THE OTHER IS ALREADY STRANGE.

AN APPLICATION OF ROWAN WILLIAMS'S THEOLOGY OF DIFFERENCE FOR WOMEN WITH HIGH FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DIFFERENCE

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ABSTRACT

To varying degrees, women with high functioning Autism Spectrum Difference (hereafter HF women) experience others as strange. This comes with significant challenges, particularly in neurotypical society and consequently such women are commonly viewed as 'deficient' in reference to what is 'normal'. Rowan Williams describes the ability to encounter strangeness or difference as an apophatic doorway into renewed relations in the image of the trinitarian God. This application of Williams's work for HF women demonstrates how their particular shape is in fact uniquely suited to an embodiment of his theology, for them 'the other is already strange'. Through this, we introduce transformative alternatives to common ways of responding to the challenges they face which value and utilise their unique shape rather than seeking to overcome it. What results is an approach to difference which reveals the transformative power of encountering others in their strangeness whilst empowering HF women to embrace their shape and pioneer this alternative way. The way of love revealed is rooted beyond the binaries of a competitive system which cannot tolerate difference, it exposes the violence of such a system and embodies an alternate way for the flourishing of all.

We are in a vital time of increased analysis of historical and present-day responses to difference and the recognition of oppression, inequality and ignorance that has been perpetuated. This construction of a theology of difference from within Williams's work is an important contribution to wider applications of his theology in a time when the Church must embody an alternative response. The demonstration of its compatibility with the distinctive shape of HF women offers a unique contribution to disability theology, standing on the shoulders of others in viewing such women as of inestimable value in the body of Christ.

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INTRODUCTION

To different degrees women with high functioning Autism Spectrum Difference (hereafter HF women) experience others as strange. In neurotypical society, this often results in problematic development of self and significant challenges relating to others. HF women often seek identity through an autistic-self or neurotribe, attempt to adapt to neurotypical use of language and develop ways of relating to others through mimicry and masking. These permit a level of participation in neurotypical society, but they come at great cost to HF women and perpetuate the system in which they are understood as 'defective' in reference to 'normal'.[1]

Throughout Rowan Williams's work are aspects of a theology of difference whereby in encountering others as different or strange, "I meet what I do not own and learn that I live from it."[2] Here, the ability to encounter others as different is held as an alternative way into restored and transformative relationships with self, God and others. This application of Williams's work demonstrates in the particular shape of many HF women a unique compatibility with his approach to encountering and the transformed way of relating which results. Through this, we will develop alternative ways of responding to the challenges that

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[1] Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2019), 182.
[2] Rowan Williams, "Encountering the Other," (St Martin-in-the-Fields Autumn Lecture Series, London, 27 September 2018) www.youtube.com/watch?v=oI-k3rkkw-Y, 6:11.

many HF women face in neurotypical society. These will be rooted in and reveal a non-competitive system beyond one of 'normal' and 'defective' binaries. Empowering many HF women to become figures of cross and gift who forgo the ways in which power and recognition are usually used and embody a new way of transformative encountering for all.

Williams expresses his theology in ways which unseat order and control rather than resting in them and as such he has not produced a systematic theology of difference. We will construct a theology of difference from his work which makes use of aspects particularly suited to challenges facing HF women and apply this. Section 1 will address relations between self and God, Section 2 will bridge the first and last section by addressing the use of language between self and other and Section 3 will focus on self and other.

TERMINOLOGY

Autism Spectrum Difference or Condition (subsequently 'autism') is widely understood as affecting "how someone sees the world, processes information, and relates to other people."[3] The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders describes the current criteria for autism diagnosis as persistent difficulties in social interaction and communication and restrictive behaviour patterns and interests.[4] Within these generally accepted traits autistic people's description and manifestation of a broad variety of experiences highlights the diverse spectrum within and the ongoing discovery about autism. Thus, we discuss patterns and commonalities of autistic experience whilst recognising that these will not be accurate for all.

Increasing awareness of significant differences between autistic females and males requires a gender distinction to be made, the focus of this study will be upon women with high functioning autism. 'High functioning' indicates a greater degree of "social and adaptive behaviour skills and communication skills than is usual" for someone with autism, enabling participation within neurotypical society whilst being neurologically atypical.[5] The use of 'difference' rather than 'condition' relates to the understanding of humanity as neurodiverse as opposed to being made up of 'normal' and 'defective' people.

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[3] "What is Autism Spectrum Condition?" ChAPS, https://www.cheshireautism.org.uk/what-is-asc/.
[4] Victoria Milner et al., "A Qualitative Exploration of the Female Experience of Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 49 (2019): 2389, doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-03906-4.
[5] Tony Attwood, *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 44-45. Asperger's Syndrome and HF autism are widely used interchangeably.

SECTION 1. DETACHMENT AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

In this section we will firstly demonstrate HF women's experience of detachment, restlessness and being unknown, and the way in which this can lead to adopting an autistic-self or neurotribe which then prevents transformative encountering with self, God and others. Secondly, we will construct the foundations of a theology of difference from William's Negative Way. This will be applied to HF women, establishing a way for them to embrace their experience of detachment as the very means by which they might be drawn into a process which enables ongoing encounter of self, God and others. Thirdly, from this and with an emphasis on relations between self and God, we will describe and apply Self-Acceptance as a foundation for transformative encountering for HF Christian women.

1.1 DETACHED, UNKNOWN AND RESTLESS

'Autism' comes from the Greek term *autos* meaning 'self' because autistic people's experience and development of the self is understood to be a determining factor in how they differ from neurotypical people. Views differ as to how this is understood; originally, Hans Asperger and Leo Kanner described a detached self-focus that is void of a sense of other. More recently, Uta Frith and Francesca Happé have influentially hypothesised that autistic people experience an absent sense of self or integrity of self which results in detachment manifest in a lack of awareness of others.[6] With an increase in HF autistic peoples' self-expression in research and memoirs, a further position describes a shifting detachment likely resulting from processing overload. In this, a fluctuation occurs between

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[6] Uta Frith and Francesca Happé, "Theory of mind and self-consciousness," *Mind and Language* 14 (1999): 23-31.

being absorbed in the self and largely unaware of the other and being absorbed in the other and largely unaware of the self.[7] What these theories share is a recognition that detachment or the absence of instinctively developed attachments shape the development of the self and sense of other in autistic people and, thus, the way in which they engage with others. Just as the instinctive development of attachments in neurotypical people shapes their development of self and other and thus, the way they engage with others.

