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## Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Appeal of Polyphony

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Graduate Program in Theology  
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts  
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ROWAN WILLIAMS AND MIKHAIL BAKHTIN: THE APPEAL OF POLYPHONY

by

Antony N. Gremaud

Graduate Program in Theology

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

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**Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin: the Appeal of Polyphony**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin, especially Bakhtin's notion of polyphony. This thesis traces the presence of the polyphonic approach in Williams' work to three main issues: the debate around the nature and future of the Anglican Communion, the debate around the place of Christianity in the increasingly secular modern West and the debate around the nature of faith presented in the works of Dostoevsky. Adopting Bakhtin's polyphonic approach, Williams sees the need for an on-going conversation, one that argues for the equality of voices within a conversation, one that resists the impulse toward closure and one that resists the impulse toward uttering a final word in a debate. This thesis also touches on the polyphonic quality of the works of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Vern S. Poythress and John Gray.

## Keywords

Anglican Communion, atheist fundamentalism, Bakhtin, closure, Dostoevsky, finalizability, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Gray, polyphony, Rowan Williams, Vern Polythress

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction: Rowan Williams on Conversations

In 2008, Rowan Williams' *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* was published, and while this book might not appear to be a very topical undertaking, the title indicates that it deals with the faith and fiction of a nineteenth-century Russian novelist, Williams' book is, nonetheless, a highly occasional piece. Indeed, it deals with three topical issues. One issue, not specifically identified by Williams in his book, has to do with the Anglican Communion. In 2008, Williams' name appeared in *The Times* in connection with the much-discussed and deeply-divisive issue of homosexuality in the Anglican Communion. On August the 7<sup>th</sup> of that year, the article in *The Times* was "Archbishop believes gay sex is good as marriage."<sup>1</sup> On the following day, the article was entitled "Williams has made a split inevitable."<sup>2</sup> The latter headline was a quote from Archbishop Gregory Venables; he was quoted as saying: "This [Williams' views on gay sexual relationships] is more evidence of the unravelling of Anglicanism. Without a clearly agreed biblical foundation, all the goodwill in the world cannot stop the inevitable break-up. Unity without truth is disunity."<sup>3</sup> There is another cultural context into which Williams' book should be placed – the rise of what Alister McGrath has called the "new atheism"<sup>4</sup> and what John Gray has called "evangelical atheism."<sup>5</sup> In 2005, Richard Dawkins' enormously popular *The God Delusion* was published; in 2006, Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* were published, and in 2007, Christopher Hitchens' bestseller *God is not Great: How Religions Poisons Everything* appeared. In three years, a series of bestsellers attacking religion in general

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Gledhill, "Archbishop believes gay sex is good as marriage." *The Times* [London] August 7, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Gledhill, "Williams has made a split inevitable." *The Times* [London] August 8, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Gledhill, "Williams has made a split inevitable."

<sup>4</sup> Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicut McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> John Gray, *Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writings* (Anchor Canada, 2009), 292-303.



and Christianity in particular were published. Why, some might ask, would the Archbishop of Canterbury, at a time when Anglican Communion is, at least according to some,<sup>6</sup> on the verge of a break-up, at a time when there is a marked attempt on the part of some intellectual heavyweights – Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, Dennett and others – to rid the world of the poisonous delusion of religion, why at this time would Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, decide to take time – and it must have taken some time for his book on Dostoevsky is a scholarly work (the notes, bibliography and index total 45 pages) – to write a book on a nineteenth century Russian novelist? On the surface, Williams’ decision to write a book on Dostoevsky at that time could be seen as akin to a Roman senator, with Alaric outside the gates of the city, taking time out to plant begonias in his garden.

It is my contention that Williams is, despite the seemingly tangential nature of his chosen subject, engaging some of the big issues mentioned above. These two issues, the one around the nature and future of the Anglican Communion and the one around “faith and contemporary culture,”<sup>7</sup> are debates that Williams addresses. Indeed, instead of the word debate, which has adversarial associations, Williams often uses the word conversation. In a manner then, in *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, one could argue that Williams engages in three big conversations. It is important to note, from the outset, the significance Williams attaches to the idea of conversations. He writes at the conclusion of his book *Christ on Trial* that “all human identity is constructed through conversations, in one way or another.”<sup>8</sup> In *Dostoevsky*, two of the three conversations are explicitly addressed by Williams. One is the ongoing conversation around Dostoevsky and religion. Another explicitly addressed

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance J.I. Packer in J.I. Packer and N.T. Wright, *Anglican Evangelical Identity: Yesterday and Today* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2009), 1-7. Packer writes: “the attitudes and actions that the liberal unorthodoxy of the past half-century has now begotten are splitting the entire Anglican Communion in two.” Or Charles F Raven, *Shadow Gospel: Rowan Williams and the Anglican Communion Crisis* (London: Latimer Press, 2010), 1. Raven writes: “It seems increasingly probable that the global crisis engulfing the Anglican Communion will turn out to be an upheaval of a similar magnitude to that which so profoundly shaped the Church of England during the sixteenth century Reformation.”

<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), ix.

<sup>8</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 138.

conversation deals with the place of religion in late modern liberal societies and in particular with what Williams refers to as “current rash of books hostile to religious faith.”<sup>9</sup> The third conversation, the one which is *not* explicitly identified by Williams in his book on Dostoevsky,<sup>10</sup> deals with the current divisions in the Anglican Communion. These three conversations – on Dostoevsky and religion, on religion and late modern liberal societies and on the nature and future of the Anglican Communion – are all influenced by the over-arching hermeneutical question: Whose reading should decide the debate? In most hermeneutical discussions, issues around authority and authorship, text and reader arise, and these issues are present in Williams’ discussion of Dostoevsky. In most hermeneutical discussions, the big questions are: Who is the master, the reader or the author? Where does meaning and truth in reading reside? Do truth and meaning reside with the reader’s intention or the author’s? These questions are present in Williams’ discussion of Dostoevsky, too. Williams’ book is, at least in part, an answer to those who would read Dostoevsky’s novels as the work of a fideist. What is of greater interest for those whose field is theology is the rather striking parallel between the hermeneutical issues that dominate the study of Dostoevsky and the issues that dominate the study of religion. These same hermeneutical questions arise in the other conversations with which Williams engages. Whose reading of the place of religion in culture should carry the day in our world? Whose reading of the Anglican Communion should decide the direction of the Communion? Or, to use the title of Merold Westphal’s book: Whose community? Which Interpretation?<sup>11</sup> In a pluralistic world which often seems to assert that each truth claim is equally true and that each reading of a text is equally valid and that each voice is equally important, what decisions can be made? The reasoning seems to follow along these lines: if each

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, vii.

<sup>10</sup> While Williams does not expressly deal with the issues dominating the status of the Anglican Communion, and while many reviewers say nothing about how the ideas in the book might relate to that topic, at least one reviewer notes the connection between what Williams is saying about Dostoevsky and how it might apply to the Anglican Communion crisis. Richard John Neuhaus, “Dostoevsky’s Question” *First Things* 188 (Dec. 2008): 57-58.

<sup>11</sup> Merold Westphal, *Whose Community? Which Interpretation: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

truth claim is equally valid, there is no universal truth, just a personal and subjective and private truth. If each reading is equally valid, there is no right reading, just a series of personal and subjective and private readings. If each voice is equally important, then conversations are merely a cacophony. If this attitude around truth and communion prevails, then there is little hope for resolution of conflicts if conversations are simply seen as never ending and never resolving. A parliament, to use an analogy, that is perpetually engaged in filibuster passes no laws, makes no progress. Admittedly, the parliamentary analogy is flawed; the analogy that Williams opts for is conversation or dialogue. Thus, the question might be framed in the following manner: If an attitude of relativism prevails, is it not likely that conversations will degenerate into conversations where the speaker has his back turned to the listener? This “back turned to the speaker” conversation – a conversation which does not lead to real dialogue – is what Williams is seeking to challenge in his book on Dostoevsky.

It is my contention that the current Archbishop of Canterbury is involved and has a stake in each of these big conversations sketched above. What is of particular interest, though, is that through his study of Dostoevsky, Williams encounters the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his deeply influential way of reading Dostoevsky, a writer whose work has led to scholarly polarities. In a manner, the problems of pluralism and relativism arise in the work of Dostoevsky. To be reductive for the sake of making a simple point, one might say that some readers read Dostoevsky in an atheistic way and some read him in a theistic way. Which reading is right? Can both be right? Is there a right reading? Is there a right way of reading? Can two diametrically opposed readings be right, be right in a way that rejects the meaninglessness of a rejoinder that simply dismisses the Other’s reading, the Other’s community? This rejection, this denial of a meaningful conversation, might aptly be described through the oft-used phrase: “Well, that is just your opinion.” This deeply dismissive judgement closes a conversation down and only maintains a false peace and a false compromise.

I am drawing a series of analogies, and it is important that we consider the validity of these analogies from the outset. In effect, I am contending that what Williams claims is true for the debate about Dostoevsky is also true for the debate about religion and culture and for the debate within the Anglican Communion. Of these three conversations or debates, one might think that the most pressing one, at least for the Archbishop of Canterbury, is the one that threatens the sustainability of the Anglican Communion. Further, it seems reasonable to assume that even though Williams does not specifically identify this debate, knowing what we know about the idea of rationalizations worked out below the conscious level, what Williams writes about Dostoevsky has some rather marked and interesting parallels to the debate around the Anglican Communion. Richard John Neuhaus, in his review of Williams' book, claims that Williams' overarching question – What is it that human beings owe to one another?<sup>12</sup> – is a question that applies to those involved in the communion crisis; Neuhaus writes:

While he of course never mentions the problems afflicting the Anglican communion, one can hardly go wrong in inferring that he believes Dostoevsky's answer is pertinent to what Anglicans owe one another. Here is a representative passage: "The enterprise of growth and so the life of narrative thus always involves a venturing into that uncontrolled territory where dialogue and interaction bring to light, not to say bring into being, hidden dimensions in a speaker. To engage in this venture is to accept at the outset that no speaker has the last word, and that the position taken up in an initial exchange is going to be tested and sifted and renegotiated in the process. It is to accept that at the outset no one possesses the simple truth about their identity or interest, and to treat with the deepest skepticism any appeal to the sacredness of an inner life that is transparent to the speaker."<sup>13</sup>

In case one might conclude that this is merely Neuhaus' imposition, below is a transcription of a video of Williams speaking on the issue of the Anglican Communion crisis. The short video clip, only 63 seconds in length, begins with a written statement and a question: "Homosexuality threatens to divide the church. How do you pray?" This question was directed at Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he answers the question in the rest of the brief video clip. Here is his answer:

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 1 and 14.

<sup>13</sup> Neuhaus, "Dostoevsky's Question."

How does the Archbishop of Canterbury pray? Hard. But what does he pray for? I pray for both sides of the debate to have the generosity to give a little space. I pray for people on the radical end to say, okay, we care a lot about this, but we also care about remaining in fellowship, and we are ready to step back if it helps us sustain the fellowship. For people on the other side, on the more traditionalist side, I pray that they have the generosity to say, okay, this feels pretty fundamental to us, but there are lots of people in good faith who don't agree. Let's have the discussion and not hurry to a conclusion. That's what I pray for. And you would think, wouldn't you, that Christians might quite like the idea of being generous with each other, but it hasn't got on yet.<sup>14</sup>

Here, in unadorned language, we have not only Williams' theory of communication and fellowship, but also his answer to the question of what we owe each other. First, Williams sees the need for a discussion. Second, even though both sides may not agree, many on both sides come to the discussion in good faith. The Christian response, what Christians owe to each other and to non-Christians, as we will see, is a discussion, a discussion that resists the desire to a hurry to a conclusion. The ideas of on-going discussions and of resisting conclusions are central to what Williams believes people owe to each other. Unfortunately, at least according to Williams' assessment, the idea of generosity – a euphemism for listening without turning one's back to the speaker – has not yet been adopted by either side.

Having provided a rough sketch of the big three conversations which serve as both the foreground and the background of Williams' book, it is reasonable to speak briefly about the question of motivation. It is little wonder that Williams turns to a communication theorist like Mikhail Bakhtin during his meditation on Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin's theories have a tremendous appeal to academics working across a variety of disciplines. If, as Williams claims, all human identity is constructed through conversations, then a theory of communication seems fitting. What I intend to argue in this thesis is that the problem with hermeneutics and conversations around Dostoevsky's work parallels the problem

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<sup>14</sup> Rowan Williams, "How do you pray on issues of homosexuality in the church?" YouTube. Ret. 17 March 2012. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0M\\_c76PQwM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0M_c76PQwM) [accessed March 17, 2012].

with the conversations between those who see no place for religion in the modern world and those who profoundly and adamantly disagree with such an assessment. The problem with Dostoevsky's work parallels the problem with the conversation between those who see a different (reduced ?) place for the Bible in the Anglican Communion and those who profoundly and adamantly disagree. Williams – ever the theologian seeking the middle ground, ever seeking to hear the voices of those who are not always heard, the theologian whose academic reputation rests in large part on his attempt to give Arius, that most notorious of heretics, a fair hearing – favours what Mikhail Bakhtin would call a polyphonic conversation or a polyphonic hermeneutic as a way around the impasse created by conversations which begin with the speaker turning his back to the listener. For Williams, the problem of Dostoevsky's work – a work that has been characterized, according to Bakhtin at least, as seemingly a “series of disparate, contradictory philosophical stances”<sup>15</sup> – is addressed by Bakhtin's approach to Dostoevsky. This approach is the polyphonic approach, which I will discuss in greater detail later on. For now, however, it might be useful to provide a sense of what Williams means by the term polyphonic; he writes in his introduction to *Dostoevsky*:

The massive importance of Mikhail Bakhtin's work on Dostoevsky... meant that every reader or critic worth his salt was now bound to give weight to the “polyphonic” dimension of Dostoevsky – the coexistence of profoundly diverse voices, making the novel itself a constant and unfinished interplay of perspectives: whatever Dostoevsky actually believed himself, he could not but put it into a novel as one perspective among others, since he was committed to a particular view of what authorship can and can't do...<sup>16</sup>

There are four elements in this passage from Williams that warrant attention. First, one must, if one desires to have even a semblance of intellectual credibility (be worth “one's salt”, and ethos is, of course, crucial to maintain in any rhetorical situation), acknowledge the coexistence of profoundly diverse voices or opinions about a single text/issue. Second, and this is the most important element, one must assume that there will be a constant and unending interplay of voices, for one of the expectations

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<sup>15</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* Trans. Caryl Emerson. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 3.

of the polyphonic is that no voice is permitted to terminate the conversation with the last word. A polyphonic conversation around the text – due to the hermeneutical assumptions of the polyphonic – cannot end. I will return to this notion of unfinished interplay later on, for one’s sense of an ending is important not only in literature and literary criticism but also in theology. Third, authorial intention cannot be used as a trump, as a vulgar power-play to claim that while there are many voices, the “real” voice who pronounces the real and right way of seeing the issue is the author’s voice. In Williams’ own words, in a polyphonic novel, “whatever Dostoevsky actually believed himself, he could not but put it into a *novel* as one perspective among others, since he was committed to a particular view of what authorship can and can’t do.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, while yet another voice, in this case the voice of an Anglican theologian, on Dostoevsky’s work may be of some interest to those who specialize in Dostoevskian scholarship, the theologically inclined individual who comes to Williams’ book would likely be interested in seeing what attracts Williams to Bakhtin’s ideas, and how those ideas shape the way Williams responds to other conversations. This present study, then, is not only an examination of Williams’ study of Dostoevsky and how Bakhtin has shaped the way he reads the great Russian novelist, but it is also an examination of how Williams seems to apply Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic to two other ongoing theological conversations: the one around the nature of the Anglican Communion and the one around the place of religion in our culture.

