan’s homiletic work frequently returns to a set of nautical metaphors.<sup>27</sup> For O’Donovan, the human life well-lived is like the ship able to withstand and endure the storms of life. This metaphor also displays the essential quality of struggle, sorrow and suffering in our lives as *disruptions* to our moral aspirations. O’Donovan writes that suffering is akin to a ‘storm’: the purposes of our lives are ‘disrupted in a way that is unanticipated and unwelcome.’<sup>28</sup> The essence of suffering in the moral life is, for O’Donovan, the threat of paralysis: ‘as impotence, as the frustration of our agency.’<sup>29</sup> And yet the moral theologian finds in the gospel resources which can locate and orient our suffering within the purposes of God in such a way as to not leave us helpless. ‘Suffering is the antithesis of action, yet it is woven into our active lives from the beginning to the end.’<sup>30</sup> O’Donovan’s work provides significant resources for how to help, guide and nourish those in suffering, to find a way to go on, to live with a sense of joy in the face of suffering and struggle. The centre of the Church’s life in prayer, liturgy, sacrament and scripture offers a set of resources that mediate the sustaining care of God amidst the trials and sorrows of life.

This image may, however, signal also the limits of O’Donovan’s account. The sturdiness of the ship upon the sea of life, able to withstand the disruptive presence of sin,

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<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *Music, Modernity and God: Essays in Listening* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 210. Quoting John De Gruchy, *Christianity, Art and Transformation: Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 167.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis’ first apostolic exhortation is a rich explication of this vision of the Christian gospel with joy at its centre: ‘The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.’ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, paragraph 1 accessed at [https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.pdf), accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Nautical imagery is deployed frequently in his homiletic work contained in *Word in Small Boats*: in the context of mission and proclamation 2-4; in the context of intellectual discipleship, 74; and as a metaphor for married life, 155.

<sup>28</sup> O’Donovan, *ER*, 206.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

suffering and sorrow might reveal an account of the moral life altogether too tidy, neat, resolute and unpressured by the disruptions of human existence. This may be so. Often the cry of the disciples ‘Save us, Lord; we are perishing’ is perhaps diminished against the confident and assured response ‘Why are you afraid? O you of little faith?’<sup>31</sup> In particular, his vision attends less directly and sustainedly with the kinds of ‘horrendous evils’ with which Williams’ work is especially attentive.<sup>32</sup>

Closely related to this criticism of O’Donovan is the danger of emphasising the stability of individual moral agency at the expense of recognising solidarity with the sufferer, the excluded and the marginalised. For a Christian life that has become all too easily settled, the presence of these people in one’s life may appear at best a distraction, or worse an active disruption to the main moral aspirations of an individual life. And yet, the Christian life that follows the way of Christ is inseparable from service to and solidarity with the poor and the dispossessed. One of the recent criticisms of O’Donovan’s *Ethics as Theology* trilogy is that the central motif of entering into Sabbath rest is difficult to hold alongside the disruptive call of God to respond to cries of injustice and marginalisation:

This failure to listen for the disruptive Word of God was, [Karl Barth] held, intimately bound up with the refusal to listen to the neighbour, who “is no longer to disturb me by his otherness.” The counter to autocratic humanism is a dialogical humanism that is open, in and through its listening to the Word of God, to being disrupted by the alien character of the neighbour, particularly those on the margins of power. This is never a task that can be completed once and for all, this side of the eschaton. We are not yet, any of us, “entering into rest.” We are called to be disturbed.<sup>33</sup>

There can a way of emphasising the stability of a life formed by the Christian gospel that all too easily limits the continued and difficult call of Christ to repent, to hear the cries of the poor, and to work for justice. The work of wisdom is to discern when stability in the Christian life becomes a quality untethered from the difficult call to take up my cross with Christ,<sup>34</sup> when stability is deformed into a buffer against the disruptive call of God mediated to me through the cries and sufferings of my neighbour. The institutional habits of the

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<sup>31</sup> Matthew 8:25-26.

<sup>32</sup> See especially ‘Redeeming Sorrows,’ in *WA*. The category of horrendous evils is one taken from Marilyn McCord Adams’ work *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer A. Herdt, ‘Oliver O’Donovan’s *Ethics as Theology* and the Struggle for Communication’ *Modern Theology* 36:1, January 2020, 159-164, 164. The first quotation is taken from Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (London: SCM Press, 1972; orig. German edition 1952), 116.

<sup>34</sup> The radical call of discipleship – to suffer together with Christ in a sin-marred world – are present themes in O’Donovan’s work. But in more diminished ways than in Williams, see O’Donovan, *RMO*, 95.