For HF autistic people, detachment and the spectrum of challenges in engaging with others that result are widely attributed to a lack of Theory of Mind (subsequently ToM). ToM describes "the ability to recognize and understand thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions of other people in order to make sense of their behaviour and predict what they are going to do next."[8] In ideal neurotypical development ToM grows intuitively through relational attachments, creating a sense of belonging, familiarity and shared understanding. This gives grounding for a secure sense of self and other to develop, which provides the ability to engage with others with relative ease. HF women's development of a sense of self and other takes place without this instinctive, subconscious capacity. For them, attachments often do not happen instinctively, and others are to varying degrees experienced as strange, unpredictable and difficult to understand. A sense of self and other develops differently from neurotypical norms, comparably manifest in a lack of inner integrity or an absent, fluctuating or absorbed sense of self and/or other. Resultantly, engaging with others, especially in neurotypically shaped society, can be extremely challenging.

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[7] Olga Bogdashina, *Autism and Spirituality* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2013), 107-8.
[8] Attwood, *Asperger's Syndrome*, 112.

In neurotypical society, typical social interaction is shaped by the assumptions of ToM. The instinctive experience of the other as familiar, known and predictable continuously affirms and bolsters an individual and collective sense of being known to self and other. Conversely, as a result of their fluctuating or absorbed sense of self and or other and their neurotypical environment, HF women often experience themselves as profoundly unknown and unknowable. They commonly struggle to understand themselves and are consistently misunderstood by others.[9] Despite the challenges in interacting with others that this results in, recent research and memoirs show that many HF women deeply desire relationships, belonging and participation. This is significantly in contrast to traditional indicators of HF autism in men. The combination of these challenges and desires mean that HF women commonly experience an acute sense of alienation from self, others and society and a restless searching to be known to self and other and to belong.

"Autism is: being present in this world,

But not entirely of it.

I am one step removed and curled,

The switch just doesn't click.

I perform the role of my perception,

And play many parts so well.

But minus files for my redemption,

My part in life I cannot tell."[10]

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[9] Rudy Simone, *Aspergirls* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), 151.
[10] Wendy Lawson, *Understanding and Working with the Spectrum of Autism* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2001), 12.

This restless searching and being unknown to self and other is expressed through the language of homelessness, "I still hadn't found the mythical sense of home that seemed to evade me",[11] and of insatiable incompletion and being "a book without an end".[12] Thus, HF women often desire to belong and make sense, to acquire a sense of stasis from which others can be engaged with and to enable the deeply desired transition from being "nobody, nowhere" to being "somebody somewhere".[13] This experience is compounded by the neurotypical post-modern emphasis upon gaining freedom and individuality through the discovering or creating of a coherent or known 'self'. This self offers a place of stasis from which life can be lived and becomes the lens that all thinking and encountering pass through.[14] Though constantly impacted by others, such selves are formed, known and lived out primarily as individual, singular 'I's, asserting themselves upon the world and relating to self, God and others from that place. Such an approach has particular appeal to HF women whose detachment results in a profound experience of being restlessly unknown to self and other. In this way, HF women can gain a sense of inner integrity or stasis through the discovery or adoption of an autistic-self, entirely known and understandable to themselves and offering a place from which to stand and engage with others.

To varying degrees this already occurs. Over time HF women can intellectually learn ToM and coping techniques which enable them to participate more easily in society. This results in a kind of self-awareness that is differentiated from the instinctively acquired ToM and is sometimes described as Autistic Theory of Mind.[15] This philosophical kind of self-

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[11] Donna Williams, *Nobody Nowhere* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 133.
[12] Laura James, *Odd Girl Out* (London: Bluebird, 2017), 216.
[13] Titles of Donna Williams's books. Williams, *Nobody Nowhere* and Donna Williams, *Somebody Somewhere* (New York: Times Books, 1994).
[14] Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 66.
[15] Bogdashina, *Autism*, 108.

awareness and sense of other is achieved through observation and the cognitive acquisition of knowledge and understanding. The rise in research, resources, neurodiverse communities and autism memoirs has brought about an abundance of information and descriptions which are shaping language, understanding and expectations around autism. This has increased self-understanding, self-expression, belonging and participation in society for many HF women. It is enabling HF girls and women to grow into themselves with understanding and improved well-being, where previously there was often confusion, shame and poor mental health. However, in a culture that desires the stasis of individual identity so intently, coupled with HF women's restless searching for being known, this can go beyond helpful self-understanding. It can lead to the adoption of increasingly fixed ideas and projections of what it is to be a HF woman. For gaining stasis through an autistic-self offers a sense of rest and home, it offers a complete and known sense of self through which HF women can be known to self and others and relate to others from that place.

For HF women, identifying an autistic-self enables a sense of mastered knowing of the self and the ability to become familiar, predictable and understandable within neurotypical society. This can offer resolution to restlessly searching for belonging, completion and being known and a secure sense of self through which others can be engaged with more easily. However, philosopher Ian Hacking demonstrates how the adoption of an autistic-self permits inclusion into neurotypical engagement at the expense of further excluding many autistic people who do not fit the concept and projections being claimed.[16] For the autistic identity to continue to proffer stasis for the HF woman it must become increasingly defended and asserted over and against difference and contradiction

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[16] Ian Hacking, "Autistic Biography," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* B 364 (2009), 1468.

which weaken it's mastered projections, returning her to being unfamiliar, unpredictable and difficult to understand. Thus, the coherent concept of the autistic-self enables inclusion for some whilst further ostracising those elsewhere on the spectrum who do not fit the image being described and experience increased alienation and misunderstanding as a result. Furthermore, encounter with God or others whose difference might bring into question the coherency of the autistic-self cannot happen without risking the self and thus is defended against.