### **1.1 The Mingling of Literature and Theology**

A question that would naturally arise when making such an approach – examining the impact that Williams’ study of Dostoevsky has on his theology and his ecclesiology – needs to be raised and addressed: Is it justifiable to grant such a place of prominence to Williams’ work on Dostoevsky, a work that appears to be only tangentially related to theological issues? This is, to my mind, a fair question. In

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<sup>17</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 3.

effect, the question might be framed in this manner: Are the parallels I have sketched simply another case of misreading, of reading too much into one book? There are a few of reasons which can be marshalled to justify my approach. First, I would like to draw an analogy. In Schoenbaum's biography of Shakespeare, in the chapter "Faith and Knowledge", he writes: "Scarcely a phrase from the first three chapters of Genesis escapes allusion in the plays. Job and the apocryphal Ecclesiasticus were favourite books, but the story of Cain left an especially powerful impression – Shakespeare refers to it at least twenty-five times."<sup>18</sup> For anyone familiar with Shakespeare's plays, it is easy to see the prevalence of the theme of a man in jealous anger rising up to kill his brother. Shakespeare's English history plays, for example, repeatedly deal with English brother rising up against English brother (both literal brother, say in *Richard III*, and, of course, metaphorical brother – a fellow Englishman). Further, it is easy to see the theme of justice and blood crying out from the ground running through Shakespeare's plays around the War of the Roses. In short, perceiving a pattern of interest and exploring the influence and impact of that pattern seems sensible. I would assert that if one were to identify a story that left a similarly striking impression on Rowan Williams, a story that would fall within the category of faith and knowledge, then that story would likely be Ivan Karamazov's "poem" of the Grand Inquisitor from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. While I have not exhaustively gone through Williams' work to tabulate the number of references and allusions to *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is fair to say that there are a sufficient number of references for one to draw an analogy between the story of Cain for Shakespeare and the story of the Grand Inquisitor for Williams. The genesis of this thesis is this insistent preoccupation in Williams' work with Ivan Karamazov and with Ivan's Grand Inquisitor. Time and again, Williams comes back to this character and this story. From a relatively early work, 1982's *The Resurrection* to 2000's *Christ on Trial* to 2008's full-length work on *Dostoevsky*, we see Williams' preoccupation with Ivan Karamazov and his story of Christ on trial in a prison during the Spanish

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<sup>18</sup> S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1986), 58.



Inquisition. A good part of this thesis revolves around an exploration of Williams' dialogue with the story of the Grand Inquisitor, with the figure of Ivan and with those who have been dialoguing with the story for the last century. In many ways, Dostoevsky is an important figure for those interested in the question of religious belief and the place of religion in culture, the second of the three great "conversations" I mentioned earlier.<sup>19</sup> In the beginning of *Dostoevsky*, Williams cites William Hamilton who claimed that study of Dostoevsky was "a substantial influence in pushing him toward the "Death of God" school of theology, since the faith of the future, the faith that was supposed to emerge from the "crucible of doubt," was never given credible form in Dostoevsky's fiction, particularly in *The Brothers Karamazov*."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, from the outset of *Dostoevsky*, Williams is engaging in this conversation about Dostoevsky with a fellow theologian.

Another reason why it is justifiable to link Williams' theology to his study of Dostoevsky is that Williams would likely claim that he is engaging in God talk with Dostoevsky. In his book *On Christian Theology*, a work that appeared nearly a decade before his book on Dostoevsky, Williams claims that "a person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is theologizing, forming a reflectively consistent speech for God... (and) the believing artist... is likewise engaged in a theological task."<sup>21</sup> If we accept Williams' notion that the believing artist is engaged in theologizing, then it seems perfectly reasonable for a theologian to engage with an artist's theology. Indeed, the collection of essays in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* is a reflection of this premise. In the introduction, the editors of this collection, George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson, write about the relationship among and between literature, literary criticism and theology:

... whilst theologians and religious writers are very often also readers of novels and are often ready to acknowledge the influence of novels on them, this influence is often only fleetingly acknowledged in

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<sup>19</sup> See for instance the collection of essays *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition* Ed. George Pattison and Diane Oenning Thompson. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), xii.

their work. It is really only in the relatively recent past that the study of literature has come to be seen as a *bona fide* pursuit for a professional theologian.<sup>22</sup>

If it has recently become acceptable to acknowledge that literature is a source for and influence on theologians, this acknowledgement is especially true for Williams. His theological works are replete with references to literature. Often, one comes across quite sustained engagements with novels or poems. For example, in *Christ on Trial*, in the first four chapters, Williams looks at the trial scenes in the four gospels. However, in the final chapter, for over 20 pages, Williams looks at the theme of Jesus on trial through a few literary works: in Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor scene from *The Brothers Karamazov*, in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and in H.F.M. Prescott's *The Man on a Donkey*.<sup>23</sup> In *Anglican Identities*, Williams again employs literature. Seeking to sketch a recognizable historical Anglican identity, he has a series of chapters on influential Anglican figures from history, but in his final chapter, one where he discusses how a number of Anglicans have approached the Gospel of John, Williams opens by discussing, at length, Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "A Death in the Desert."<sup>24</sup> In sum, throughout Williams' work, we see a mingling of the literary and the theological.

Thus, for a few reasons it seems justifiable to approach Williams' academic work on Dostoevsky as a theological enterprise. However, there is at least one more reason why Williams' decision to write on Dostoevsky should be of theological interest and that is because such a book would bring him in direct contact with the prominent Russian thinker who has had a profound influence on the study of Dostoevsky – Mikhail Bakhtin. Williams acknowledges that some of the ideas in his *Dostoevsky* are indebted to Bakhtin.<sup>25</sup> There are two Bakhtinian concepts in particular that appear to have shaped Williams' response to the three conversations: the polyphonic nature of truth and relationships in the world and the "unfinalizability" of dialogue and the self. These two concepts are not only central for

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<sup>22</sup> Pattison and Thompson, "Introduction: Reading Dostoevsky religiously" *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 119-141.

<sup>24</sup> Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (Plymouth: Cowley Publications, 2003), 121-137.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, xiii.

Bakhtin's reading of Dostoevsky, for sorting out the problems of Dostoevsky's poetics, but these concepts have, as I briefly sketched earlier, some interesting theological possibilities, too. Simply put, all three conversations mentioned earlier could be re-shaped if the concepts of polyphony and of unfinalizability were central assumptions that parties in the conversations adopted. It would appear that Williams is seeking to find a way beyond the conversations which involve a speaker beginning his monologue with his back turned to his listener. At the very end of his famous book on Dostoevsky, Bakhtin pronounces what does not appear to be a tentative or provisional judgement: "We must renounce our monologic habits so that we might come to feel at home in the new artistic sphere which Dostoevsky discovered, so that we might orient ourselves in that incomparably more complex artistic model of the world which he created."<sup>26</sup> One question that needs to be explored is the impact of such a polyphonic approach which requires us to renounce our love of endings and final decisions in favour of on-going discussions and provisional decisions. For all the noble sentiments around the polyphonic, with its admirable desire to include, with its ability to hear and appreciate the many-voicedness of Scripture, to see, value and affirm diversity in the Church community, is it really reasonable to proceed on the assumption that judgement must always be suspended, that there is no end, to proceed on the assumption that all in this world is provisional? Must Christians in their lives and in their disputes with believers and unbelievers renounce certainty? What is the cost of such a renunciation? This thesis will engage with these bigger questions near the end.

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<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 272.

## Chapter 2

### 2. Mikhail Bakhtin, Polyphony and Rowan Williams

“... all of Bakhtin’s work stands under the sign of plurality, the mystery of the one and the many.” - Clark and Holquist<sup>27</sup>

“Terrorism, child abuse, absent fathers and the fragmentation of the family, the secularization and sexualisation of culture, the future of liberal democracy, the clash of cultures,”<sup>28</sup> Rowan Williams writes, are all present in the works of Dostoevsky’s novels. These problems of the nineteenth century are, of course, just as pressing today, and for Williams, the world of these problems is one where the “the question of what human beings owe to each other – the question standing behind all these critical contemporary issues – is left painfully and shockingly open.”<sup>29</sup> The central question for Williams’ *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* is just that: What do we owe to each other? If we see this as controlling question, then we might, out of a desire for clarification, pose another question: *How* do we know each other; or, more specifically, through what sense do we know each other? Consider two images as two possible answers. We might imagine, as a contemporary image of knowledge acquisition, a frenetic eye that roams and flits about, that desires to see things, people and cultures. Or, we might imagine – especially if we see a great many problems in our world as distinctly relational in quality, problems that reveal a poverty of understanding about what we owe to each other as human beings – a patient and attentive ear rather than a frenetic eye. If we were to accept that we would be better served by a patient ear, then the appeal of Bakhtin would make eminent sense since if one were to seek an image of the Russian thinker, then it would be of a human being who advocates passionately for people to bend their ears to hear the voices of others. Bakhtin is the philosopher of the ear, the philosopher who speaks incessantly and insistently about voices. In this chapter, I will attempt to

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<sup>27</sup> Katrina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

provide a rough sketch of the figure of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin and to explain the nature of Rowan Williams' interest in him and his notion of polyphony.

## 2.1 Mikhail Bakhtin

There is a famous Chinese proverb that fittingly applies to Bakhtin in the sense that it is double-voiced and in the sense that it applies to the arc of Bakhtin's life: May you live in interesting times. Seen as a blessing, the proverb seems to suggest that one's life will be more interesting if one lives during interesting times; seen as a curse, the proverb seems to suggest that one's life will be more turbulent and dangerous if one lives during times of great upheaval, instability and change. In both senses, Bakhtin lived through interesting times. He was born in Orel, Russia in 1895; he died in Moscow in 1975. He lived, then, through the Russian Revolution, his brother joined the White Guards; he lived through the Purges; he, like Dostoevsky, fell out of favour with the state and was exiled.<sup>30</sup> He was arrested in 1929; Holquist assert that it was due to his association with an underground Orthodox church group.<sup>31</sup> He was to have been sent to the Solovetsky Islands for ten years, an exile that would almost certainly have killed the frail man suffering from osteomyelitis, but he was sent to an easier exile in Kazakhstan.<sup>32</sup> For years, he remained in there, on the fringes of the Soviet world, a genius who, according to Clark and Holquist's biography, was reduced to teaching pig farmers.<sup>33</sup> By the mid 1950s, however, things began to turn for Bakhtin. When Nikita Khrushchev came to power, some of the intellectuals who had suffered under Stalin found that their fortunes changed with the leadership change; many of the disgraced and the exiled were brought back into the fold. Bakhtin found favour among a group of young scholars who knew his book on Dostoevsky, published in the year of his exile, and his dissertation on Rabelais. No doubt, these scholars were surprised to discover that Bakhtin was still alive. To employ the ancient

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<sup>30</sup> Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 239.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his world* (London: Routledge, 1990), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 143-144.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

pagan image, Fortuna's wheel began to turn for the man who had survived interesting times: exile for a political crime, the terror of the Stalinist purges and the horrors of the Second World War. In 1963, his 1929 work on Dostoevsky was reissued in a second and modified edition, *The Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. In 1965, his book on Rabelais (a dissertation that he submitted in 1947) was published. As a final closing sign of his re-admittance into respectable culture, in 1972, after so many years on the periphery of Soviet society, he was permitted to move to Moscow. There, in 1975, back in the centre of the Soviet world, Bakhtin died.<sup>34</sup>

Bakhtin is now a well-known and celebrated figure; his book on Dostoevsky, whether or not it represents a misreading of the Russian novelist, is widely considered a literary classic.<sup>35</sup> His influence across the disciplines is substantial; his name frequently appears in the indices of books that range from queer theory to feminist theory, from literature to theology. There are now a number of fashionable Bakhtinian terms which are part of the vocabulary (jargon?) of the academic world. In *Introducing Bakhtin*, Sue Vice selects a number of Bakhtinian terms that students of literature would likely encounter, and she devotes a chapter to each: heteroglossia, dialogism, polyphony, carnival and chronotope.<sup>36</sup> I would like to add one more term – unfinalizability.<sup>37</sup> One of the fundamental assumptions of polyphony, or, one might say, one of the main impulses behind polyphony, is unfinalizability. The word, in various forms, is insistently reiterated in Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and I will spend some time looking at this concept, especially at the end of this paper. For now, however, I think it is best to turn our attention to what Bakhtin says about polyphony, then to what some critics say about polyphony and finally to what Rowan Williams, a theologian, says about the concept.

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<sup>34</sup> Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 338.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Caryl Emerson's assessment of Bakhtin in *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin*.