Church's life can easily veer towards a questionable sense of familiarity, which in turn numb its members to the cries of injustice from outside (or, indeed, from within) its borders which would threaten its sense of institutional stability.

The affective dimensions of Williams' vision of the Christian life are altogether more difficult to pin down and summarise than O'Donovan's. A defining feature of his work is to keep as many elements as possible of a topic in play in any given conversation. Characteristic of his theological approach is the attempt to attend to the richness and difficulty of any particular subject matter. This means that isolating any particular aspect of how Williams perceives the Christian life might risk diminishing the richness of his vision, and his characteristic attempt to think in ways that treat dissonance as a constructive feature of ongoing encounters with the fullness of reality. As a case in point, to take a defining affective aspect of O'Donovan's vision (Easter joy) we see that this is also important to Williams' vision and features especially prominently in his homiletic works. However, Williams qualifies the character of Christian joy in several important ways that make his account of joy distinctive in relation to O'Donovan's. What is distinctive about this joy in Williams' vision is the way that such joy is chastened by a sense of *surprise* – as our fragile and fallen apprehensions of the world are disrupted by the loving light of Christ – and such joy is always worked out alongside an ongoing sense of *struggle* of being human in a broken world that defaces and inhibits one's self and one's neighbour.

In his sermon preached upon becoming the Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams helpfully elucidates his distinctive understanding of the character of Christian joy. He boldly claimed that 'The Church of the future, I believe, will do both its prophetic and its pastoral work effectively only if it is concerned first with gratitude and joy', and even goes as far as claiming that 'orthodoxy flows from this [gratitude and joy], not the other way around.'<sup>35</sup> Williams' sense of Christian joy could be interpreted here as even more radical than that of O'Donovan's. For Williams, joy is something uncontrollable and wild. In other words, joy is something which irrupts in human lives wholly as a surprise. Such is the character of joy which takes as its basis the risen and living Christ 'who is the secret of all hearts' and 'the hidden centre of everything.' The surprise of joy is also the surprise of encountering the risen Christ 'who comes to us always ... as a stranger, "as one unknown".'<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Enthronement sermon, Thursday 27th February 2003, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1624/enthronement-sermon.html> . Accessed on 7th April 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Williams quotes at the end of this sentence Albert Schweitzer.



Another closely related characteristic of true joy in Williams' work is that it is always to be found in a life that is engaged in *struggle* and *solidarity*. The note of struggle in Williams' works is, we have already seen, especially pronounced. The Christian life involves a sense of conflict, as individuals struggle with their own propensities towards delusion and destruction. Likewise, the Christian life in Williams' writings also entails an ongoing engagement with difficulty – the pain of unanswered prayer, the confusion of God's apparent silence in the face of human suffering, and the challenge of our own frail resources to help and heal the pain of one's neighbours. Indeed, such joy is found and grown only as part of an ongoing human engagement with one's own sense of frailty and limit: 'When we have become more honest about our hunger and our loss, we shall have a fuller awareness of what that joy is; and as that joy matures, we shall have a fuller sense of the depth of our need.'<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Christian joy in Williams' works is experienced only as part of a life that is engaged with the 'the child, the poor, the forgotten.'<sup>38</sup> In other words, joy is experienced only by sharing in the struggles of one's neighbour, caring for them, and finding Christ in particular situations of frailty, suffering and hardship. Solidarity contains a particularly affective dimension in Williams' thought. To know joy is to know the risen Christ. Yet Christ is to be found in the very darkest places of the world, in the lives of the forgotten, the marginalised, and the downtrodden. As such, the Christian life begins by 'seeing [Christ] simply there in our midst, suffering and transforming our human disaster.'<sup>39</sup> So too must the journey to joy not detour from such places. Joy is to be found as part of a life that is turned outward in love towards one's neighbour, a journey in which Christ calls one to be disrupted and transformed by the gift of attention to my neighbour's suffering, and the work of action to alleviate and heal such suffering.