Belonging to an autistic community or 'neurotribe' is widely encouraged and shown to be greatly beneficial for autistic people.[17] However, when this becomes relied upon to resolve the sense of restless searching and desires for home, completion and being known, its preservation over and against contradiction and different assertations becomes imperative. This need to assert and defend the HF woman's autistic-self or neurotribe to maintain what has been gained draws them into a competitive way of being whereby genuinely encountering self, God and other is too high a risk. Instead, they must defend and assert their coherent identity or community among others and to do this any strangeness, difference or anomaly which threaten must be neutralised and overcome. In this way, as a sense of stasis, knowing and belonging increases, the ability to encounter difference in others decreases and participation in a competitive excluding system increases. Thus, HF women become participants in the system which once victimised them and continues to victimise others in "a logic that extends rather than challenges normative distributions of power and recognition."[18]

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[17] Audrey Pollnow, "Aristotle on the Spectrum," *First Things* March (2017),
https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/03/aristotle-on-the-spectrum.
[18] Linn Marie Tonstad, *God and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 256.

Thus, HF Christian women face two significant challenges with regards to the foundations of encountering others. Firstly, HF women's development of self through detachment results in what is described as an absent, fluctuating or absorbed sense of self. Particularly in neurotypical society, this results in a sense of being unknown and unknowable and restlessly searching for a place of stasis from which to relate to self, God and others. Secondly, the adoption of an autistic-self or neurotribe to acquire stasis enables HF women to participate in neurotypical society, whilst simultaneously drawing them into a competitive system whereby stasis is maintained through increasingly fixed concepts. Resultantly, difference that would challenge such concepts is defended against and transformative encountering of self, God and other cannot occur. We turn now to Williams's Negative Way as an alternative foundation to relations between self and God and thus of encountering others.

1.2 WILLIAMS'S NEGATIVE WAY

Through the negative or apophatic theology of Eastern Orthodoxy Williams asserts that the unknowable depths of God are that which can be known about God with any clarity.[19] To encounter God as primarily unknowable requires and enables the releasing of constructed identities of self, God and others and the projections of being known, complete and belonging they offer. Encountering God as unknown or strange reveals also the essential unknowability or strangeness of the self and others and the limitations of language and conceptualisation regarding these. This is not primarily about the clarity with which things

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[19] Rowan Williams, "Lossky, *via negativa* and the foundations of theology," in *Wrestling with Angels* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 13.

are known, it is not a rejection of reason or understanding which enable thinking about self,

God and others. Contemplating God as fundamentally unknowable breaks down

understanding which claims god-like mastery and offers god-like security and power,

shattering and re-forming previous perceived forms of knowing self, God and others.[20] Such

is the, "crucible of divine creative darkness, the breaking in on us of what is wholly

unmasterable, so much so that it forces my defensive ego out of its castle in the center of

my universe".[21] This is a self-giving *process* which leads into an alternative way of being

which lies outside a competitive system of self-assertion and self-defence and instead

enables ongoing transformative encounter with self, God and others.

Williams addresses the post-modern experience of acquiring freedom and

individuality through the developing of a coherent, fully known self which then becomes the

lens through which self, God and others are engaged with. In this, the self becomes the

source of belonging, security and being known rather than through relations with God in the

way of Christ. This self becomes increasingly fixed and complete to enable its survival in a

world of different claims and experiences which challenge its stability. Thus, the other

becomes "my other, defined in relation to my (self-) presence, a resolvable, confrontable

difference."[22] For true difference or otherness cannot be encountered without risk to self,

so instead everything is reflected through the self's assertions, desires and fears. In this,

each self protects its own integrity at all costs, creating a competitive system where

different claims vie for space with resulting 'winners' and losers.[23] Narratives of sameness or

'normal' gain security by identifying anomalies as deficiencies rather than differences and

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[20] Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 35.
[21] Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1995), 102.
[22] Rowan Williams, "Hegel and the gods of postmodernity," in *Wrestling with Angels* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 27.
[23] Williams, *Tragic Imagination*, 66.

co-existence across difference either dissolves under pressure or requires ignoring the other to the point of denying their humanity.[24] In this matrix, 'God' is also conceived of and encountered as an extension of the self because encountering genuine otherness in God destabilises the certainties of the self and so is defended against, whereas a god who reflects those certainties bolsters the self.

Through his work on Augustine, Williams adds the dynamic of incompletion and restlessness. He argues that beings moving through time are not simply finished, "self-transparent reasoning subject(s)".[25] As the speaking of a sentence illustrates, they are constantly moving through absence and displacement as incomplete, searching, growing beings. As such, the content of what is known about oneself *is* one's restless searching and thus one's fundamental incompletion and unknowing. Thus, to know oneself with any clarity is to know oneself as continually responding to the absence of God as a determinate object which satiates with finality.[26] This restless existence is often responded to by loving and pursuing concepts, things or people with insatiable anxiety to possess. This includes fictive senses of completion or mastery through adopting an essentially known-self, a known-other and a known-God and the sense of stasis these can offer. Indeed, for Williams the sin which prevents communion with God and human community in God's image is rooted in the possessive approaching and use of self, God and others as manipulable concepts and the competitive systems this creates.[27]

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[24] Rowan Williams, "Between politics and metaphysics: reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose," in *Wrestling with Angels* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 55, 70.
[25] Rowan Williams, "'A Question to Myself' Time and Self-Awareness in the *Confessions*," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.
[26] Williams, "Time," 5.
[27] Williams, "Lossky," 13.

Such themes come together in Williams's trinitarian theology with its emphasis on relations rather than essences. Here, God is neither the source of nor resting in an inertia of sated desire, rather in God is the ongoing movement of kenotic desire or love between Father, Son and Spirit. This is illustrated through the invitation and movement in the eyes of the three figures at the table in Andrei Rublev's icon 'The Old Testament Trinity'. In this, their eyes draw in the observer for whom there is a place at the table, whilst simultaneously deflecting their gaze to the next figure, who deflects to the next figure and so on in an eternal movement of self-displacing love.[28] To be in communion with God is to be situated in the reality that "God loves us as God loves God"[29] and to live within a movement of self-giving love which receives and deflects without stasis, possession or satiation, whereby satisfaction is in the desiring or loving.[30]

In humanity, such desire continues to be experienced as a difficult absence or restlessness and can be misplaced in concepts, things or people, or continually directed towards God. When desire is directed towards God, people are drawn into unknowing and into the displacing of constructed identities and thus the ability to encounter relationship with God in whom one is continuously being loved, known and sent. The hitherto restless space of unknowing and incompletion requires and develops relations of trust in, through and with 'God who knows me' though I cannot fully know myself. Such relations of trust are not a given state but a state to be continually drawn into through prayer and community with others. To be thus situated is what it is to image the trinitarian God as an unknowable, self-giving self-in-relation. In this, the stasis of the individually defined, known self is given

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[28] Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2003), 52-54.
[29] Rowan Williams, "The Body's Grace," https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf, 3.
[30] Rowan Williams, "The Deflections of Desire: Negative Theology in Trinitarian Discourse," in *Silence and the Word* (ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 123.

up and instead the restless searching draws continually into communion with God and non-competitive relations with God and others. Dependency upon a fixed self-identity which must be defended and asserted against difference which threatens its coherency is exchanged for entrusting the self to God in dependency and reciprocal love. Such relations of trust with God liberate people into self-giving encounter with self, God and others across unmastered difference.