<sup>36</sup> Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

## 2.2 The Problem of Plurality

The polyphonic is a central term and concept in Bakhtin's book on Dostoevsky. Consider the opening paragraph, taken from the 1963 edition; the chapter is entitled "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel and Its Treatment in Critical Literature":

Any acquaintance with the voluminous literature on Dostoevsky leaves the impression that one is dealing not with a single author-artist who wrote novels and stories, but with a number of philosophical statements by several author-thinkers – Raskolnikov, Myshkin, Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov, the Grand Inquisitor, and others. For the purposes of critical thought, Dostoevsky's work has been broken down into a series of disparate, contradictory philosophical stances, each defended by one or another character. Among these also figure, but in far from first place, the philosophical views of the author himself. For some scholars Dostoevsky's voice merges with the voices of one or another of his characters; for others, it is a peculiar synthesis of all these ideological voices; for yet others, Dostoevsky's voice is simply drowned out by all those other voices. Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems. The character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky's finalizing artistic vision. In the consciousness of the critics, the direct and fully weighted signifying power of the characters' words destroys the monologic plane of the novel and calls forth an unmediated response – as if the character were not an object of authorial discourse, but rather a fully valid, autonomous carrier of his own individual word.<sup>38</sup>

Much about Bakhtin's notion of polyphony can be gleaned from this opening paragraph and from the first word in the title of his book on Dostoevsky – problem. In short, the polyphonic wrestles with the problem of plurality. In the excerpt above, there is the recognition of a plurality of voices, many memorable and arresting, in Dostoevsky's works. There is the awareness that these voices put forward philosophies that run contrary to each other – a problem with harmony or unity arises. Indeed, later on in the introduction, Bakhtin claims, quite rightly, that Dostoevsky often forces one of his characters to "converse with his own double, with the devil, with his alter ego, with his own caricature."<sup>39</sup> This detail is significant for our examination of the influence of Dostoevsky and Bakhtin on Rowan Williams, for the scenes from *The Brothers Karamazov* that run throughout Rowan Williams' works, not just his book

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<sup>38</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetic*, 5.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

devoted to Dostoevsky, are just such *pro-and-contra* or *tête-à-tête* encounters: Alyosha's conversation with his brother Ivan in a tavern, the Grand Inquisitor's verbal assault on Christ in the prison cell in Seville, the Devil's conversation with Ivan before his brother's murder trial. Bakhtin himself defines the polyphonic is this way: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices, a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world... not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse."<sup>40</sup> Various elements from that definition could be emphasized: plurality, unmerged, equal rights. In the passage above, the problem, according to Bakhtin, is not with Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels but rather with the reader unaccustomed to bending a patient ear to hear unity in polyphony. In other words, when a reader encounters polyphony – a plurality of fully valid, unmerged and equal voices – the tendency is not to allow polyphony to stand. Various non-polyphonic claims are advanced: one voice must speak for all, or one voice must speak above all the other voices, or two or more voices must be synthesized into one voice in the interests of coherence. In short, there is a powerful desire to suppress polyphony and hear only one voice. One response is to claim that one character of the many speaks for the author; the bias of selection is obvious in such readings. Many have, for example, said that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan is the author's mouthpiece, and further, that the Grand Inquisitor is the mouthpiece of both Ivan and Dostoevsky,<sup>41</sup> but Bakhtin says that a character in Dostoevsky's novels does not "serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice."<sup>42</sup> Another way some readers seek to avoid the problem of polyphony, Bakhtin says, is to claim that the author's voice is a combination or "synthesis" of a number of his character's voices. A third way is for the reader to claim that author's voice is lost in the cacophony of voices – simply "drowned out." In short, the monologic (univocal) plane is the one with which most people are comfortable. What might extreme examples of monologic

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<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6-7.

<sup>41</sup> See D.H. Lawrence, "Preface to Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor*" *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays* Ed. Rene Welleck. (Englewood, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 90-91.

<sup>42</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 7.



language be? Caryl Emerson provides a rather interesting list: “ultimatums, categorical farewells, suicide notes, military commands.”<sup>43</sup> The monologic is a form of language that *does not* invite interaction; it *does not* invite a response; it *does not* wish for the conversation to continue. Rather, it wishes to be the last, final and authoritative word.

### 2.3 In Praise of Freedom

What, then, is the perceived benefit to the polyphonic? The answer, in a word, is freedom. In the specific case of the world of Dostoevsky’s polyphonic novels, characters are at liberty to go on answering and responding to each other, to go on growing and becoming. Put in another way, an unfinalized figure (character in a novel or real human being) is a figure who is always in the process of becoming. The polyphonic is not closed off, is not finalized. In terms of fiction, this means that the author is put on a new level with his/her characters, but new possibilities are opened up, Bakhtin insists, by the notion of polyphony and unfinalizability. Bakhtin writes that “the new artistic position of the author with regard to the hero in Dostoevsky’s novels is a fully realized and thoroughly consistent dialogic position, one that affirms the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero.”<sup>44</sup> From his book on Dostoevsky, there is one final aspect of Bakhtin’s polyphony that I wish to call attention to and that is an image Bakhtin uses to explain the plurality of Dostoevsky’s fictional world. Bakhtin writes:

Dostoevsky’s world is profoundly *pluralistic*. If we were to seek an image toward which this whole world gravitates, an image in the spirit of Dostoevsky’s own worldview, then it would be the church as a communion of unmerged souls, where sinners and righteous men come together; or perhaps it would be the image of Dante’s world, where multi-leveledness is extended into eternity, where there are the penitent and the unrepentant, the damned and the saved. Such an image would be in the style of Dostoevsky himself, or, more precisely, in the style of his theology...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 157.

<sup>44</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 63.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

Here, we have an image that would likely appeal to a theologian, an image of polyphony as the church, as the communion of unmerged souls, an image of souls in a great cosmic relationship (humanity with humanity and humanity with God) that extends into eternity. It is easy to see why Williams would be attracted to Bakhtin's notion of polyphony; it seems to speak to and about all three conversations that press on Rowan Williams. It speaks about how one reads/ hears Dostoevsky's works. It speaks about, in the conversation around the place of the sacred in the secular world of western modernity, how both sides should be forced to speak with their double across the table, should proceed under the assumption that as unfinalizable figures in an unfinalizable culture, they should not seek to cut short their conversation, should not seek to utter the final and definitive word. Last, perhaps most interestingly, polyphony speaks to and about the Anglican Communion crisis. If we accept the validity of Bakhtin's image of the polyphonic as a church in communion, then polyphony speaks to those parties in the Anglican Communion who wish to terminate the conversation around homosexuality in the church, or around the place/reliability of Scripture in the church or around the value of a communion that can at time sound more cacophonous than polyphonic. Here, it would seem, Williams has found an image to serve as a model for how the Anglican Communion can go on answering each other despite the perceived problems. Perhaps, Rowan Williams sees the Bakhtinian problem of Dostoevsky's polyphony in a manner much like the Anglican Communion's problem of polyphony. It is not so much a real problem as a problem of perception. The problem is not with the novels or their structure just as it is not a problem with the Church or its structure, but rather with those who lack the patient ear to hear. In sum, in Bakhtin's notion of polyphony, Williams has found an idea to champion plurality and unity.

#### **2.4 Bakhtin's Voice through other Voices**

I have briefly outlined what Bakhtin means by the term polyphony, but it is useful to look at what some critics feel polyphony means, too. Perhaps, it would be best to begin with a critic whose

work purports to be an introduction. Sue Vice sees “voices with equal rights,” the subtitle of her chapter on polyphony, as the heart of the concept. Her reading is deeply concerned with power and power imbalances. It is fitting to quote her at length; she writes:

... it (polyphony) refers precisely to the construction of voices of characters and narrator in the novel, as its etymology – the Greek for ‘many voices’ – suggests... the term’s simple musical metaphor ‘refers to the co-presence of independent but interconnected voices.’ Bakhtin argues that characters and narrators are known by their voices... and it is the way in which these voices are arranged that determines whether or not a work is polyphonic. Bakhtin takes the novels of Dostoevsky as his central example of the polyphonic text, as he argues here character and narrator exist on the same plane, the latter does not take precedence over the former but has equal rights to speak. The polyphonic novel is a democratic one, in which equality of utterance is central... Polyphony refers to autonomy of the characters’ voices... Not only did Dostoevsky hear conflicting voices everywhere, which he transposed into the novel, but the voices he heard were dialogic, internally riven into conflicting opinions...

It is clear that Vice places the deeply revered modern values of democracy and equality and autonomy at the forefront of her summary. There will, the assumption goes, always be conflict, but polyphony refuses to permit a power imbalance to resolve disputes or terminate discussions, for discussions are the only genuine avenue to understanding and growth. Certainly, the notion of the author no longer being the authority, the notion of characters no longer being merely puppet/creatures made and manipulated by a puppeteer/creator is a shift in power, a shift toward equality, but equality is not, at least to my mind, the aspect that requires the greatest emphasis in Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony. When polyphony is conceived in these terms, it can become a tool of the marginalized and the oppressed to level the playing field in a game of power and control.

While Vice’s book is an introduction, the next critic is a prominent Bakhtinian scholar, a scholar who not only reads Russian but who translated much of Bakhtin’s work<sup>46</sup> – Caryl Emerson. Here, Emerson’s description of polyphony is extended quite fruitfully – in a manner that would likely have pleased Bakhtin – into a theological sphere:

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<sup>46</sup> She translated both *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination*.

In order to examine degrees of consciousness in the aesthetic realm, Dostoevsky created – or perhaps discovered – polyphony. According to Bakhtin, this idea was so radical that it caused ... a ‘Copernican revolution,’ in the history of the novel. In the prior more ‘Ptolemaic’ worldview, an author sits at the center of things like Jehovah, passing out bits of consciousness piecemeal to the characters taking shape under the authorial pen, just enough to each person so that the cast of characters could obediently act out its predetermined roles. But Dostoevsky, Bakhtin intimates, endorsed a more ‘New Testament’ model of authorship, one based on unresolvable paradoxes and parables rather than on certainties handed down as law. The rewards might appear unjust and the ends unclear, but the method increases the chances that both author and hero will genuinely learn from the process of defining each other. Incarnation – which is delimitation – always means increased vulnerability. When polyphonic authors ‘come down to earth’ and address their creations not vertically but horizontally...<sup>47</sup>

Emerson sketches a kenotic<sup>48</sup> analogy, one where an author (God) empties himself, relinquishing his power, and interacts with his character (creatures) on equal terms, one where both author (God) and character (creature) “will genuinely learn from the process of defining each other.” The polyphonic is, thus, linked with the God who comes down to earth to walk among and talk with his creation in a decidedly new and surprising way. This interaction opens up a range of new possibilities of seeing, hearing, knowing and becoming.

In her chapter on polyphony, Emerson outlines some of the main criticisms, the Bakhtinian backlash so to speak, that have surfaced after one hundred years of Bakhtin. The criticism that I wish to focus on might loosely be termed ungrounded faith, or what Emerson terms “dialogic optimism.”<sup>49</sup> For some, Bakhtin’s faith in language, his faith in the benevolent effects of exchange, in moving people to learn from the process of defining each other, is misplaced. It is just as likely that language and interaction will lead to misunderstanding and misrepresentations as it will lead to understanding and development. In short, as Emerson puts it, many critics think that Bakhtin “overestimates the power of

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<sup>47</sup> Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 127.

<sup>48</sup> Since *kenosis* is such a significant theological concept, it seems fitting to say a few words about it. It comes from the Greek, an emptying. Biblically, it appears in Philippians 2:6-7. *Kenosis* is a term that is commonly used to refer to the idea of divine self-limitation, specifically to the idea of Christ laying aside, while he was a man, his divine power. Alister McGrath writes: “The gospels make no reference to Christ making use of all his divine attributes (such as omniscience) during his period on earth. How is this to be explained?... Either Christ used his divine powers in secret, or he abstained from using them altogether. The first option... came to be known as *krypsis*... the second... as *kenosis*...” *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Second Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 354.

<sup>49</sup> Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 136.

language to rescue us”<sup>50</sup> and further that, on the rather contentious issue of unfinalizability, a central pin in Bakhtin’s argument, some critics feel that “the refusal to finalize any judgment is an escape from the consequences of authentic residence in the world.”<sup>51</sup>

For those who believe in the potential of polyphony, as Bakhtin clearly did, there is always a natural human tendency, a temptation if you will, to move toward a final response, toward a finality that seeks to close down any potentially new opportunities for interaction whereby one learns about oneself and about others, whereby one changes and becomes. Williams, like Bakhtin, is a passionate believer in this kind of polyphonic exchange. Here, from his book on Dostoevsky, is Williams speaking in defence of what Bakhtin calls unfinalizability:

Thus, there is no end to writing. The endless turning on itself of the Devil’s conversation with Ivan is analogous to the writer’s self-interrogation. And when it is God that we are talking about, the need for such self-interrogation becomes more urgent, since the dangers of avoiding it are so dramatic. All that we have seen of the destructive and self-destructive potential of the language of faith, the various ways in which we can reduce it either to the willed and subjective or to the descriptive and worldly... means that we have to go on speaking/writing about God, allowing the language of faith to encounter fresh trials every day, and also fresh distortions and refusals. In writing fiction in which no formula is allowed unchallengeable victory, Dostoevsky has implicitly developed what might be called a theology of writing... Every fiction is at its most fictional in its endings, those pretences of closure and settlement.<sup>52</sup>

Even though this passage makes it explicit that Williams sees this theory of writing as a “theology of writing,” even though it seems abundantly obvious that Williams is drawing a clear analogy between the polyphonic in writing and the polyphonic in Christian exchanges and theology, lest the skeptical reader conclude that I am merely cherry-picking my supporting proof, consider another passage in defence of the notion of the ongoing or unfinalizable nature of interaction, an example taken from a position of importance in Williams’ book – the introduction: “The Dostoevskian novel is... an exercise in resisting the demonic and rescuing language... by insisting on freedom – the freedom of characters within the novel to go on answering each other, even when this wholly upsets and disappoints any hopes we may

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<sup>50</sup> Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 143.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 45-46.

have for resolutions and good endings..."<sup>53</sup> Why does Williams advocate this notion of unfinalizability, this ongoing answering of each other? It is because the freedom of such an exchange is part of the "continuing process of a reflective life."<sup>54</sup> In short, repeatedly and insistently the words uncertainty, unresolved and ongoing appear in Williams' work on Dostoevsky. It seems clear that he believes that a "commitment to this process,"<sup>55</sup> the on-going discussion, is what makes growth and maturity possible. Williams is drawing an analogy between the way that the novel works and the way that exchange between humanity and God works. When the conversation stops, "when we have nothing with which to engage, we stop speaking and stop developing."<sup>56</sup> To employ the language from the opening of the *Didache*, for Williams, there are two ways: *the way of death* (the demonic), where the human temptation is to stop engaging with God and others, to turn one's back on the other, to fail to engage with the foundational question of what we owe to each other, and *the way of life* (the polyphonic), rescued in part by language and by a willingness to go on engaging with one's neighbours and with God, even when these exchanges wholly upset our desire for good endings and just verdicts. This constant and unceasing exchange is part of the continuing process of a reflective life.