Williams emphasises precisely this disruptive quality of Christ's work that is more diminished in O'Donovan's account. For Williams, this disruptive quality of Christ's work takes place in the Church's life whenever the Church has veered into a false comfort based upon untruth and self-deception, and especially when my attentiveness towards my neighbour's suffering has become dulled. Disruption is an inherent feature of the gospel to which the Church's imagination must be continually drawn back to. The central point of God's revelation in Christ is at the cross, which is 'the final control and measure and irritant

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

in Christian speech'.<sup>40</sup> The work of God continually disrupts human lives for the sake of saving them from untruth and deception: 'we must be surprised, ambushed, and carried off by God if we are to be kept from idols.'<sup>41</sup> Likewise, the risen Christ is characterised by leading his people through the memory of guilt and sin, renewing this memory in hope, for the sake of healing and restoration: 'the uncovering of all forgotten wounds, so as to open up again the possibility of fresh relation, growth into healing.'<sup>42</sup> The suffering of my neighbour is a central part of the disruption which shapes a Christian life. For Williams, the appropriate response to suffering should never be to render the experience of the sufferer 'into a satisfactory theoretical context'.<sup>43</sup> Rather, the appropriate response to suffering reminds me that 'the world is a world of differences and so of converse and so of listening'. Suffering reminds me of the irreducible difference of my neighbour, and the impossibility of domesticating God.<sup>44</sup> At every point, the *metier* of the Christian life is marked by the disruptive work of God to convict, transform and heal human beings who all too easily dwell in untruth, and who fail to hear the painful cries of the neighbour.

Discerning the disruptive call of God is amplified when the Church turns its attention to historic and present complicity in structure and habits of sin. Williams' writings painfully direct the patterns of Christian discernment to the difficult individual and corporate histories which make up the Church's life – histories involved in structures and works of dispossession, marginalisation and injustice. The risen Christ is the one who draws me back to my historical and present complicity in sin: "Repent and believe", stresses that God's forgiveness cannot be abstract and general: the authentic word of forgiveness, newness and resurrection is audible when we acknowledge ourselves as oppressors and "return" to our victims in the sense of learning who and where they are.'<sup>45</sup> This point has become especially important to hear as the Church remembers and repents for its too easy alignment in recent centuries with, and as an instrument of, systematic dominance, oppression and marginalisation.<sup>46</sup> The Church's complicity in the idolatry of Whiteness that has plagued the Church's history in relation to race is one example of which the Church is becoming all the

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<sup>40</sup> Williams, *WK*, 3.

<sup>41</sup> Williams, 'Advent,' *OtJ*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Res*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Williams, 'Redeeming Sorrows', *WA*, 272.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, *Res*, 14.

<sup>46</sup> Jeremy Bergen's rich reflection on the Church facing up to its painful past develops Williams' work into a broader context of the Western church's entanglement in histories of slavery, racism, colonialism, sexual abuse and anti-Semitism. See Jeremy Bergen *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

more aware in recent years.<sup>47</sup> The sharpness of Williams' vision acts as a corrective to any expression of Church that fails to hear Christ's radical call to repentance and conversion, and the gospel's radical call to solidarity with my neighbour. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of justice. For a Church too easily settled in habits of self-deception, or numbness to the pain of my neighbour, God's call to live justly can only be received as an interruption to my previously held patterns. As Marilynne Robinson, a favoured writer of Williams, argues:

The Bible seldom praises God without naming among his attributes his continuous, sometimes epochal, overturning of the existing order, especially of perceived righteousness or of power and wealth. When society seems to have an intrinsic order, it is an unjust order. And the justice of God disrupts it.<sup>48</sup>

But the sharpness of Williams' vision of disruptive grace that calls human beings out of patterns of distortion, dominance and sin may also make it difficult to speak (at least not without a degree of reservation) of the *goodness* of grace, of the *joy* of knowing oneself held and loved by God from everlasting to everlasting, even as one is found complicit within these structures of sin. The notes of purgation and repentance can sometimes eclipse the notes of joy and gladness in his writings. The self continually opened to the disruption of God's work and my neighbour's cries can easily lead to an unstable sense of self lacking a firm foundation of its own.<sup>49</sup> Both of Williams' most constructive interpreters highlight the limits of this predilection towards the tragic and the sorrowful in his vision.<sup>50</sup> At its best, Williams' emphasis on the painful and purgative disruption of grace direct Christian joy away from self-

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<sup>47</sup> Willie Jennings' work is of particular significance here. See *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), and 'Can White People Be Saved? Reflections on the Relationship of Missions and Whiteness' in Love L. Sechrest, Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, Amos Yong (eds.) *Can "White" People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018), 27-43.

<sup>48</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things* (London: Virago, 2015), 199.