Influenced by Freudian and Marxist critique, Williams continually anticipates the capacity for Christianity to be used to offer an illusory sense of stasis and mastered understanding of self, God and others, becoming power to assert and defend in the world. His Negative Way instead, "fixes the self in a permanent state of impotence and alienation",[31] relinquishing power into the hands of God who is other, unknowable and so unmasterable, whose nature is expressed in the self-giving Christ. In the pattern of Christ, the human limitation of being bodies in time is embraced with its unmet desire for God's endlessness, its incompletion and ongoing reliance upon relations with God. To be 'in Christ' is thus to allow desire to draw continually into dependency, trust and communion with God. This re-ordering of desire towards God liberates persons to encounter others from a position of loved, self-giving love. As opposed to relating to God and others through the assertion and defence which results from dis-ordered desire and thus perpetuating a system which necessitates the exclusion of difference.[32] This enables and requires transformative encounter whereby difference in God and others is permitted to continually break down

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[31] Rowan Williams, "Freudian Psychology," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden; Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1983), 220.
[32] Williams, "Time," 13.

constructed identities, drawing into communion with God and non-competitive relations with self, God and others.

Thus, we propose that Williams's Negative Way offers the foundation for a theology of difference. In this, contemplation of God as fundamentally unknowable reveals the unknowability in self and others. This reveals and breaks down absolutising identities and projections of self, God and others which secure the self at the expense of preventing encounter with difference. Human desires to be secure and at rest in being fully known, in being complete and in belonging are increasingly recognised with their tendencies towards god-like mastery. When directed towards God, these desires draw into ongoing self-giving relations of trust with God where mastering concepts are exchanged for communion in which one is known and loved. This enables non-competitive encounter with self, God and others where difference can be genuinely encountered. Furthermore, embracing being unknown and restlessly searching becomes the very *means* by which people can be drawn into this self-giving process. We propose that applying Williams's Negative Way to HF women's experience of detachment, of being unknown and of restlessly searching opens a way for HF Christian women to experience Self-Acceptance. This is an acceptance of the self as ultimately unknowable to self and other and restlessly searching for communion with God. It is foundational in enabling transformative encountering with self, God and others.

1.3 SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Here we will demonstrate how Self-Acceptance can act as a foundation in transforming relations between self and God and thus enable transformative encountering of self, God and others for HF Christian women. Firstly, Self-Acceptance begins with HF women

accepting their particular experience of being unknown to self and other and of restless searching as revealing and reflecting reality and a way into transformative encountering. Secondly, Self-Acceptance is a self-giving way which recognises and releases illusory sources of stasis such as a conceptualised autistic-self or neurotribe allegiance. Instead, the self is entrusted to communion with God, from which HF women are freed to relate non-competitively, making possible the encountering of difference in self, God and others. Thirdly, in embodying such Self-Acceptance HF women make possible a new transformative way of encountering difference in self, God and others for all.

Firstly, neurotypical people usually develop a secure sense of self, God and other through attachments and instinctive ToM which give a foundational experience of familiarity, understanding and belonging. This instinctive capacity works to overcome a sense of self or other being strange, unpredictable and unknowable to enable a secure sense of self and other through which engagement can flow. Resultantly, William's Negative Way describes a reality which is alien to them. However, HF women's experience of detachment and lack of ToM means that they often *begin* from a profound experience of being unknown to self and other, of restless searching, of being incomplete and homeless. This *is* their primary experience; it is not a reality to embrace but the reality they already know. This reality is commonly viewed through a lens of their being 'defective', as it problematises neurotypical socialising and makes engagement difficult across neurological difference. As such it is often viewed as something HF women must overcome so that their engagement and belonging within neurotypical society might be eased. However, Williams rejects typical ways of relating which require fixed concepts, tribal allegiance and the attempted neutralising of difference. Instead, he asserts that "a mind intrinsically incomplete, desirous and mobile, intrinsically incapable of possessing a definitive and

unrevisable account of its contents and specific workings, can rightly and intelligibly be said to know itself completely."[33] Thus, Williams empowers HF women to interpret their particular shape of being unknown and restlessly searching as a reflection of reality which accepted and lived into can be foundational to drawing into restored relations with God and enabling transformative encountering of self, God and others. In this way, his Negative Way invites HF women to journey out from under a narrative of deficit into one of renewed transformative relations across difference.

Secondly, an application of Williams's work reveals that HF women's adoption of stasis through an autistic-self or neurotribe to overcome searching restlessness, unknowability and homelessness is illusory and prevents encountering rather than enables it. While it offers the relief of solid ground from which self, God and others can be engaged with, for Williams, all such possessive grasping falls short of satiating the innate restless searching for communion with God. For, "we know ourselves most fully and truthfully… when we know both that we are desiring beings and that our desire is ultimately and freely itself when it consciously becomes longing for God."[34]To continue to offer relief, the autistic-self or neurotribe must become increasingly fixed and absolutising to survive in a system of competing individual claims. They must be increasingly defended and asserted against differences which threaten to weaken their coherency and efficacy. As such, everything becomes viewed through or defined in reference to the lens of autistic-self or neurotribe. God and others are engaged with only to the extent that the autistic-self or neurotribe and the sense of stasis they offer is maintained. Thus, differences in self, God

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[33] Rowan Williams, "The Paradoxes of Self-Knowledge in Augustine's Trinitarian Thought," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 165.
[34] Rowan Williams, "'Good for Nothing'? Augustine on Creation," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 65-66.

and others which do not comply with this lens are defended against; in fact, self-defence

and self-assertion shape and limit all relating. In this framework, HF women can only relate

to self, God and others within a competitive system. Here, difference in self, God and others

is instinctively and consciously prevented from destabilising the autistic-self or neurotribe

by being ignored, denied or overcome.