## 2.5 The Polyphonic in Embryonic Form in Rowan Williams

A question naturally arises at this point: When did Williams start to advocate passionately for this polyphonic approach that places such emphasis on the idea of unfinalizability? In other words, when did this idea about *resisting endings* appear in Williams' work? Anyone who is acquainted with attempts by historians to describe a period in history such as the Enlightenment is likely aware of the difficulties of drawing a hard demarcation line in time. A similar problem appears to exist with making a claim that seeks to point out when the influence of the polyphonic appears in the works of Rowan Williams. To be

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<sup>53</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

sure, one could go through his works and simply search for the term. It is, as far as I know, absent except for one notable appearance in an essay published in his collection, *On Christian Theology*.<sup>57</sup> However, I would like to go further back and look at what I would like to call the polyphonic in embryonic form. The notion of polyphony is a dominant theme in Williams' *Dostoevsky*, but there is evidence of polyphony in works by Williams that precede this book. Arguably, the two most significant works by Williams are *Arius* and *On Christian Doctrine*, and in the latter, a collection of occasional essays, Williams opens with a very interesting prologue. His prologue is an attempt to answer the question of starting point, the question of what is the "proper role of theology in the Church"<sup>58</sup> and the more difficult question of the proper role of the theologian and of theological discourse. Here, again, I wish to allow Williams to speak at length without the distortion of summary:

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 and shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God. The meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching what this community does – not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating or 'inducting', imagining and worshipping. The theologian emerges as a distinct and identifiable figure when these meanings have become entangled with one another, when there is a felt tension between images and practices, when a shape has to be drawn out so that the community's practice can be effectively communicated. But this does not mean that theologians do not exist prior to such moments. A person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is theologizing, forming a reflectively consistent speech for God. The believing artist or the liturgist or hymnographer is likewise engaged in a theological task. But it is likely to be only in crisis that people emerge who see their essential job as pushing forward the consideration of coherence and transparency that are already at work in more 'informal' ways. And of course, when this happens, the possibilities of crisis are multiplied: when you try to tidy up an unsystematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. What the early Church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version of its language, in which the losses were adjudged too severe for comfort...

In various ways, these are still issues that surround the proper role of theology in the Church. It may not quite be true that – as some radical contemporary theologians would insist – a real theologian is always a 'heretic' because that is implicit in creative religious thinking; but the risk of conceptual conflict is certainly increased when theology come to its visible and public expression. This is one reason for the deep suspicion with which churches habitually regard theologians. However, this suspicion overlooks the preconscious reflection, the ordering of experience, that is constantly going on in the Church... It is no use pretending that there is a real and recognizable religious practice that does not

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<sup>57</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

include this – just as it’s no use pretending that there is a reading of the Bible free of selection and interpretation. And what is more, from the other end, so to speak, the would-be professional theologian can so understand his or her task as to forget their practical and historical rootedness in the informal theologizing of the community as it develops.<sup>59</sup>

There are a number of elements that I wish to draw out and discuss from this lengthy passage. First, the contemporary theologian, according to Williams, speaks just as in the epic genre, *in medias res*. The action has already been going on for some time; a polyphony of voices is the inheritance of the Church. The contemporary theologian’s voice is one that has entered, in the middle of things, an ancient conversation about who God is and what a Christian in community does. Second, this ancient conversation involves, of course, the use of language, so it is not long before the theologian “emerges” as a figure who seeks to disentangle meanings, to ease tensions that inevitably arise when humans speak. Williams writes: “it is likely to be only in crisis that people emerge who see their essential job as pushing forward the considerations of coherence and transparency...” Third, in the effort to impose coherence, in the effort to tidy up speech, things are lost and heresies are born. This leads to the interesting observation about the theologian as heretic. Typical of his love of nuanced qualifications, Williams writes that it is “not quite” true to say that real theologians are always heretics. It is the role of theologians in meeting the Christian community’s need for clarity and coherence and unity in their speech about God and community that the “tidy” versions of faith in language produce a fear of something being lost in this effort of tidying up. It is here that Williams seems to place the theologian, the figure who emerges during times of crisis and confusion, among that group of necessary figures who often is an outcast – the heretic.

In his prologue, Williams also speaks about a “typology of theological voices”<sup>60</sup> and about how they interact. This is an embryonic form of polyphony in theology. Williams claims that the first voice in theology is the celebratory; this voice is distinguished by a few qualities: it is spoken in and to a

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<sup>59</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xii-xiii.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.



community of the faithful not only as a form of worship but also as a form of understanding. The next theological voice – and Williams indicates that there is a sequence here – is the communicative. The distinguishing qualities of this voice are that it is spoken to those outside the community of the faithful, spoken in an attempt to commend the gospel. The final voice, critical, is an examination of the language, metaphors and arguments of the faithful at those times when language seems to be breaking down, when problems of coherence arise. In effect, one might see the critical voice as a voice that arises to address the problem of a plurality of voices within the community. To summarize, celebratory voice theology speaks to the insider; it draws on a familiar vocabulary; it seeks to explore to the fullest extent how language might describe and celebrate faith and God. Communicative voice theology speaks to the outsider, draws on alien vocabulary and imagery and seeks to argue for an intelligibility of faith. Critical voice theology arises when there is a need to assess or challenge or correct the language of celebration or communication.

Williams speaks about the interaction of these theological voices in a manner reminiscent of Bakhtin's notion of polyphony. First, he makes a case for the equality of these voices when he asserts that we must resist the impulse to impose a hierarchy of voices, for he acknowledges that any one voice in isolation is weak and unsustainable. Second, these voices are seen as independent, yet they interact and collaborate in the movement toward our understanding of who we are and who God is, what we owe to God and what we owe to each other. Each voice, by its very nature, encounters unique problems; each voice must be allowed to answer and be answered by the others. In the lengthy passage cited above, Williams speaks about the voice of the heretic theologian. He writes: "when you try to tidy up an unsystematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. What the early Church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version of its language, in which the losses were adjudged too severe for comfort..." Celebratory voice theology is naturally expansive, seeking to do justice to the greatness and

incomprehensibility of God. Critical voice theology is naturally reductive, seeking to tidy up language that threatens to expand into meaningless incoherence.

## 2.6 The Voice of the Heretic Theologian

Just as Dostoevsky often sets his characters in *tête-à-tête* dialogic exchanges with their “doubles,” Williams seems to place the theologian, at times, in a similar position with respect to his/her Christian community. The theologian as heretic is a figure in the community who fulfills a valuable service or duty, but this figure is often, as a result of this service, viewed with suspicion. In Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” there is a memorable passage where he speaks about how various people serve the state. A loose paraphrase might be something like this: The mass of men serve the state as machines, with their bodies; others, such as lawyers and politicians, serve the state with their heads; a few, martyrs and reformers, with their consciences. These, Thoreau says, are treated as enemies.<sup>61</sup> The figure of the heretic theologian is similar to this figure of the rebel who engages in civil disobedience: both due to their service are treated with deep suspicion.

The heretic theologian, then, is one voice in the healthy polyphony of the church community; however, this voice, outside the polyphony of the church, is problematic. If, contrary to the Bakhtinian principle of equality of voices, a hierarchy emerges with the heretic theologian situated at the top of the pyramid, problems arise. If, contrary to the Bakhtinian principle of ongoing exchange or unfinalizability, the theological discourse that begins with the celebratory moves to the communicative and then *terminates at the critical*, problems arise. Williams acknowledges this, claiming that critical voice theology, at the end of the line in the sequence of the three, can move in two directions: agnosticism/nihilism (a dead-end) or back to celebratory voice theology (new life).<sup>62</sup> If it moves in the direction of the

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<sup>61</sup> Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience” *The Portable Thoreau* Ed. Carl Bode. (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 112-113.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xv.

former, then conversation ends and the demonic triumphs. If, on the other hand, it moves to the latter, then language can be rescued and the cycle begins again.

This theme of resisting closure, of denying a final and authoritative word appears in another essay in Williams' collection – "Theological Integrity." Essentially, Williams asks: What makes some theological discourse lack integrity? His answer is, at least in part, discourse that conceals, that fails to adequately acknowledge the existence of bias and agenda. All discourse is given to this, and, Williams claims, "integrity can be recovered by the extent... that they show themselves capable of conversation."<sup>63</sup> He continues on by asserting that having integrity "is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final."<sup>64</sup> Later on he writes:

To appeal to a total perspective is to betray the dominative interest at work in what you are saying, for there can be no conversation with a total perspective. And if what cannot be answered (or rather, cannot be conversed with) cannot honestly be said in the first place – because it will be a statement about the speaker's power, not about what the speaker claims to be talking about – it seems as though integrity in religious discourse is unrealizable.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps, Williams' words on conversations stem from his meditations on the primary conversation in his life – the one with God. Christians are called to pray without ceasing, to carry on an ongoing and ceaseless conversation. However, it is not just this that shapes Williams' thoughts, but also a tension that needs to be held, for there is a tension about what we know and do not know about God. Williams, deeply influenced by the Eastern Orthodox faith, writes a good deal about the mysterious and incomprehensible nature of God. He has also spent time writing about the figure of Christ – God made known to us. Kent Eilers speaks about how Williams' reading of the resurrection leads him to assert that Christian speech and language should be characterized by its willingness to ceaselessly question, probe

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<sup>63</sup> Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 4.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

and unsettle.<sup>66</sup> Eilers calls it a theological activity of encounter and shock, and it comes from how Williams sees the resurrection of Jesus, and how the resurrection is a restoration of language.<sup>67</sup> Williams writes, in *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, in a manner that parallels some of his thoughts on polyphony in his work on Dostoevsky:

Christian speech is *for ever* entering into and re-emerging from inarticulacy. There is no one moment of dumbness or loss followed by fluency, but an unending flow back and forth between speech and silence; and if at each stage the silence and the loss and emptiness become deeper and more painful, so at each stage the recovered language is both more spare and more richly charged.<sup>68</sup>

This back and forth exchange, this notion of “unending flow” is present in Williams’ work from an early period.

Now that we have outlined some of the key attributes of polyphony, traced the appearance of some of these ideas in Williams’ work that precedes his book on Dostoevsky, it is fitting to look at his work on Dostoevsky more closely. While I will be offering a reading of Williams’ work, the central and controlling questions for the next chapters are the following: Is a polyphonic approach religious or secular? Is God’s word the final word? If so, is it anti-polyphonic? If, in fact, polyphony is neither religious nor anti-religious, what potential and what danger does it hold in theology?

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<sup>66</sup> Kent Eilers, “Rowan Williams and Christian Language: Mystery, Disruption, and Rebirth” *Christianity and Literature* (61.1. 2011: 19-32), 19.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* ((1982) Second Edition. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 66.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Rowan Williams' *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction*

Freud claimed that “Dostoevsky’s place is not far behind Shakespeare. *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most magnificent novel ever written; the episode of the Grand Inquisitor, one of the peaks in the literature of the world, can hardly be valued too highly.”<sup>69</sup> To be sure, the voices of Ivan Karamazov and the Grand Inquisitor were and are highly valued. Recently, writers such as Dawkins and Hitchens make reference to Ivan Karamazov in an attempt to impose a final and decisive judgment on the question of religion, a closing word about poisonously delusional religion.<sup>70</sup> In effect, their main aim is to close the conversation by claiming that there is no more that need be said. It is easy to see why Williams – a strong proponent of polyphony, especially that part of polyphony that insists on ongoing exchange, that insists on avoiding closure – would desire to answer these voices. However, as I mentioned earlier on, it is not simply these voices that Williams seeks to answer. If a polyphony of voices is the inheritance of the church, and if we are invited in the process of the reflective life to engage with these voices, then Williams seeks to answer those voices, too. Thus, it is not long into his book that Williams quotes the first theological voice exchanging with Ivan. On page two of *Dostoevsky*, Williams quotes and responds to William Hamilton who claimed that study of Dostoevsky was “a substantial influence in pushing him toward the ‘Death of God’ school of theology, since the faith of the future, the faith that was supposed to emerge from the ‘crucible of doubt,’ was never given credible form in Dostoevsky’s fiction, particularly in *The Brothers Karamazov*.”<sup>71</sup> He quotes Hamilton: “we can all receive Ivan with a terrible kind of delight... Ivan’s picture of himself we immediately recognize as self-portrait; the God that is dead

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<sup>69</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Dostoevsky and Parricide” in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Critical Essays* Ed. by Rene Welleck. (Englewood Cliffs: NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 98.

<sup>70</sup> Richard Dawkins cites a lengthy passage from *Brothers Karamazov*, specifically from Ivan Karamazov. *The God Delusion*, 259. Christopher Hitchens cites a lengthy passage from Ivan Karamazov’s conversation with his brother Alyosha about the torture of Russian children. *God is not Great*, 217.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

for him is dead for us; and his Karamazov-God of tension and terror is often the only one we are able to find.”<sup>72</sup> Williams then points out some foundational assumptions behind Hamilton’s assessment which render his judgement, in the generous language of Williams, “curious.”<sup>73</sup> First, it assumes that Ivan’s position in Grand Inquisitor speech is “definitive” and “stands almost independently within the novel.”<sup>74</sup> Second, it assumes that the real focus of the novel is in the exchange between Alyosha and Ivan with the keystone, to mix metaphors, being the Inquisitor story.<sup>75</sup> In essence, all of these hermeneutical assumptions are anti-polyphonic. These assumptions not only seek to make Ivan the mouthpiece of the Dostoevsky, but these assumptions claim that Ivan’s views expressed in the poem of the Grand Inquisitor are firm, fixed and final. Williams writes: “We have become a great deal more sensitive to the need to read the *whole* novel, understanding that even a significant and concentrated ‘insertion’ like the Inquisitor story is part of a carefully woven fictional construct.”<sup>76</sup> A few sentences later, Williams invokes Bakhtin and his notion of the polyphonic as a kind of *ad verecundiam* appeal. Williams is not constructing a straw man here. There is a text, not a book *per se*, but a text that is bound like a thin paperback that is entitled *The Grand Inquisitor on the Nature of Man* by Fyodor Dostoevski.<sup>77</sup> It is 47 pages in length. There is a nine-page introduction by William Hubben, but the text is simply the chapter entitled “The Grand Inquisitor.” The very fact that this excerpt – a single chapter – is packaged and sold as an independent text, as one voice, provides proof of the prevalence of the type of monologic reading put forward by Hamilton. Certainly, the very existence of the text proceeds on the faulty assumption that the part (twenty some pages) represents the whole (a novel of more than 900 pages). Williams claims that Hamilton’s misreading of Dostoevsky is due to a poorly chosen critical lodestar – D. H.

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<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Fyodor Dostoevski, *The Grand Inquisitor on the Nature of Man*. Trans. Constance Garnett. Introd. William Hubben. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1948).