<sup>49</sup> The language of 'self-forgetting' is significant in Williams' work as a way of describing the shape of Christ's life, which humanity is continually being drawn into. At its best, this language describes the difficult and purgative of growing into the likeness and fullness of Christ's own life – led by the Spirit and rooted in the Father's love. In its more tragic iterations, especially in his earlier work, this language can suggest a subtraction or diminishment of the self. See especially Williams' engagements with Luther in *Wound of Knowledge*, 157, and 'To Give and Not Count the Cost,' in *Holy Living*. For recent critiques of this kind of danger, see Karen Kilby and Rachel Davies (eds.), *Suffering and the Christian Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), especially Logan Williams' and Karen Kilby's essays in this volume.

<sup>50</sup> Mike Higton pertinently asks whether the focus in Williams' writings risks 'muting the note of joy, of thankfulness, of release and rescue, appropriate to the news that God has stepped over all the barriers which separate us from him, and has accepted us despite ourselves.' *Difficult Gospel*, 35. Ben Myers adds to this line of critique, suggesting that Williams' theology is best characterised as Lenten in its focus: 'His uniqueness as a thinker lies in the unflinching severity with which he submits his imagination to the ascetic dimensions of Christian devotion.' Of course, the Christian year is not a perpetual fast – always Lent, and never Easter or Christmas: 'one cannot live by ash alone.' Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 117.

serving illusion and ensure that the joy of the gospel is not received in isolation from loving solidarity towards my suffering neighbour. Williams' writings frequently express a vision of God's love which we know particularly amid the fire – of God's faithful presence amidst the struggle, sorrow and trials of life.<sup>51</sup> A rarer, though helpfully complementary image, is that of the *feast*, signifying the gratuity and joyfulness of a life lived with God.<sup>52</sup>

This question of the place of suffering and joy in the Christian life is one way through which to explore the richness of contrasts between these two visions. I use these themes partly because they draw out the affective dimensions of these thinker's visions, but also because the themes are intimately connected to the fundamental doctrinal contours that structure their works. The gladness of Christian living arises from the centrality of creation, sabbath, and Christ's resurrection in O'Donovan's writings. The joy of forgiveness, the joyfulness of creation's goodness, and the joy of living find their anchoring in God's good creation, and God's work to continually renew that creation. Conversely, the journey of human living into a deeper recognition of our frailty, limit, and sin – as well as the gratuitous abundance of joy that disrupts our lives – arise from Williams' crucicentric vision, his account of creaturely limit and frailty, and of the endless abundance of the Triune God's ways. The interplay of joy and sorrow in Christian living brings all these doctrinal aspects to the fore, and, more importantly, draws into view these differing accounts of how the Christian vision should be *affectively* inhabited.

In presenting these contrasts I also hope to show that the kind of difference I have been exploring is not one of fundamental theological disagreement: the notes and themes of each thinker can also be found in the other. Joy finds an important place in Williams' vision, as that moment when the reality of God's love breaks through human defences of self-deception and illusion. The surprise of joy accompanies the disruption of grace, when humans recognise both the truth of their failings and the greater truth of God's accepting grace. Similarly, struggle, suffering and sorrow find their place in O'Donovan's writings too. Suffering interrupts the human pursuit of coherent, intelligible and wise living. But wisdom is proved precisely through its ability to navigate and respond to suffering. Likewise, the melody of resurrection joy does not dimmish the notes of suffering in O'Donovan's picture of the Christian life. Rather, the resurrection offers a *cantus firmus*, an anchor which promises

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<sup>51</sup> Williams, *WK*, 182.

<sup>52</sup> This is a central image in Williams' enthronement sermon as Archbishop of Canterbury, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1624/enthronement-sermon.html>. Accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

that suffering will end, and that finality belongs to the grace and goodness offered in the risen and triumphant Christ.

If such a conclusion to these discussions were possible, however unresolved, I offer the words of John Ames, one of the protagonists of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* quartet. As he explores a sermon concerning providence, in conversation with his wife Lila, he explores the kinds of resolutions and tensions to which O'Donovan's and Williams' works have led us:

The only true knowledge of God is born of obedience [...] and obedience has to be constantly attentive to the demands that are made of it, to a circumstance that is always new and particular to its moment." Yes. "Then the reasons that things happen are still hidden, but they are hidden in the mystery of God." [...] "So then, it is part of the providence of God, as I see it, that blessing or happiness can have very different meanings from one time to another. "This is not to say that joy is a compensation for loss, but that each of them, joy and loss, exists in its own right and must be recognized for what it is. Sorrow is very real, and loss feels very final to us. Life on earth is difficult and grave, and marvellous. Our experience is fragmentary. Its parts don't add up. They don't even belong in the same calculation. Sometimes it is hard to believe they are all parts of one thing. Nothing makes sense until we understand that experience does not accumulate like money, or memory, or like years and frailties. Instead, it is presented to us by a God who is not under any obligation to the past except in His eternal, freely given constancy." [...] Therefore we have no way to reconcile its elements, because they are what we are given out of no necessity at all except God's grace in sustaining us as creatures we can recognize as ourselves.' That's always seemed remarkable to me, that we can do that. That we can't help but do it. "So joy can be joy and sorrow can be sorrow, with neither of them casting either light or shadow on the other".<sup>53</sup>