Acceptance and encountering of the essential unknowability of God, and thus of self

and other, through contemplation (*not* conceptualisation) reveals the constructs adopted in

attempts to sate desire for stasis. In this "assimilation to God's own acceptance of the limits

of time and body",[35] HF women are invited to accept their profound sense of being

unknown and unknowable, disconnected, alien and restlessly searching as a reflection of the

reality of being in time whilst longing for God's endlessness and completion. Thus, desires

for intellectual mastery of self, God or others to enable a secure position or conceptualised

autistic-self from which to engage with the world is directed instead towards communion

with God. As are desires which define the self in terms of a neurotribe in attempts to

acquire stasis through a sense of security and belonging.

Such Self-Acceptance is self-giving as opposed to self-defending or self-asserting as it

exists in the tension of owning no completely known sense of self but continually entrusts

the self to God. Rather than stasis, this is a continual movement of being drawn into

communion with God in whom one is known, loved and sent in love, whereby encountering

difference or unknowing continually breaks down illusion and draws into transformative

encountering once more. This remains in the tension of continually encountering self, God

and other as fundamentally unknowable and enables the becoming of a self-giving self-in-

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[35] Williams, "Time," 11.

relation in the pattern of Christ. This way of being is liberated from a competitive system into a way of encountering difference in self, God and others as that which can break down illusory and sin-entrenched independence and draw into transformative communion with God. Thus, as the HF woman refuses illusory stasis and continually yields to relations of dependency and trust in God she is enabled to "stop seeing what is other as a rival".[36] She can engage with her understandings about autism and her neurotribe without the need to competitively assert and defend them against difference.

Thus thirdly, Self-Acceptance embraces its unknown, restless and relational nature as a reflection of humanity and that which offers an alternative foundation to communion with God and relations with others. In embodying this, HF women make a transformative way of encountering possible for others as well as themselves which forgoes the ways in which power and recognition are typically used. As assimilation into a competitive system of illusory concepts and securities are exchanged for relations of trust in God, HF women's ability to encounter difference increases and her participation in excluding systems decreases. She is enabled to welcome difference or strangeness which destabilises her understandings of what it is to be a HF woman and that of her neurotribe. In this way, as the HF woman ceases to assert and defend herself in a binary of deficient and 'normal' she reveals "disability in a hermeneutical paradigm; as a way to encounter, interpret, experience and live in a world caught up in the cult of normality."[37]

Consequently, the HF woman is newly enabled to encounter those autistic people who have been further excluded by the autistic self-image which was initially so helpful for

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[36] Rowan Williams, "Logic and spirit in Hegel," in *Wrestling with Angels* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 36.
[37] Christopher Barber, "On Connectedness: Spirituality on the Autistic Spectrum," *Practical Theology* 4.2 (2011), 210, doi: 10.1558/prth.v4i2.201.

her understanding. Embodying the reality that being transcends diagnosis, without undermining how helpful a diagnosis can be.[38] As women who know the pain of being different first-hand, embodying this alternative response to difference enables them to become a point of '*krisis*' in their communities and an invitation to those held captive by projections of self-knowledge, self-completion and self-mastery. Francis Young applies *krisis* from the New Testament to describe a painful exposure and revelatory gift of judgement that makes possible a new way of encountering self, God and other.[39] Thus, Self-Acceptance lived out in the lives of HF women becomes an alternative embodiment of God in showing and offering invitation into an alternative way for others. Both autistic *and* neurotypical can be freed from a system which holds all people captive, both the 'winners' and losers in a society shaped by competitive self-assertion and defence.

1.4 CONCLUSION TO SECTION 1

Using Williams's Negative Way, we have constructed the foundations of a theology of difference and applied it to HF Christian women's experience of detachment, of being unknown and restlessly searching. In this, we have shown three things. Firstly, that HF women's experience reveals and reflects what it is to be in finitude whilst desiring God's endlessness and completion. Secondly, that when directed towards God as opposed to an autistic-self or neurotribe, such desire draws them into communion with God. In this, stasis and competitive relating are exchanged for self-giving relations of trust with 'God who knows me', resulting in transformative encountering of self, God and other. Thirdly, with

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[38] John Gillibrand, *Disabled Church – Disabled Society* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2010), 82.
[39] Francis Young, *Face to Face* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 142.

emphasis on self and God, we propose that through Self-Acceptance HF women's experience of detachment becomes a means by which they can embody a radically alternative response to relations between self and God, which can then become an alternative means of transformational encountering across difference for all.

SECTION 2. UNNATURAL LANGUAGE AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The 21st century has seen a profound increase in the availability of HF women's narratives through memoirs, ethnography, research and online autism communities. Through the medium of language these widely unrecognised experiences contribute greatly to the possibility of Self-Acceptance as defined in Section 1 and its impact on the ongoing transformation of neurotypical society. This section offers a crucial bridge between the emphasis upon self in Section 1 and emphasis upon other in Section 3 by enlisting the use of language to enable rather than prevent encountering difference between the two.

In this section we will firstly demonstrate HF women's inherent challenges with language and the ways in which their self-descriptions can become absolutised in ways which actually prevent encounter. Secondly, we will continue to construct a theology of difference from Williams's work through his approach to Language as Dispossession. From this, thirdly, we will apply a description of Self-Expression as way for HF Christian women to embrace their challenges with language as a means by which they might exchange absolutising language for language which enables encounter.