Lawrence.<sup>78</sup> Lawrence also asserts that the Inquisitor and figure of Ivan Karamazov are the thoughtful parts of “Dostoevsky himself.”<sup>79</sup> Further, he claims that “we cannot doubt that the Inquisitor speaks Dostoevsky’s own final opinion about Jesus.”<sup>80</sup> There again is that nagging word – final. In the spirit of the polyphonic, Williams takes up this finalizing judgment and re-opens the conversation.

### 3.1 Haunted by Ivan’s Case

In *Resurrection*, a work from 1982, Williams writes about Ivan: “There is no justification without resurrection. Ivan Karamazov cries out against the prospect of an ultimate reconciliation between victim and murderer based on a recognition of God’s justice, and he is right.”<sup>81</sup> From one of his published sermons in *Open to Judgement*, a work from 1994, Williams again writes about Ivan: “As Ivan Karamazov discovers in his terrifying encounter with an amiable middle-class nineteenth-century liberal Satan, his most refined torture is the refusal to tell us clearly whether he is us or not; that is the torture which drives Ivan insane. As soon as the question, ‘Inside or outside?’ ‘I or not I?’ is put, we have capitulated to the enemy’s terms.”<sup>82</sup> In *Christ on Trial*, a work published in 2000, Williams yet again writes about Ivan: “Appealing to Jesus as a way out of the unbearable contemplation of the pain of others is, for Ivan, a strategy that fails to engage with what Jesus really is.”<sup>83</sup> It seems fair to say that Williams maintains a conversation with Ivan Karamazov in his works. The texts cited above span from 1982 to 2000. This conversation precedes his more in-depth discussion in *Dostoevsky*. It is as if Williams is haunted by the problem of suffering laid out by Ivan, for he keeps returning to it, dialoguing with it. In *Christ on Trial*, Williams characterizes the case made by Ivan to his brother Alyosha as “probably the most eloquent

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<sup>78</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 2.

<sup>79</sup> D.H. Lawrence, “Preface to Dostoevsky’s *The Grand Inquisitor*,” 90.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 16.

<sup>82</sup> Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 91.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 120.

attack on easy theories of divine justice or divine reparation ever written by a Christian.”<sup>84</sup> Ivan’s case is filled with pathos. In his case, he does not deny that God’s existence might be possible, but he wants no part of God or His plan if His creation and His creatures can be as they are and can suffer as they clearly do. The problem of evil, pain and suffering is a powerful, and for Ivan, seemingly insurmountable stumblingblock. Evidence of human suffering and of human depravity could be piled very high, but Ivan only takes the case of children, “of the other tears of humanity with which the earth is soaked from its crust to its centre, I will say nothing.”<sup>85</sup> Here is one pathetic, in the original sense of the word, example from Ivan’s collection:

I’ve collected a great, great deal about Russian children, Alyosha. There was a little girl of five who was hated by her father and mother, ‘most worthy and respectable people, of good education and breeding.’ You see, I must repeat again, it is a peculiar characteristic of many people, this love of torturing children, and children only. To all other types of humanity these torturers behave mildly and benevolently, like cultivated and humane Europeans; but they are fond of tormenting children, even fond of children themselves in that sense. It’s just their defenselessness that tempts the tormentor, just the angelic confidence of the child who has no refuge and no appeal, that sets his vile blood on fire. In every man, of course, a demon lies hidden – the demon of rage, the demon of lustful heat at the screams of the tortured victim, the demon of lawlessness let off the chain, the demon of diseases that follow on vice, gout, kidney disease, and so on.

‘This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by those cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty – shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn’t ask to be taken up at night (as though a child of five sleeping its angelic, sound sleep could be trained to wake and ask), they smeared her face and filled her mouth with excrement, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the poor child’s groans! Can you understand why a little creature, who can’t even understand what’s done to her, should beat her little aching heart with her tiny fists in the dark and the cold, and weep her meek unresentful tears to dear, kind God to protect her? Do you understand that, friend and brother, you pious and humble novice? Do you understand why this infamy must be and is permitted?’<sup>86</sup>

This story of the little girl, one who has not eaten of the apple, is one of many such harrowing stories; it is all the more harrowing for it – like the demons in Mark’s gospel – is not one; they are legion. Ivan collects these stories from newspapers and books, and he is clearly shaken by these. We, too, encounter

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>85</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* ((1880)Trans. by Constance Garnett. New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 289.

<sup>86</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 286-287.



such stories over our lives, but I suspect that we do not compile them. We feel the horror in our bones at the time; we know that these things happen; we choose to forget. Do you remember the story of two-year-old Jamie Bulger? He was abducted in a supermarket by older boys, lured away from his mother by these older boys, tortured by these older boys, left on a train track to be cut in two by these older boys. These older boys were ten years old. It is almost impossible to take the measure of such a deed. How does one make sense of it from a Christian perspective? How is this part of God's merciful plan of salvation? There is real anguish in Ivan's voice when he cries out to his brother: "I say nothing of the sufferings of grown-up people, they have eaten the apple, damn them, and the devil take them all! But these little ones!"<sup>87</sup> The traditional appeal to theodicy – badly and baldly put as human evil and human suffering and human pain must exist for the sake of human freedom, the freedom to choose God, the freedom to grow through trial, the freedom to see trials as "joy"<sup>88</sup> for the sake of the world that is to come – simply does not work for Ivan. It is possible to see how freedom, at such a price, is a terrible gift.<sup>89</sup> I suspect that should someone have the fortitude to collect such stories as Ivan does, the fortitude to witness and/or survive the Holocaust, such experiences would be a stumblingblock. Indeed, in one of the most famous scenes from *Brothers Karamazov*, the one cited by Hitchens, Ivan asks his brother if he would consent to build the *eschaton* – the world of peace and harmony – if it was "essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature."<sup>90</sup> Alyosha answers softly, "No, I wouldn't consent."<sup>91</sup> When Alyosha raises the issue of the Incarnation, claiming that "there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all and for all because He gave his innocent blood for all and

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<sup>87</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 287.

<sup>88</sup> For the idea of trials as joy, see James 1:2-3.

<sup>89</sup> For an interesting link with the notion of terrible gifts and with the notion of pain, specifically leprosy, see Brand, Paul and Philip Yancey, *The Gift Nobody Wants* (New York: Harper, 1995). The premise is that the body is a metaphor for the spirit and that the spirit – like the body – needs pain to stay healthy.

<sup>90</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 291.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

everything,”<sup>92</sup> Ivan relates his story/poem: “My poem is called ‘The Grand Inquisitor’; it’s a ridiculous thing, but I want to tell it to you.”<sup>93</sup> It should be noted that, according to the index of *Dostoevsky*, Williams mentions the Grand Inquisitor on over 40 pages. To put this in context, Williams’ book, without notes, is fewer than 250 pages; moreover, “The Grand Inquisitor” chapter is a mere 22 pages; the novel, over 900 pages. What follows is a detailed summary of this much-discussed chapter.

### 3.2 The Grand Inquisitor

Arguably, Ivan offers a series of prefaces to his self-described ridiculous poem. One could see the preceding chapter “Rebellion” as a preface, where he lays before his novice brother a catalogue of human suffering permitted by God. In the second preface, his “literary preface,”<sup>94</sup> he places “The Grand Inquisitor” within a generic frame. Ivan briefly summarizes a poem, “The Wanderings of Our Lady through Hell,” that he believes to be similar in kind to his own. In the poem, when Mary discovers that those sinners who sink to the bottom of the lake of fire are forgotten by God, she is shocked. She begs on their behalf for mercy. Ivan says that “her conversation with God is immensely interesting.”<sup>95</sup> At one point, God points to the hands and feet of her Son and asks: “How can I forgive His tormentors?”<sup>96</sup> At this point, she begs all the saints, martyrs and angels to beg for mercy with her, and she wins a respite for the damned. (The same issue of mercy and the prospect of forgiveness appears during Ivan’s catalogue of horrors). Ivan says, “my poem would have been of that kind if it had appeared at that time.”<sup>97</sup> During his literary preface, Ivan says how it is “customary in poetry to bring down heavenly powers on earth.”<sup>98</sup> That is, of course, just what happens in his prose poem – Jesus returns to Seville

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<sup>92</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 292.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

during the time of the Inquisition. We are told that Jesus came “softly,”<sup>99</sup> a word that is used sparingly by Dostoevsky, but a word that is clearly used to draw a link between Alyosha and Christ, a link between their reactions before their inquisitors during their trials. The people of Spain – described as “children”<sup>100</sup> by Ivan – recognize Jesus, flock to Him and follow Him; He moves “silently in their midst with a gentle smile of infinite compassion.”<sup>101</sup> However, after He raises a girl of seven from the dead (a clear parallel with the girl from “Rebellion”), He is seized by the Inquisitor’s guards and imprisoned. Later in the evening, the Inquisitor comes, alone, to visit Him in His cell; the Inquisitor’s first words are: “Is it Thou? Thou?”<sup>102</sup> When he doesn’t receive an answer, he adds: “Don’t answer, be silent. What canst Thou say, indeed?”<sup>103</sup> The very words of the Inquisitor signal that the narrative – his narrative – is on the monologic plane. It is important to remember that Jesus is imprisoned both by material walls and by the monologic plane of the Inquisitor’s discourse, a monologue delivered to a silent prisoner. The implications for freedom are clear. The tone of the Inquisitor is one of world-weariness. He is an old man of almost ninety, with a withered face and sunken eyes. When Alyosha breaks into the monologue to say that he does not understand, Ivan laughs. He says that “all that matters is that the old man should speak out, should speak openly of what he has thought in silence for ninety years.”<sup>104</sup> The prisoner silently listens to the charge brought against him, and the Inquisitor says that for fifteen centuries humans have wrestled with the terrible gift of freedom, but that now “people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet. But that has been our doing.”<sup>105</sup> It is important to note here that while the poem can be read as an attack on totalitarianism, Williams does not see the story as about tyranny and freedom but rather

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<sup>99</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 295.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 294 and 295.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

as about truth and falsehood, about what human existence is like and whether it is possible to bear the weight of such an existence with love.<sup>106</sup> The Inquisitor explains that freedom has been relinquished for the sake of happiness. He then goes on to rehearse, in a startling manner, the three temptations in the desert; he says: “Judge Thyself who was right – Thou or he who questioned Thee then?”<sup>107</sup> The Inquisitor claims that the three temptations Jesus encountered and rejected are what is needed to rule over men: “There are three powers, three powers alone, able to conquer and to hold captive for ever the conscience of these impotent rebels for their happiness – those forces are miracle, mystery and authority. Thou hast rejected all three and hast set the example for doing so.”<sup>108</sup> Men crave bread, earthly bread; men crave a community of worship, and men crave a powerful and unifying authority. If these are provided, then a measure of happiness can be achieved for the mass of men. The Inquisitor claims that the mass of men, however, are “weighed down with the fearful burden of free choice.”<sup>109</sup> He acknowledges that some of the children of freedom (children is a word that he reiterates, and this links back again to the harrowing stories from “Rebellion”) are able to love and to sacrifice, but only a few. The weak cannot endure what the strong can, and the message and the example laid out is only for the strong. The Inquisitor cries out for the weak: “How is the weak soul to blame that it is unable to receive such terrible gifts? Canst Thou have simply come to the elect and for the elect? But if so, it is a mystery and we cannot understand it.”<sup>110</sup> And so, the Inquisitor tells Jesus, what he suspects he knows already and has come to Seville to “hinder”, the acceptance, by the Church, of the three forces Jesus rejected. He says in rebellious defiance: “why dost Thou look silently and searchingly at me with Thy mild eyes? Be angry. I don’t want Thy love, for I love Thee not.”<sup>111</sup> The Inquisitor explains the Church’s decision to take the sword of Caesar was done out of a desire to create a universal state and peace. He says: “The

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<sup>106</sup> Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 124.

<sup>107</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 299.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

most painful secrets of their conscience, all, all, they will bring to us, and we shall have an answer for all. And they will be glad to believe our answer, for it will save them from the great anxiety and terrible agony they endure at present in making a free decision for themselves.”<sup>112</sup> “Peacefully they will expire in Thy name, and beyond the grave they will find nothing but death. But we shall keep the secret, and for their happiness we will allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity. Though if there were anything in the other world, it certainly would not be for such as they.”<sup>113</sup> The Grand Inquisitor, with whom the power of life and death is entrusted, concludes: “Tomorrow I shall burn Thee. Dixi.”<sup>114</sup> *Dixi* is a very interesting selection: I have spoken. It is a God-like termination of discussion. In effect, the word is the very antithesis of Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony; *dixi* is the antithesis of freedom, the freedom to answer or to refuse what has been said; *dixi* is a pronouncement that stands in direct opposition to the idea of unfinalizability. It is, according to Williams, the language of violence and the demonic.

According to Bakhtin, any reading that would seek to extricate “The Grand Inquisitor” as a story that stands alone outside of the novel betrays a serious misunderstanding of the novel genre. Indeed, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist claim in the introduction to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* that “literary systems are comprised of canons, and ‘novelization’ is fundamentally anti-canonical.”<sup>115</sup> Further, and most importantly for our reading of the Inquisitor monologue, Emerson and Holquist assert that the novel as a genre “will not permit generic monologue.”<sup>116</sup> Thus, in a manner, when Ivan finishes his Inquisitor monologue, we should expect – due to generic expectations – that the monologue will not stand alone – *dixi*. This is exactly what we see. When Ivan finishes his poem (though he has yet to impose the ending of the kiss from Christ), Alyosha, in the spirit of polyphonic dialogue, makes a rather startling assessment in direct contradiction to Ivan’s intent (if his intention is not ironical): “Your poem is

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<sup>112</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 308.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>115</sup> Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, “Introduction” to *The Dialogic Imagination* (Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), xxxi.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxi.

in praise of Jesus, not in blame of Him – as you meant it to be. And who will believe you about freedom? Is that the way to understand it?”<sup>117</sup> What is most interesting is Alyosha’s assessment via the metric of tone: “that’s their ideal, but there’s no sort of mystery or lofty melancholy about it... It’s simple lust of power, of filthy earthly gain, of domination – something like a universal serfdom with them as masters – that’s all they stand for. They don’t even believe in God perhaps. Your suffering inquisitor is a mere fantasy.”<sup>118</sup> Eventually, Alyosha comes round to what he calls the secret of the poem: “Your inquisitor does not believe in God, that’s his secret!”<sup>119</sup> To this, Ivan replies: “At last you have guessed it. It’s perfectly true that that’s the whole secret.”<sup>120</sup> Near the end of the fraternal dialogue, Alyosha asks Ivan how the poem ends. If we see Alyosha and Jesus as enduring parallel trials from parallel inquisitors using parallel monologic “imprisoning” accusations, then it is rather interesting that silence and love reshape the end; Alyosha’s and Jesus’ ability to absorb, and not return, all the bitterness, all the anger and all the despair changes the tone of the discussion for both Ivan and the Inquisitor. The Inquisitor waits for Jesus to reply, but he receives no words only a kiss, “softly” bestowed. The unnamed Inquisitor releases his prisoner, telling him to never return; “the kiss glows in his heart, but the old man adheres to his idea.”<sup>121</sup> Likewise, Ivan fully expects Alyosha to denounce and disown him when his atheist secret is revealed, but he is instead disarmed and delighted by his brother’s reply – a soft and wordless kiss.