The lack of resolution in a Christian life is, as Ames suggests, an inextricable engaging with the fullness of the living God. The obedience of faith involves a trust that amidst all life's fragmentariness, the promises of God remain steadfast and true, if also unseen in how such promises will be resolved. The ambiguities, complexities and irresolution of a life – its uneven and elusive balance of joy and sorrow, doubt and certainty, stability and disruption – are all part of a gift which remains wholly *grace*. All these moments that make up a life draw us more deeply into the unfathomable riches and reaches of divine mercy, which invite us to learn continually afresh all that grace demands of us, and to see always anew all that love has done for us.

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<sup>53</sup> Marilynne Robinson, *Lila* (London: Virago, 2014), 223-224.

The richness of Williams' and O'Donovan's writings is seen in the intensity, the richness and complexity of the landscape of Christian faith which they display. Their works both represent serious attempts to articulate what Christian faith entails, as an enterprise requiring both *intelligence* and, ultimately *obedience*. In this respect, the task in which their works are engaged is a task that does not end. It is a task which only invites further engagement, discovery, perception and response: 'to discern the next challenge, the upward call that never allows us to settle back.'<sup>54</sup> O'Donovan's exposition of St Paul's exhortation to "strain forward" (Phil. 3:13) gestures in precisely this direction. Christian growth and maturity are marked by 'a recognition of our own incompleteness as a human being', which leads to an always deepening 'attention to the task still before us'.<sup>55</sup> To know and to follow Christ on the journey of discipleship is characterised by this possibility of surprise, to continually ask 'What astonishing thing am I about to witness?'.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, in Williams' exploration of the iconic character of Christian living, the life of discipleship is characterised as a journey of discovery, as human beings are moved 'deeper in everything than we can ever go, further beyond everything that we can ever go' through an ongoing encounter with 'the face of Jesus'.<sup>57</sup> In comparing and contrasting these visions, I have sought to draw out precisely these tensions that are inherent to the Christian faith – that life with Christ may be at once gift and response, joyful and sorrowful, firmly established and energetically straining forward, a work of resting in the works of God whilst wrestling with the elusive realisation of God's promises amidst human lives.

The Christian life, seen through an engagement with these two thinkers, can therefore be viewed in the kind of paradoxical ways framed by the New Testament, characterised in terms of being 'afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.'<sup>58</sup>

Such paradoxes are not meant to be resolved, but instead offer a generosity of vision to see how the breadth, joys, sorrows, struggles, and works of a life find their orientation *in Christ*. The task of living, as Williams and O'Donovan direct us, is to take seriously the

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<sup>54</sup> O'Donovan, 'Looking Forward,' *WSB*, 161.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Williams, *Dwelling of the Light*, 84.

<sup>58</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:8-11.

complexity of living within ‘the middle of things’ with Christ – in all its anguish and goodness – so that we can find a narrative of consonance which makes living possible.<sup>59</sup> It is a difficult task of learning to see the beginning, middle and end of our lives in relation to the risen Christ, the one who is actively present at the beginning, middle and end of all things. In Christ, humanity is invited to live neither with ‘presumption’ nor with ‘despair’<sup>60</sup> – neither in ‘presumptuous and finalising interpretation,’ nor in despondency that ‘self-understanding’ in Christ is altogether impossible.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, it is Christ who challenges against both presumption and despair. Our narrations will always be open to question, liable to the ongoing prompting, surprise and renewal of the living God (Williams). But, likewise, we have no choice but to try and narrate our lives in ways which make sense, that engender a certain kind of stability, and in ways that make possible wise and responsible living (O’Donovan). The way of faith, hope and love in Christ should lead neither to complacency nor despondency, but simply *onward*: equipped for the journey as wayfarers and pilgrims who ‘see and greet from afar’ all that God has promised, knowing that we are but strangers and exiles walking along the way, with the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 17.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Pieper, *Faith, Hope and Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 127.

<sup>61</sup> Alan Jacobs, *Looking Before and After: Testimony and the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 70.

<sup>62</sup> Hebrews 11:13. Cf. Jacobs, *Testimony*, 79-80.





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