2.1 UNNATURAL LANGUAGE

One of the diagnostic criteria for autism is consistent difficulties in communication of which a problematic relationship with language plays a significant part. In various ways, and to differing degrees, "language feels unnatural"[40] for HF women whilst they participate in a society where this does not seem to be the case for others. They struggle with auditory

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[40] Attwood, *Asperger's Syndrome*, 202.

complexities, misunderstandings through literal interpretation or missed implied meaning, difficulty following and participating in neurotypical flow and rules of conversation and the ability to express themselves in such a way that they feel accurately understood. HF women are increasingly encouraged to use autism resources which enable them to learn intellectually how communication in neurotypical settings works. This intellectual rather than instinctive approach to language and communication means that to different degrees HF women are attempting to interpret body language, facial expression, intonation, context, figures of speech, metaphor and the reciprocal rhythm of conversation on a daily basis. This is an extremely taxing process, yet it draws attention to what is more easily missed by those for whom language development occurs more instinctively, that the nature of language and communication is multifarious and complex. People with HF autism frequently observe that when neurotypical people use common words and phrases they are often meaning different things and yet do not clarify their intent because direct exchange of meaning is assumed. Similarly, neurotypical people are often perceived as not saying what they mean, of conversing so indirectly and with such layered meaning that for those interpreting intellectually it can appear as a lack of "honest speech".[41]

Language is key to participation in a neurotypically shaped society. Historically, and to this day, autistic people have been widely unseen, excluded and assumed to be deficient in part as a result of their inability to intuitively understand and reciprocate language on neurotypical terms.[42] Being identified as a *HF* autistic person describes a greater capacity for neurotypical language and communication in comparison to people elsewhere on the autism spectrum. With an increase in diagnoses, research, online autism communities and

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[41] Simone, *Aspergirls*, 151.
[42] Gillibrand, *Disabled Church*, 91.

the significant increase in HF memoirs, HF women's use of language to express themselves

has increased exponentially. Such narratives have removed a level of invisibility, enabled

increased dialogue between HF people and across neurological difference and this has been

empowering for them and re-educating for all. It has enabled them to move, "from a place

of confusion, frustration, and obfuscation to one of understanding, self-acceptance, and

radical authenticity",[43] including increasing recognition in wider society.

However, philosopher Ian Hacking observes that the language HF people are using to

express their experiences of being autistic is often then being used to create absolutising

concepts of what it is to be autistic. This is despite the reality that it is only *HF* autistic

people who are writing such narratives. As a result, those who fit or can fit themselves into

such descriptions experience a new kind of inclusion, known self or belonging. Whereas

those autistic or undiagnosed people whose experience is different are further excluded,

unknown and alienated as the HF 'inside view' on autism increases and neurotypical

expectations of autism are defined.[44] With the use of language to describe the autistic

experience, autistic children and adults are being shaped by language which describes

typical autistic experiences as if they are the only experiences and they "may then learn that

that is how it is to be autistic".[45]

In Section 1 we identified gaining freedom and individuality through an absolutised

or known self purported to offer security, belonging and empowerment. As one of the most

significant tools in a neurotypically shaped society, language is thus necessarily used to

sustain and create totalising concepts, rather than to draw attention to the reality of limited

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[43] Erin Bulluss and Abby Sesterka, "5 Messages for My Younger Autistic Self," in *Psychology Today* (2020), 31.
[44] Hacking, "Autistic Biography," 1468.
[45] Hacking, "Autistic Biography," 1469.

understanding with regards to self, God and other. Therefore, HF women's use of language to self-describe in neurotypical society immediately draws them into a system which tends towards the eradication of a sense of fundamental unknowing and towards the absolutising of concepts. Whether by HF women's intention or neurotypical interpretation, their narratives offer beneficial increased understanding *and* formulate an autistic-self or autistic-other which purports to be fully known. This draws HF women into a competitive system. Their ability to use language to self-describe gains their inclusion at the expense of further excluding others who cannot do this or whose experiences problematise that HF narrative. A narrative which must now be defended and asserted to retain the understanding, belonging and empowerment it has given. This includes becoming blind to, intolerant of and combative towards any difference, complexities or anomalies which threaten the autistic self-description where it could have enabled "a real reconfiguration of structures of power and exclusion."[46]

Thus, HF Christian women face two significant challenges with regards to language. Firstly, to varying degrees they experience inherent difficulty with communication, of which language is a key part and a gateway to participation in neurotypical society. Secondly, their use of language to self-describe enhances the possibility of Self-Acceptance and wider understanding but also leads to an absolutised set of self-images which then defend against genuine encounter with self, God and other. This draws them into the competitive system they were once victims of whereby the self-descriptions which enable their inclusion further exclude others. We turn now to Williams's use of Language as Dispossession as an alternative foundation to the use of language.

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[46] Tonstad, *Difference*, 256.

2.2 WILLIAMS'S LANGUAGE AS DISPOSSESSION

Williams asserts that "the coming of Christ is the dissolution of speech, since God's *logos* is an alien utterance that cannot be assimilated into the logic of our world."[47] This is not an abandoning of language but a revealing of its limitations and of its proper use as enabling relational encounter and ways of *living* that speak. This stands in opposition to the use of language to create a false sense of mastery and completion which prevents encounter. Through the work of Wittgenstein, Hegel and Gillian Rose, Williams shows how language can be used as a "totalising dialectic"[48] when it is believed to be a sequence of units which mirror reality with accuracy and finality. This common use of language enables and maintains an illusory sense of mastered understanding regarding self, God and others. However, Williams observes that language is not at all a rendering of reality in words which directly convey singular meaning with objective accuracy; this is beyond its capability. He draws attention not primarily to the meaning of individual words but to what they are being used for and how they are being practiced. Recognising that language and meaning is shaped by what has come before and where it is leading to in the context in which it is being used.

Williams's apophatic foundation is not a resting in ordered unintelligibility, his approach to language is not a formula of unknowing which renders speech meaningless, leading to passivity. Instead, he offers a way of using language which enables understanding and action *whilst* maintaining the tension of fundamental unknowing that enables ongoing encounter, learning and transformation into newness. Thinking and language form and

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[47] Myers, *Stranger*, 32.
[48] Williams, "Hegel," 27.

express positions, yet these do not need to be absolutising or used to alleviate such tension. Williams upholds the necessity of taking up positions as action is taken in the world, yet he maintains that taking positions always includes failure, violence and precedes more learning. One always begins from a place of inequality and from there whatever good is achieved will also "inevitably in some measure misrecognising the nature of the interest of others, establish a new imbalance of power and justice."[49] To soberly draw and hold attention to unavoidable participation in violence is not just about increasing caution. It ensures a posture of humility which remains alert to the shape of life in finitude, in particular those whose experiences confirm the limitations of actions to bring about absolutised good.