Fraternal dialogue (a tête-à-tête exchange) is certainly an interesting way to dramatize the polyphonic. In this case, Ivan, the older brother, is the atheist engaging his brother, the novice, in a conversation about God. With admirable composure and equanimity, the younger brother lends a patient ear to hear his brother’s voice. After listening to the sustained attack both on him, and by extension on his dying Elder, father Zossima, Alyosha still has enough love to kiss his brother, a reaction

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<sup>117</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 309.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

that delights Ivan. Here is a fruitful conversation. Not all such conversations would be so beneficial. I do not wish to make too lengthy a digression here, but there is a real, contemporary and relevant parallel to this fictional fraternal dialogue that may serve to temper enthusiasm for Bakhtin's polyphonic approach lest we become too sanguine about its prospects. In 2010, Peter Hitchens, brother of Christopher, published his own book, *The Rage Against God*. The title, of course, suggests both the anger against God and the current fashionability of such strident hostility: it is all the rage to rage against God. In this case, Peter is Alyosha and Christopher is Ivan, but this real fraternal dialogue did not end with a loving kiss. The brothers, Peter says, almost came to a physical altercation when they first publically debated in 2008. Moreover, while Peter says that he does not seek "to answer fury with fury or scorn with scorn,"<sup>122</sup> he is not entirely successful at avoiding the scornful and derisive tone that characterizes his brother's book. Indeed, Rupert Shortt, in his review of Hitchens' book in *The Guardian*, says: "*The Rage Against God* is meant to be a grown-up substitute for ... shouting matches. Within limits, the project is a success."<sup>123</sup> Within limits is not a phrase which should be interpreted as a ringing endorsement of the benefits of exchange.

What then are we to make of this poem/fable/parable/story/monologue of "The Grand Inquisitor"? Lawrence sees the story in this way: the Inquisitor is the thinking person, specifically, the thinking self of Dostoevsky. The three Karamazov brothers, he does not admit Smerdyakov, are read by Lawrence as an allegorical representation of the author: Ivan (the thoughtful self), Dimitri (the passional self) and Alyosha (the inspirational self).<sup>124</sup> Further, Lawrence claims:

And we cannot doubt that *the Inquisitor speaks Dostoevsky's own final opinion about Jesus*. The opinion is, baldly, this: Jesus, you are inadequate. Men must correct you. And Jesus in the end gives the kiss of acquiescence to the Inquisitor, as Alyosha does to Ivan. The two inspired ones recognize the inadequacy

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<sup>122</sup> Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: how atheism led me to faith*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 11-12.

<sup>123</sup> Rupert Shortt, review of *The Rage Against God*, by Peter Hitchens. *The Guardian*. April 17, 2010.

<sup>124</sup> Lawrence, "Preface to Dostoevsky," 90-91.

of their inspiration: the thoughtful one has to accept the responsibility of complete adjustment.<sup>125</sup>  
(emphasis added)

Williams rightly challenges the notion that D.H. Lawrence's reading should be a lodestar. It is the very notion that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor is an attempt to decisively resolve the question of religious belief that Williams seeks to answer. For Williams and Bakhtin, the Grand Inquisitor is not such a construct. Whatever our reading of this story within a story is, it cannot be wrenched out of the novel as a whole. This much Bakhtin asserts quite clearly. We see that Williams follows this pattern, for his book on Dostoevsky, while it is replete with references to the seminal book and the seminal story of the Inquisitor is, in fact, an examination of Dostoevsky's work as a whole.

### **3.3 Stay with Christ rather than with Truth?**

*Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* deals with most of Dostoevsky's novels, but it focuses primarily on the four major works that come after the author's exile in Siberia: *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, *The Devils* and *The Brothers Karamazov*. The book is divided into five chapters, and the first chapter "Christ against the Truth?" represents the most sustained interaction with the figure of Ivan Karamazov and his story of the Grand Inquisitor. The title of the chapter is a reference to a 1854 letter sent by Dostoevsky, a famous letter for those who study the novelist, to Natalya Fonvizina where he declares, very problematically for Williams, that "if someone were to prove to me that Christ was outside the truth, and it was really the case that truth lay outside Christ, then I should choose to stay with Christ rather than with truth."<sup>126</sup> This confessional statement, albeit a hypothetical one, on the part of an intelligent Christian confirms a commonly held opinion among some atheists, namely, that when presented with the truth, those who hold to religious convictions will choose – based only on will – to reject truth. This reasoning begins usually with the dismissive premise that many who hold religious convictions do so simply because they are ignorant; however, if intelligent people hold religious

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<sup>125</sup> Lawrence, "Preface to Dostoevsky," 91.

<sup>126</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 15.



convictions, as clearly many such as Dostoevsky do, then the reason for this is that religious conviction is merely human will that flies in the face of human reason and what evidence clearly reveals to be untrue. In short, for many atheists, when truth is demonstrated to be against Christ, those with religious convictions often chose Christ. This, I would submit, is the view espoused by both Hitchens and Dawkins. This, too, I would submit, is in part the reason for their stridency. Seen in such a voluntaristic manner, religious conviction appears to lack integrity, and there are very few who suffer a lack of integrity in humanity with equanimity. Thus, when Rowan Williams tackles this issue, he is taking part in a public conversation. He approaches this issue in a rather interesting way; he assumes that the voluntaristic declaration made in the 1854 letter is something which Dostoevsky must work through. Of course, as a novelist, the way he works through such questions is through fiction, through polyphony. It is the nature of Dostoevsky that he gives full voice to the other side, like Milton's Satan, the devil's argument is no mere ill-conceived and hastily-constructed straw man to be easily demolished for an easy victory. No, for the polyphonic to be authentic, the voice must be fully weighted, for only in this way can Dostoevsky wrestle with the idea with integrity. This, then, is Williams' oblique approach to the contemporary conversation. When Williams engages with Ivan Karamazov and his poem of the Grand Inquisitor, he is not only part of an ongoing conversation with those who move in the sphere of theology such as William Hamilton, but also with the cultured despisers of religion.

For Williams, Christ-over-truth voluntarism – which he describes as “understanding religious conviction as the will's adherence to its own projections”<sup>127</sup> – is intolerable, and he argues that it is intolerable for Dostoevsky, too. Williams' claims that if “choosing Christ over the truth means that the most significant element in religious commitment is the sheer power of will to hold to whatever it likes, we are... in the territory of violence.”<sup>128</sup> Is this merely a projection on Williams' part, seeking to have a

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<sup>127</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 24.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

much-loved and deeply-revered author hold to his own religious convictions? I cannot answer that, but Williams does marshal a cogent case for his position. He claims that this type of religious conviction, “a risky self-projection in the face of a void,”<sup>129</sup> links back to Lessing “ugly ditch” and forward to Bultmann’s Christian existentialism.<sup>130</sup> How does he counter Dostoevsky’s words in the letter, words it should be noted not written in a fictional context? Williams invokes polyphony. First, Williams, as we might well expect, claims that it would be a mistake, according to the notion of unfinalizability, “to take the words of the Fonvizina letter as some sort of immutable testimony.”<sup>131</sup> Later, he draws an interesting connection between the letter and Ivan Karamazov’s great parable. Here, again, he claims that “the Inquisitor narrative is not meant to be a last word in the novel and should not be abstracted from the rest.”<sup>132</sup> Indeed, Williams sees the Inquisitor episode as an example of how Dostoevsky gives voice to his own thoughts, in a dialogic manner, in the words of another person in order to examine and critique those thoughts. Williams writes that Dostoevsky’s “writing is unquestionably one of the ways in which he explores and challenges his own faith, we can expect to find internal arguments and tension in the work.”<sup>133</sup>

### 3.4 The Kiss of Compassion

We have already summarized the Inquisitor story. How does Williams read it? For him, the climax of the story is the kiss, or kisses. Williams notes that we expect a verbal response. Both Ivan and the Inquisitor have been given a great deal of time to speak, if one were to be conducting this polyphonic exchange according to the rules of formal debate, one might cry foul – one side has been given all too much time and prevalence. Thus, at the end of the Inquisitor’s speech we await Jesus’ response as the Inquisitor does: “the old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and

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<sup>129</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 16.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

terrible.”<sup>134</sup> Jesus approaches the old man “and in silence softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips.”<sup>135</sup> “That was all his answer.”<sup>136</sup> The whole speech cries out for a response. It is an outrageous speech, a scandalous speech, a kind of carnivalesque inversion,<sup>137</sup> to employ the language of Bakhtin. The Devil is the wise spirit? Falsehood is truth? Freedom is an unendurable bondage? Yet, the carnivalesque elements in the Inquisitor’s speech echo the carnivalesque elements of the gospel. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. God becomes man. Heaven comes down and becomes earth. The king becomes a slave. Victory is won through defeat on the cross. The whole story is shocking and unsettling. Jesus is once again imprisoned and on the verge of another painful execution as an enemy of the state. The whole thing is an outrage in a manner that echoes the outrages in the previous chapter when Ivan trots out his collection of horrors done to Russian children. It is an outrage that meek and innocent Jesus, having said nothing but having worked miracles (the raising of the dead girl) should be taken and imprisoned and spoken to in such a manner. We are invited to be outraged, to feel rage. It is most fitting then that no words are spoken and only a kiss is given as a response to the Inquisitor. Williams sees the kiss as that which “establishes Christ’s freedom.”<sup>138</sup> He notes that it does so in two senses: “it literally secures freedom from the prison and it represents the freedom to refuse the argument over power and

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<sup>134</sup> Dostoevsky, *Brother Karamazov*, 311.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>137</sup> The carnivalesque is a seminal Bakhtinian concept. Carnival time and place is when and where, according to Bakhtin, “people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact.” *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 123. In essence, the carnival is a scandalous inversion, but at the heart of this inversion is the need for an open and free dialogue which will bring about renewal. Carnival is a topsy-turvy time when the great are brought low and the low are raised up. There are parallels between Bakhtin’s carnival and the Gospel. In terms of dialogue, from a Christian perspective, the image of holy and unapproachable God brought low is carnivalesque inversion. God comes to earth as a man and empties himself of His power. Only during carnival time, do the great and the low interact freely. It is at such times that one begins to see, hear and know the Other. Thus, kenosis is a kind of carnival: God is made low for a short period of time for the purpose of interaction. Moreover, according to Bakhtin, “the primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king.” *Problems*, 124. The carnival appears, among other places, in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 122-145.

<sup>138</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 31.

tragic necessity.”<sup>139</sup> Whether Ivan had intended his Jesus to be reduced to silence, to be unable to answer, to be left in the realm of the demonic (unable to respond) is of some interest, but what we see is that Alyosha refuses the meaning of the kiss presented to him in his brother’s story. Rather, through his imitation of Jesus, he brings a new way of seeing the story and the kiss, and he brings joy to his brother, too. Williams sees Christ’s response as an “act of gratuitous compassion – not the Inquisitorial compassion that seeks to remove the suffering by force, but a bare recognition of the Inquisitor’s imprisonment in the tragic contradiction of falsehood for the sake of truth.”<sup>140</sup> While Christ’s response, Williams notes, does not change the Inquisitor, apart from the “glow” left in his heart, the response says no to a few things: Christ is not “overcome by the Inquisitor’s violence,”<sup>141</sup> and Christ is not overcome by the power of the Inquisitor’s rhetoric. Williams writes: “human freedom is enabled to respond as it needs to in order to be itself when this nonworldly freedom becomes apparent.”<sup>142</sup> But, in the end, the way Williams sees it is that there is no definitive answer to the charge put forward by the Grand Inquisitor, and this is the whole point of polyphony. He writes:

Dostoevsky is concerned as a writer to show what belief and unbelief are like rather than either to conclude an argument or to take refuge in the unfathomables of subjectivity. Given that he has repeatedly stressed the liberty of human beings to refuse what is put before them, he leaves us with the necessary nonresolution of statements and behaviors within the interaction of the narrative – the ‘polyphony’ so famously discussed by Bakhtin...<sup>143</sup>

Let us return to the heart of the matter of this paper – the idea of non-closure. Williams’ claims around non-closure seem, at this point, fairly clear. He writes that when one seeks to “affirm something other than the world of plain facts and obvious accounts of them, the world of mathematical closure,”<sup>144</sup> one cannot aspire toward closure. One should not “approach human affairs as if they belonged to the

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<sup>139</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 31.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-40.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

world of evidence and determined outcome” for to do so is “bound to end in violence – ideological violence to the understanding of what humanity is, literal violence toward those who will not be convinced.”<sup>145</sup> The Dostoevskian novel, Williams repeatedly points out, requires a resistance to closure. This resistance permits the characters freedom to refuse ideas and argument that are put in front of them, permits them the freedom to go on answering each other and themselves. Throughout his discussion of Dostoevsky in his book, Williams weaves the literary theme of closure in with the theological theme of closure. In apophatic theology, the principle, in Williams’ words, seems to be that “whatever is specifically said of God has to be un-said as soon as it seems to offer the seductive prospect of a definition of the divine essence.”<sup>146</sup>

What promise and what danger does the polyphonic, especially its resistance to closure, hold in the field of theology. Williams has been weaving the two disciplines together; it is time to separate the two. In the chapter to follow, I will look at the notion of the polyphonic and of unfinalizability in theology.

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<sup>145</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 58.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

## Chapter 4

### 4 Polyphony and Christianity: Pro and Contra

“... we are obliged to listen to the entire polyphony of revelation.” – Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>147</sup>

We have seen how Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic – a notion that Bakhtin felt might aptly be described via the image of church communion – has been embraced by Rowan Williams in his book on Dostoevsky, a book which, as I have argued earlier, attempts to engage three big religious conversations: one around the figure of Dostoevsky, one around the relationship between the secular and the sacred in the modern world and one about the Anglican Communion. We have also seen how this notion of polyphony makes a case for an approach to both communication and conflict between and among various groups. We have also seen how the very nature of this polyphonic approach resists closure and insists upon an ongoing tension, a tension that is seen as not only natural but also healthy, an approach where human voices are free to interact, free to go on answering each other. This polyphonic approach, naturally, has its detractors. At the heart of the complaints made by some detractors is the idea that the polyphonic, while it is admirably inclusive, popular and democratic, while it is admirably free and open, while it makes space for the marginalized and the silenced, this approach is unwilling to come to a resolution. Bakhtin, as Emerson points out, “does not do beginnings and ends,”<sup>148</sup> for the polyphonic is “wholly committed to process and to the dynamics of response.”<sup>149</sup> Decision are, therefore, required to be provisional. This type of provisionality can easily be seen as indecision. One thinks of T.S. Eliot’s memorable lines from one of the great poems of the twentieth century “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the modern movement toward relativism and

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<sup>147</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism* Trans. Graham Harrison. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1987), 11.

<sup>148</sup> Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 157.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

uncertainty: “In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.”<sup>150</sup> This acceptance of provisionality or uncertainty can be seen as liberating (freedom is, of course a central concern for Bakhtin), but it can also be seen as crippling. In this chapter, the central concern is the issue of the efficacy of the polyphonic approach to theological conversations. Here is the controlling question for this chapter: In what spheres, if any, should Christians be expected to live with the tension, uncertainty and provisionality that are characteristic of the polyphonic approach? This chapter, therefore, is divided into a *pro* and *contra* examination of polyphony from a Christian perspective.

#### **4.1 Pro: In Defence of Polyphony**

It seems appropriate to begin with what is likely to be the least contentious application of the polyphonic approach in Christianity – the individual Christian’s dialogue with God. If ever there was an example of the need to go on answering and talking, to never close down a discussion, to remain open to judgement and change, it is with God. This conviction is clearly held by both Rowan Williams and by Dostoevsky. Time and again, Williams speaks about just this type of dialogue in his book. However, at this point it is interesting to note that this conviction is something that Emerson claims is true for Dostoevsky. Emerson believes that Bakhtin hears this polyphonic exchange in Dostoevsky’s novels:

He (Bakhtin) would argue, I think, that Christ had come to seem ‘more true’ to Dostoevsky largely because, by that time in his life (long after his Siberian exile), Dostoevsky had put in so much energy to understand Him, had received so many varied ‘answers’ within himself, had returned so often to the same beloved set of parables and pondered them so deeply, that it no longer mattered what issues had been resolved or concretely ‘proven’ by the image and example of Christ. For what matters ultimately to human beings and what generates value in our lives rests on two factors: first, where we turn for help, and then, the *time put in*. Thus I should not ask such questions as ‘Who am I?’ – an essentialist paradox that admits no answer – but rather, ‘How much time do I have to become something else?’ The choice to spend time with another personality and to take its approach to the world seriously is itself the core and substance of truth.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 14.

<sup>151</sup> Emerson, *The First Hundred Years*, 158.

Clearly, Emerson sees the polyphonic approach adopted by Dostoevsky in his approach to God. It is the level of intimacy with God that is achieved by the time put into the process of exchange that really matters, not what “issues [have] been resolved.” It is the process, not resolution, that really matters. Do other Christians see the exchange between God in a manner that is suggestive of the polyphonic? Admittedly, few Christians would lay claim to the exchange between Creator and creature as an exchange between equal voices; however, on the point of closure, specifically on the point of an unending exchange in the ongoing process of becoming, many Christians, I would submit, would agree to such an approach. J.I. Packer, an evangelical Anglican theologian, in writing about the Anglican identity issues in the communion speaks about an interesting distinction: there is a need for certainty in the area of doctrine and the acceptance of uncertainty or process in relations with God. In the passage below, Packer is writing about how there is a lack of certainty and a privileging of an ongoing process that is at the root of the current Anglican identity crisis. In the particular passage which is quoted at length below, Packer is explaining how his occasional works are an attempt to establish a Christian’s conscience:

Establishing consciences means helping believers from uncertainty into clear certainty on any aspect of their ongoing relation to God about which they currently have doubts: where they stand with him, how and where they should be serving him, how to honour and please him in bewildering circumstances... *A Kind of Noah’s Ark?* (1981) had in view clergy and laity who were baffled and discouraged by the continually broadening spectrum of tolerated unorthodoxies within the Church of England...”<sup>152</sup>

We hear Packer speak not only about an ongoing relationship with God and about the idea of a questioning relationship, but also about the relationship between doubt and identity. For Packer, it seems clear that there should be a movement from uncertainty into clear certainty. The movement is progressive; this is not really dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense. The relationship which Dostoevsky and Williams speak about has to do with living with the tension of doubts, not simply tackling doubts one at a time, ticking them off a list. Packer does not seem to be advocating for a polyphonic exchange with the

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<sup>152</sup> Packer and Wright, *Anglican Evangelical Identity*, 1.



ideas of uncertainty and doubt as Williams and Dostoevsky seem to. Further, according to Packer, the broadening spectrum of tolerated unorthodoxies within the Anglican Communion is baffling and discouraging. This spectrum, I think, might be described by Bakhtin as polyphony. I wish to take up one word that Packer employs – discouraging. That which takes away the heart of the Christian, which leads the Christian to inaction, could be seen as a difficult position to defend. The question that arises from such an assessment might then be: Does the fault reside with oneself for being discouraged by such an approach or rather with the approach itself? Is there something inherently flawed about an approach which demands the individual to proceed provisionally, with an ongoing tension between certainty and doubt? Is certainty in beliefs something the Christian must relinquish?

It is important to acknowledge that Packer, at least from the excerpt above, assumes that some things in the Christian faith are ongoing. Presumably, one's character, one's understanding of who one is, of who God is, of the nature of one's relationship with God are all things which are ongoing so to speak. Many Christians, it is important to acknowledge, could see themselves and their relationship with God in such an unfinished manner. The foundational idea of a Christian pilgrimage implies the idea of unending change until death. The key seems to be *where* one expects to see change: change in me, change in the Church, change in the doctrines of the Church, change in God. The Church as a body of Christians changes, but do the values that guide the Church change? Are these values unfinalizable, too? Put in another way, one might ask: Is truth univocal or polyphonic? Hans Urs von Balthasar has a short book that deals with this issue. For him, God does not change, but since we do not fully know God, when more of God is revealed to the Christian, God might, from the perspective of the individual, seem to change.

## 4.2 The Polyphonous Orchestra of Creation

According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, a contemporary Catholic theologian, truth is symphonic. Like William Paley's *Natural Theology*, von Balthasar opens his book, *Truth is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, with a controlling analogy. Paley, of course, uses the watch and the watchmaker analogy to discuss the truth of what he sees in the world: a world of enchanting and dazzling complexity and design, a world that reveals the glory and greatness of God.<sup>153</sup> Von Balthasar, like his fellow theologian, uses an analogy to discuss the truth of what he sees in the world, namely that "the world was, is and always will be pluralist."<sup>154</sup> He writes: "in his revelation, God performs a symphony, and it is impossible to say which is richer: the seamless genius of his composition or the polyphonous orchestra of Creation that he has prepared to play it."<sup>155</sup> As the title of his book clearly asserts, von Balthasar's thesis is that truth is symphonic. For him, plurality is not a new problem: the world was always pluralist, and the church was always pluralist. He makes specific reference to the ancient Christian analogy of the body, citing I Corinthians 12: "For the body does not consist of one member but out of many... If all were a single organ, where would the body be?" The problem that is the occasion for his book is that the pluralist reality of today is, according to von Balthasar, impatiently "tugging at the framework of a unity that is felt to be a prison."<sup>156</sup> Like Paley, von Balthasar looks at the world as God's revelation, and what he sees in the world is the presence of plurality, and he concludes that theology must come to grips with this reality as a revelation of God. He writes: "If we really want to hear something intelligible, we are obliged to listen to the entire polyphony of revelation."<sup>157</sup> It would seem clear that even though von Balthasar uses the word symphony in the title of his book, he is also willing to use the word polyphony

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<sup>153</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology, or Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature* Ed. Matthew Eddy and David Knight. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008).

<sup>154</sup> von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, 9.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

as a synonym. In case there was any doubt about the nature of the comparison I am attempting to make, consider how he closes his introduction:

Today, therefore, perhaps the most necessary thing to proclaim and take to heart is that Christian truth is symphonic. Sym-phony by no means implies a sickly sweet harmony lacking all tension. Great music is always dramatic: there is a continual process of intensification, followed by a release of tension at a higher level. But dissonance is not the same as cacophony.<sup>158</sup>

Consider the parallels between Bakhtinian polyphony and von Balthasar's notion of symphonic truth.

Here again, we see the idea of a healthy and fruitful tension, a co-existence of opposites. Here again, we see the idea of a continual process. Here again, we have the refusal to accept that only the univocal can be harmonious – “dissonance is not the same as cacophony.” Interestingly enough, von Balthasar proclaims that Christians must take to heart this truth. If they are speaking of the same plurality within the church, what Packer sees as a discouraging spectrum of tolerated unorthodoxies, von Balthasar hears as a symphony of divine revelation.

Another obvious point in favour of polyphony in the Christian community, at least in part, is Scripture. It is easy to hear the Bible as a collection of many voices engaged in a kind of ongoing dialogue or exchange with each other and with God. Writers wrestle with the words of others, with their relationships with others, with themselves and God. One thinks of the Book of Job, which begins with a fascinating tête-à-tête exchange (quintessentially polyphonic) between God and Satan and then moves on to an agonizing series of conversations Job has with his wife, his friends and God. However, even though Scripture, at least in this sense, seems polyphonic, it does not completely fulfill Bakhtin's description of polyphony. For Christian communities, at least from classical antiquity, it is clear that not only is Scripture central to the community, but for many it was and is authoritative, too.

In *Symphonic Theology*, Vern Poythress takes up von Balthasar's controlling music metaphor in his examination of theology from a Biblical and evangelical perspective. He sees symphonic theology in

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<sup>158</sup> Von Balthasar, *Truth is Symphonic*, 15.

the following way: “We use what we have gained from one perspective to reinforce, correct, or improve what we understood through another. I called this procedure *symphonic theology* because it is analogous to the blending of various musical instruments to express the variations of a symphonic theme.”<sup>159</sup> In essence, Poythress makes a case for the validity of multiple perspectives. He subdivides the concept of perspective into four categories. First, he identifies analogies and metaphors as a kind of perspective. He cites a series of Biblical examples; one is: “Wisdom is like a woman who invites guests to her feast. (Proverbs 9:1-5)”<sup>160</sup> Second, he distinguishes between *one-time* analogies from *controlling* analogies. For example, he cites: God is our Father; God is light; God is our shepherd. “Each of these analogies,” he writes, “invites us to see God from a different perspective... to see God as analogous to a different aspect of the created world and its relationships... None of these analogies by itself represents a complete ‘theory’ of God.”<sup>161</sup> Further, he asserts that “the Bible does not use a single dominant perspective in an exclusive way.”<sup>162</sup> This, of course, bears some rather obvious parallels to the polyphonic. Indeed, Poythress then discusses the four Gospel accounts – four voices focusing on different themes and different aspects of Jesus. For Poythress, the differences which arise when different voices speak are “harmonizable (though we may not always see right away how to harmonize).”<sup>163</sup> The third kind of perspective that he identifies is around selection. He acknowledges the idea of selectivity as a kind of perspective: differences in interests and themes and subjects in the Bible. Even though Poythress willingly concedes to the validity of different perspectives in the first three categories, he writes: “in a fourth and final sense, there is single dominant perspective in the Bible. That is, the Bible teaches us a particular view of God, ourselves, and the world.”<sup>164</sup> This view is described in a

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<sup>159</sup> Vern P. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1987), 43.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

creedal manner by Poythress. In short, for the first three perspectives, he is willing to see truth as something that can be approached via different perspectives, where numerous views could and should be viewed as complementary, not contradictory. The final type perspective, though, is exclusive. Unlike with the other three categories, this final perspective is what he calls a worldview, and this cannot be harmonized with other worldviews. It is “ultimate, universal and therefore exclusive.”<sup>165</sup>

### **4.3 Contra: The Case against Polyphony**

There is much within the polyphonic that could be embraced by Christians and by Christian theology, but there are elements of the polyphonic that also raise concerns. Let us begin with the Latin adage: *cui bono*? Who benefits from this adoption of this polyphonic approach? More pointedly, from where does the impetus to change come? Is plurality, as von Balthasar appears to see it, a kind of version of natural theology? Is plurality a reality of the world and the church because that is what God intended? Or, is plurality a form of confusion that is less evidence of God’s design and more of humanity’s? In short, plurality is basically a fact. Pluralism, a warm embrace of this type of diversity, is a value system. Whose value system? Let us consider, at least for the moment, polyphony as a value system of the world. When Christians and Christian communities feel compelled to change, the most important question to ask is why. If the change is being introduced by pressures to conform to the world’s values, to imitate the world’s customs and behaviours, then perhaps the change is suspect. Paul writes in Romans 12:2: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is.” Who, then, advocates for the polyphonic approach? Certainly, a secular case can be made that the polyphonic approach is a necessary response to plurality. One of the highest values in the modern secular world is tolerance, a value that is necessary in a deeply pluralistic world. The great cities of the West are filled

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<sup>165</sup> Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*, 19.

with people of different nationalities, tongues and faiths; without tolerance, these cities of the West would hardly be sustainable. One could, therefore, see the notion of polyphony not as a spiritual approach to truth, but as a secular response to social pressure.

#### **4.4 *Modus Vivendi*: The Secular World's Polyphony**

John Gray, an influential philosopher who routinely critiques what he refers to as liberal late modern societies, takes a position on plurality that looks quite polyphonic in his essay "*Modus Vivendi*."<sup>166</sup> He takes up the ancient philosophical question: What is the good life? His answer is that it is actually a series of good lives, different but equally good ways of living – a position that not only acknowledges the reality of plurality in modern society but also makes a virtue out of it. More specifically, the subject of his essay is the idea of different ways of living in a liberal pluralistic society with a tradition of toleration. Liberal toleration, according to Gray, has two faces. "From one side, toleration is the pursuit of an ideal form of life. From the other, it is the search for terms of peace among different ways of life. In the former view, liberal institutions are seen as applications of universal principles. In the latter, they are a means to peaceful co-existence. In the first, liberalism is a prescription for a universal regime. In the second, it is a project of coexistence that can be pursued in many regimes."<sup>167</sup> These two faces, Gray claims, are often conflated, and he argues that the one must be discarded as an unhelpful inheritance from the Enlightenment. According to Gray, when modern liberal societies see toleration as an ideal form or way of life, one based on universal principles leading to some kind of universal regime, he sees hegemony. Such a project fails to adequately account for a fundamental quality of humanity and society – that conflict in the city cannot be resolved through the application of human reason. The error in liberal pluralistic modern societies comes, Gray argues, when there is an assumption that there is an ideal (one ideal), that there are universal principles and that

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<sup>166</sup> John Gray, "*Modus Vivendi*" *Gray's Anatomy: Selected Writing* (Anchor Canada, 2009).