To recognise this and yet still speak or act is to let go of self-possession that fears failure and to accept the illusion of such self-possession or mastery. This use of language, thinking and acting becomes a practice of self-dispossession and even "self-*gift*".[50] It remains humbly present to the tension of moving from "misunderstanding to a more constructive misunderstanding"[51] and the failure and participation in violence that this will include. In the absence of a totalising dialectic, the reality of ongoing learning and the possibility of ongoing transformation into newness becomes both a cross to bear and a gift to celebrate. Thus, Williams describes practising language and thinking "*as* engagement, as converse, conflict, negotiation, judgement and self-judgement".[52] This requires and propels ongoing encountering and being worked upon by difference or otherness rather than defending, attacking or neutralising it to alleviate tension and the reality of failure.

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[49] Williams, "Metaphysics," 64.
[50] Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 148.
[51] Williams, *Tragic Imagination,* 58.
[52] Williams, "Metaphysics," 67.

In these terms, Williams's understanding of Language as Dispossession offers a way of using language which is appropriate to the theology of difference we are constructing from his work. He critiques the use of language to master or absolutise which draws people into a competitive system of assertion and defence where difference must be neutralised. Instead, rooted in negative theology, he describes a way of using language which builds upon understanding whilst maintaining the ability to continue to encounter difference. This approach is costly, an act of self-dispossession which remains in the tension of speaking and acting from a position whilst acknowledging a complex starting point, an ongoing lack of mastery and humble expectancy of ongoing failure and participation with violence. In these terms, language is used appropriately to engage, think and learn without illusory absolutising. Thus, enabling and necessitating ongoing encountering of difference and learning which has the capacity to lead into transformational newness. In this, a recognition of the limitations of language becomes the very *means* by which people can be liberated into using language to enable rather than prevent encounter. We propose that applying Williams's approach of Language as Dispossession to HF women's experience of language as unnatural opens a way up for HF women to learn Self-Expression. Such Self-Expression uses language to share understanding across difference without claiming mastery or projecting absolutes. Thus, continually inviting ongoing encountering with difference with the aim of being drawn into ongoing learning and growth together across difference.

2.3 SELF-EXPRESSION

Here we will demonstrate how Self-Expression can enable HF Christian women to use language to communicate across difference whilst enabling Self-Acceptance. To undermine

rather than contribute to absolutist discourse and thus enable language to be used to increase rather than prevent encountering. Firstly, Self-Expression begins with HF women accepting their experience of the limitation of language as a reflection of reality and a way into transformative encountering. In this, Self-Expression retools pre-existing language to share understanding while projecting the need for ongoing learning. Secondly, Self-Expression embraces self-dispossession by using language to take up positions while remaining in the tension of unmastered knowing. This draws into ongoing encountering, learning and growing, with, for example, those who have been further excluded by the use of such Self-Expression. Thirdly, in embodying such Self-Expression, HF women make possible an alternative way of using language which makes transformative encountering of difference possible for all.

Firstly, neurotypical people commonly develop ToM and their use of language instinctively in which a sense of understanding others, being understood and developing language grow together. This experience enables the presumption that language is sequential words which describe reality with the accuracy and finality of a mirror. Whereas, HF women's experience of language as unnatural and their intellectual learning of its contours in neurotypical use means that they often *begin* from a profound experience of the limitation of language to directly convey ultimate meaning. This *is* their primary experience; it is the reality they already know because of their particular shape. Thus, HF women are uniquely positioned to know and embody the understanding that language does not simply mirror reality but is shaped in various ways by what comes before and after, what it is being used for and what the context is. In neurotypical society, the challenges HF women face in engaging with others through language exchange are commonly viewed in terms of deficit. Such challenges are to be overcome through intellectual acquisition of neurotypical

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approaches to language. However, in opposition to this, Williams's theology of language as dispossession empowers such women to accept their experience of the limitations of language as a reflection of reality. Offering an alternative to the allure of totalising speech, language can then be used appropriately to enable genuine ongoing encounter across difference and ways of being which communicate.

Instead of approaching HF women's narratives and self-descriptions as literal renderings of their autistic experience, Williams's perspective questions what the language is being used for and how it is functioning within communities.[53] Philosopher Ian Hacking, also taking a Wittgensteinian approach, observes that although autism auto-biographies are often read as literal descriptions they may be read "not as describing well-defined experience, but as creating ways in which to express experiences"[54] for which previously there has been no language. He describes HF autistic people as people without an instinctive grasp on neurotypical language, who acquire the language through cognitive learning and use it to self-describe to gain entrance before entering the wider community. In this way, HF women's narratives can be understood as re-tooling pre-existing language to self-express rather than directly describing experience, moving "from description to representation".[55] When written and read as such, they become a way of using language to enable increased understanding and engagement across difference without being used to project a completed image of the autistic-self or autistic-other which reduces genuine encounter. In this way, HF Christian women can use language to Self-Express without absolutising, to enable increased understanding whilst maintaining that the self, God and

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[53] Myers, *Stranger*, 15.
[54] Hacking, "Autistic Biography," 1472.
[55] Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 69.

other remains essentially unknown and understanding unfinished. In these terms, Self-Expression can be used to enable Self-Acceptance, whereby restless searching for being known and belonging are directed towards self-giving relations of trust with God. Meanwhile it enables HF Christian women to gain a way of communicating across difference in neurotypical society that avoids being assimilated into an absolutising, competitive system.

Secondly, Self-Acceptance and Self-Expression lead to HF women taking up positions and influencing the positions of others about what it is to be a HF woman. In applying Williams's approach, we propose Self-Expression which asserts and enacts such positions in the knowledge that to do so always also includes failure, violence and precedes more learning. Such use of language is an ongoing practice of self-dispossession, whereby language creates positions that enable encounter which continually submits to unmastered difference in self, God and others. This means remaining present to the tension of the limitation of language, positions and unavoidable participation in failure and violence. It allows the continual disruption of a sense of self-possession and draws into a process of ongoing encounter across difference, learning and transformation. In this way, Self-Expression enables HF Christian women to offer and enact positions on what it is to be a HF woman as opposed to being silent or inactive. Yet accepting the self-dispossessing nature of Self-Expression draws and frees them to then further encounter, for example, those elsewhere on the autistic spectrum who experience additional exclusion as a result of the use of their narratives. They are also compelled to further encounter and respond to those who find themselves using such narratives as fixed descriptions of autism to gain entry into neurotypical and autistic community. Similarly, HF women remain in learning dialogue with neurotypical people, for speaking is taking a position "while remembering that the other still

imperiously requires to be understood, to be *thought*."[56] Such ongoing encountering

enables Williams's process of negotiation, judgement and learning and thus use language to

be drawn "into a process of speaking and making sense together"[57] rather than gaining a

necessarily competitive mastered narrative. Thus, keeping HF women present to genuine

difference and unknowing which draws them continually into becoming self-giving selves-in-

relation.