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

there could a universal regime. Oneness runs contrary to pluralism. Gray writes: “our inherited conception of toleration presupposes that one way of life is best for all humankind.”<sup>168</sup> We need, he argues, to begin from the premise that there is no one way of living that is best for everyone and that, therefore, many ways of living is what is best for everyone. This is the *modus vivendi* of the title. One of the underlying assumptions with his promotion of *modus vivendi* is that peaceful coexistence does not assume an end of conflicts; the goal of consensus is illusionary. To use the language of Bakhtin, the desire to merge voices into a voice is antithetical to the polyphonic. Gray writes: “we do not need common values in order to live together in peace. We need common institutions in which many forms of life can coexist.”<sup>169</sup> For Gray, it is central that we relinquish the illusion that rationality will bring us to a consensus on common values; peaceful coexistence is a laudable goal, but this goal does not require a consensus on values; moreover, it is common institutions, not common values, which are needed. Something like this *modus vivendi* view of Gray’s is what we will see in Williams’ approach to Anglican Communion crisis: the Communion (a common institution) needs to stay together even when members do not share the same values (uncommon values). In the language of Gray’s essay, the question is: Do Anglicans in the Communion need common values or just a common institution?

This distinction between the ideal of consensus on common values and the ideal of peaceful coexistence is important. Gray writes: “The span of good lives of which humans are capable cannot be contained in any one community or tradition. The good for humans is too beset by conflict for that to be possible.”<sup>170</sup> What does Gray’s argument mean for our topic? Must there be a “span of good lives” in the Anglican Communion? What kind of span is possible? Gray’s essay is about the problem of pluralism and the conflicts which arise when a consensus on values is seen as the ideal and when the ideal cannot be achieved. His solution is to relinquish the dream of a consensus on common values and to acknowledge

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<sup>168</sup> Gray, “*Modus Vivendi*,” 25.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

the ubiquity of conflict (accept that notion that there will be no closure) and embrace the value of peaceful coexistence. This *modus vivendi* approach proposed by Gray sounds very much like the approach advocated by Rowan Williams in his book on Dostoevsky, an approach that I have argued is applied by Williams in a series of conversations.

Leaving aside the question of whether or not the polyphonic is a Christian response to truth or a secular response to social pressure for greater tolerance, it seems clear that the main reason why Williams' polyphonic approach could be seen as a failure is because it fails to take into account the breadth of his audience. It is my contention that the polyphonic is, at least in general, embraced in two of the three communities with whom Williams is conversing; it is not hard to see that Bakhtin is a decidedly fashionable theorist in the world of the academy. His work is used and cited by many, especially those who have traditionally felt disempowered and silenced. Further, in the secular world, the hermeneutic of suspicion is commonly accepted. Conclusions, theories and practices are generally seen as provisional and tentative. The willingness to suspend judgement, in much of the secular world's eyes, seems like wisdom. New knowledge and new ideas will, so the received thinking goes, come forward and challenge and/or replace old ideas and thinking. Little permanence can be expected; conclusions and resolutions should be provisional. Thus, when Williams converses with academics about Dostoevsky, most of his audience would accept provisionality as good. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, any decision will be subject to revision or reversal. The problem with Williams' polyphonic approach is that in the sacred world, this acceptance of provisionality is not a given in all conversations. While the polyphonic approach swims along with the current of secular culture, while it is the accepted norm in a discussion among literary critics or in a discussion among cultural theorists, such an approach cannot be assumed to be normative with another communion – the Anglican Communion. Indeed, for some parts of the Anglican Communion, this approach and its foundational assumptions swim against the current of sacred culture and its history. In some ways, polyphony is profoundly antithetical to Christianity.



#### 4.5 A Shadow Gospel?

One of the five so-called *solas*, *sola Scriptura*, runs directly contrary to Bakhtinian notions that there is no authoritative word. *Sola Scriptura* is the assertion that Scripture is the final and deciding word in matters of faith. Many in the Protestant tradition would assume that this is a faithful and orthodox view, an important and non-reversible part of the Anglican Communion's tradition, but it is not one that Charles Raven believes is accepted by Williams.<sup>171</sup> While orthodox/ evangelical Anglicans would accept that there have been various readings of the Bible, that there is, at least in part, a polyphonic quality to the Bible, they would not accept that the Bible is not authoritative. This view of the polyphonic approach is very much evident in Charles Raven's critique of Rowan Williams and his theology and his leadership during the Anglican Communion crisis. While Raven never uses the word "polyphony" in his book, and while Raven does not even cite or make reference to Williams' *Dostoevsky*, many of the central attributes of the polyphonic are singled out for criticism in Raven's critique of Williams' theology and leadership.

For Raven, it is the polyphonic nature of Williams' approach – a "theological programme (that) effectively redefines Anglican orthodoxy in terms of process rather than proposition, a characteristic way of communicating and relating which retains the language of orthodox Christianity, but loosens it from the biblical revelation and a shared confessional loyalty"<sup>172</sup> – that is the main reason for the Anglican Communion crisis. A little background sketch of Charles Raven is appropriate. He is a rector in an Anglican church in England, and he is also a member of the Global Anglican Future Conference (GAFCON) Theological Resource Group. His book, *Shadow Gospel: Rowan Williams and the Anglican Communion Crisis*, was published by the Latimer Trust. In the book itself, Latimer Trust is described as "a conservative Evangelical research organisation within the Church of England, whose main aim is to

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<sup>171</sup> Raven, *Shadow Gospel*, see chapter 2, "The Eclipse of Scripture."

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

promote the history and theology of Anglicanism as understood by those in the Reformed tradition.”<sup>173</sup>

Even though Raven’s titular reference to Williams’ “shadow gospel” is rather uncharitable, Raven’s insistent description of Williams’ desire to engage in dialogue (a listening process) and to avoid closure is telling. He writes in the introduction: “It has been commented that he operates with ‘no known ecclesiology,’ but the one clear thread which runs through his ministry as Archbishop of Canterbury has been the overarching imperative to avoid closure.”<sup>174</sup> Lest the reader think that I am merely cherry picking an insignificant verbal symmetry to establish my point, it might be useful to cite another passage. Here again, Raven marks the commitment to process and the resistance to closure as a problem:

“Williams’ commitment to Hegelian dialectic means that the *via negativa* of apophatic theology becomes a dynamic hermeneutical device which structures his whole theological method. Its requirement that opposites be held together in hopefully creative tension effectively rules out closure and it is impossible not to note that this all too easily degenerates into saying ‘Peace, peace when there is no peace.’”<sup>175</sup>

What, according to Raven, brings Williams to this position is a rejection of the authority of Scripture.

Again and again in his critique, Raven points out the reduced place of Scripture in Williams’ theology and ecclesiology.<sup>176</sup>

The question of *cui bono* can be extended even further. In certain situations, ongoing dialogue (irresolution) can be seen as a tactic in the pursuit of an agenda, especially when one group feels that the passage of time will strengthen its position and weaken its adversary’s. Thus, for ongoing dialogue to be polyphonic, it must be entered into in good faith, with a desire to listen to the Other, not out a desire to bide one’s time. The way Williams reads Bakhtin, it would appear that polyphonic discourse is one

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<sup>173</sup> Raven, *Shadow Gospel*, frontispiece.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>176</sup> See Raven’s chapter, “The Eclipse of Scripture,” 33. He writes: “To describe the Bible as ‘God’s Word written’ would therefore not seem to be a description Williams could assent to in any straightforward sense.”

which insists on the freedom of voices to go on answering each other, even when such an approach frustrates the typical human desire for a judgement. Tension and doubt, Williams asserts, are the hallmarks of a reflective Christian life. Humans are not finished works; their ideas and approaches are likewise in a state of ongoing development. For some in the Anglican Communion, this warm embrace of polyphony is evidence of conformity not to Church tradition but to the modern secular world. For Williams, the desire to end the conversation, to not permit polyphony, is the pathway that leads to the demonic.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Conclusion: The Demonic as Beyond Dialogue and Change

This thesis set out to examine the presence of the polyphonic in Rowan Williams' work. From the outset, it has been my contention that *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith, and Fiction* is not only a sustained engagement with the faith and fiction of the Russian novelist, but also an exploration and endorsement of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphonic approach. Moreover, it is clear that Williams not only sees value in a polyphonic approach to Dostoevsky, but also in an approach to Christian life. The literary and the theological are woven together. In *Dostoevsky*, Williams also explores the question: How much commitment (atheist commitment or Christian commitment) can you live with?<sup>177</sup> He sees this exploration at work in the fiction of Dostoevsky as experiments in "extremity."<sup>178</sup> These experiments are basically the polyphonic approach to truth claims: "to state a position and stake one's fidelity to it requires as complete an honesty as possible about the circumstances and ideas that would most severely test its credulity. Stating it honestly entails invoking its possible denial, and thus inviting or provoking an interlocutor to explore just such circumstances and ideas."<sup>179</sup> These trials, Williams claims, are what need to be embraced by Christians in their lives.

The idea of living with a tension of knowing and not knowing, of commitment and uncertainty, seems axiomatic. If Christians know everything about their God and their faith and their neighbours, then there is no need for conversation. This type of extreme confidence leads to non-interaction – the demonic. If, on the other hand, we know nothing about God, about ourselves and about our neighbours, we subscribe to an extreme relativism (in a minute there is time for decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse), then there is a kind of death of language as it descends into nihilistic

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<sup>177</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 242.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

meaninglessness – the demonic. This, too, is unacceptable. For Williams, the demonic is that which puts an end to conversation whether because it is perceived to be of no need or because it is perceived to be pointless. These extremes must be rejected; there must be a fusion, a “surrender to the claims of an independent truth and a surrender to the actual risks and uncertainties of asserting this truth in a word and action that makes the entire enterprise of spiritual – and specifically Christian – life one that is marked by the decentring and critique of the unexamined self.”<sup>180</sup> This ongoing tension is, Williams argues, the reason why closure must be resisted.

How much tension must be tolerated? This is not clearly answered by Williams. What is the polyphony of God’s creation? What is the polyphony of sinful humanity? Williams does not clearly answer these questions. Some tentative conclusions can, however, be drawn from Williams’ *Tokens of Trust*. First, this highly readable book, more in the vein of celebratory voice than critical voice theology, is a sustained engagement and interaction with the creeds. Each chapter takes its theme from a line from the creeds. It is not a commentary; the creeds serve as the controlling theme for each chapter and for the book as a whole. One of the interesting things about the book is Williams’ insistent references to various Christian traditions. Clearly, there is a desire to interact with the various voices of the Church, to harmonize diversity. At the heart of the book is the problem of distrustfulness: fears of misrepresentation, of power-plays, of hidden agendas. He writes that often “we don’t feel the great institutions of our society are working for us.”<sup>181</sup> A good deal of *Tokens of Trust*, especially the final two chapters, deals with Williams’ ecclesiology. The creeds ask us to believe in – trust in – a Church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. He writes that “believing in the Church is really believing in the unique gift of the *other* that God has given you to live with.”<sup>182</sup> He meditates on communion with God and the

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<sup>180</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 242.

<sup>181</sup> Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

Other, and while he does, he makes constant references to poets, painters, novelists and theologians.<sup>183</sup> The desire to hear and respond to the entire polyphony of the Church (not just from early Christianity to today, but also from a cross-section of the Church on the globe today, and not just from theologians in a narrowly-defined sense, but also from artist/theologians) is very much in evidence. How does this relate to polyphony? Arguably, the creeds are monologic. Spoken as one voice, spoken as the final and definitive truth, these creedal formulations could be taken as antithetical to the polyphonic, yet Williams takes up the creeds in a decidedly polyphonic manner, dialoguing with them and with readers who wish to hear the Archbishop articulate an introduction to Christian belief for a global community, for a community that stretches back thousands of years. Admittedly, while he engages with the creeds, he does *not* exercise the freedom to refuse the formulations, a freedom vigorously defended by the principles of the polyphonic.

It is clear that Williams sees value in the polyphonic as a way around impasses – the discussions of the deaf who speak with their backs turned to the Other. Each of the three conversations that I have mentioned before are at impasses of a sort. However, according to Williams, as long as these sides can come to a common table and sit in a tête-à-tête exchange governed by generosity and good faith, there is hope. The demonic, for Williams, is when conversation stops. He writes in his conclusion to *Dostoevsky*: “When dialogue fails, when history is supposed to be over, when certain aspects of the human mind have been recatalogued as pathologically generated illusions, there is no more politics: there is nothing to entertain dialogue *about*; nature in the guise of a definitive account of what human beings timelessly need and how to meet those needs has defeated culture.”<sup>184</sup>

The foundation of the polyphonic is the idea of voices talking in conversation. If we accept Williams’ assertions that “all human identity is constructed through conversations, in one way or

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<sup>183</sup> For example, at the beginning of every chapter in *Tokens of Trust*, a painting from David Jones is included.

<sup>184</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 237.

another”<sup>185</sup> and that there is “one all-important conversation (the one with God) into which we must be drawn,”<sup>186</sup> then a theory of conversation is central to theology. Williams claims that “the Gospels, the history of the Church, the imaginative constructions of novelists like Dostoyevsky... all give us a picture of the variety of stratagems we use to avoid that conversation, and of the cost of such avoidance.”<sup>187</sup> Here, we see the profound ambivalence in humanity – torn between the desire to engage in the unsettling conversation that allows us to grow and the desire to devise stratagems to avoid it.

This thesis began with a simple observation: Rowan Williams seems preoccupied with the figure of Ivan Karamazov. As early as 1980, Williams was carrying on a conversation in his published works with Dostoevsky, arguably a fellow theologian, about the problems posed by Ivan and Ivan’s Inquisitor. Williams seems haunted by the problem, returning again and again to wrestle with it. It seems fitting to conclude with Williams’ closing words (closing for now at least) on Ivan at the end of *Dostoevsky*: “One of the things that makes Ivan’s Inquisitor such a perennially haunting figure is that his voice is clearly audible on both sides of the current global conflict. He is both the manager of a universal market in guaranteed security and comfort for a diminished human soul and *the violent enforcer of a system beyond dialogue and change.*”<sup>188</sup> (emphasis added) Whatever takes us beyond dialogue and change, according to Williams, is demonic. At this point, subject to revision, stands Williams’ judgment of Ivan’s Inquisitor. To be continued.

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<sup>185</sup> Williams, *Christ on Trial*, 138.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139.

<sup>188</sup> Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 237.

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