Thirdly, in embodying this theology of difference through Self-Expression HF women

rupture the totalising dialects around them which prevent encounter. Instead of gaining

entry into neurotypical society through enacting descriptions of autism or self-describing

with finality they reveal the violence inherent in the common assumptions behind

absolutising uses of language. HF women's refusal to use language in this way and their

alternative method of re-tooling existing language to Self-Express without mastery ensures

that their embodied experience of violence through exclusion and misunderstanding

becomes known, without drawing them into that system themselves. Enabled by Self-

Expression, their presence reveals the relational sin of objectifying and determining others

through an individual self which defines everything in relation or opposition to itself with

violent results.[58] Thus, "disability is the divinely initiated *krisis* that reveals *everyone's*

human weakness, brokenness and sin. And this exposure is an eradicable aspect of being

redeemed."[59] This revelatory role is made possible through HF women's Self-Acceptance

which locates them in communion with God, beyond the system of rivalry and competition.

Self-Expression then embodies the use of language to enable relational growth and mutual

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[56] Williams, "Metaphysics," 65.
[57] Williams, *Edge*, 68.
[58] Williams, "Lossky," 13.
[59] Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 173.

learning to develop across difference rather than to bolster the security of the individual self or group. In these ways, HF Christian women are enabled to embrace their experience of neurotypical language as unnatural. They are enabled to embody an alternative approach to language which reflects their particular shape and offers the possibility of transformative encountering across difference for all.

2.4 CONCLUSION TO SECTION 2

Using Williams's approach to Language as Dispossession, we have further developed a theology of difference and applied it to HF Christian women's experience of language as unnatural and the use of HF autism narratives in the 21st century. Through this application we have shown three things. Firstly, that HF women's experience of the limitation of neurotypical language to directly convey ultimate meaning reflects the reality of the limitations of language. HF women's challenges with language become a means by which they undermine the assumptions and misrepresentations of totalising speech which otherwise use their narratives to absolutise self-images and draw them into participation in a competitive system. Secondly, we propose a particular kind of Self-Expression, whereby language is re-tooled to express experience in such a way that it draws into ongoing encounter with difference in self, God and others rather than preventing it. Such Self-Expression enables encounter across difference through the creation of positions of what it is to be a HF woman. However, such positions remain present to the reality of failure, violence and ongoing learning, and as such the use of language becomes an act of self-gift which draws continually into encounter with difference and ongoing transformation. Thirdly, HF women's embodied Self-Expression becomes source of *krisis* and means of

transformation for all as language which represents Self-Expression and Self-Acceptance

also maintains the tension of unknowing and searching which draws into ongoing encounter

with self, God and others. In this way they participate and draw others into an alternative

non-competitive system in which language is used to enable ongoing encountering and thus

learning and growing together.

SECTION 3. THE STRANGE OTHER AND LOVING THE STRANGE OTHER RIGHTLY

In the first two sections, relations between self and God and the use of language across difference has been explored. A definition of Self-Acceptance and Self-Expression have been applied to enable HF Christian women to embrace their unique shape in ways which enable encountering difference with self, God and others in a society where this can be problematic. This section will build upon this material with an emphasis on relations between self and other.

Firstly, we will explore HF women's experience of others as strange and their tendency to respond to this through the mimicry, camouflage and control associated with the Female Protective Effect. Secondly, we will complete our construction of a theology of difference through Williams's understanding of Christ the Stranger. This will be applied to HF women, offering a way for them to embrace their experience of others as strange as a means by which they might be continually drawn into ongoing transformative encounter with self, God and others. Thirdly, we will present a description of Loving the Strange Other Rightly as a way in which HF Christian women might embody non-competitive, self-giving love which enables self and other to enter into ongoing transformative relations together in the image of the triune God.

3.1 THE FEMALE PROTECTIVE EFFECT

It has been shown in Section 1 that in autistic people a sense of self and other develops through an absence of instinctive attachments and intuitively developed Theory of Mind. In neurotypical people these are credited as the subconscious ability "to attribute mental

states (such as beliefs, desires, intentions etc.) to themselves and other people, as a way of making sense of and predicting behaviour."[60] Here, relations between self and other are shaped by a sense of understanding and belonging which gives a foundation for social interaction. Conversely, to differing degrees HF autistic people experience others as difficult to understand, unpredictable and strange which shapes their sense of self and other. As previously described, HF autistic people often experience a lack of inner integrity or an absent, fluctuating or absorbed sense of self and or other, which then shapes relations and social interaction with others. Furthermore, despite the challenges and in contrast to traditional understandings of autism in men, HF women often desire relationships, belonging and participation with others and can instinctively employ the use of mimicry, camouflage and masking to help achieve this.[61]

From a young age, HF girls and women experience others, and often themselves, as strange whilst having the social, adaptive and communication skills to be expected to participate in neurotypically shaped society. Their common experience of a lack of belonging, understanding and control often result in high levels of fear, anxiety and stress. Consequently for some, desires for control, belonging and socialisation can lead to an assertive, dominating, "clinging"[62] way of relating to people, routines and things which "make us feel safe on an otherwise precarious planet."[63] Alternatively, as previously described, some autistic people experience self and others in terms of "a fluctuating state of 'all self, no other; all other, no self'"[64] where self and other is not experienced simultaneously because of processing and sensory overload. Both this and accumulative

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[60] Gillibrand, *Disabled Church*, 27.
[61] Sarah Hendrickx, *Women and Girls with Autism Spectrum Disorder* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2015), 24-25.
[62] Hendrickx, *Women and Girls*, 30.
[63] Simone, *Aspergirls*, 147.
[64] Bogdashina, *Autism*, 107.

insecurity can lead to the disappearance of a sense of self in the presence of others and the adoption of learned behaviours or identity which mirror the others being engaged with. This is a defensive response whereby high levels of fear, struggle and or overload are circumvented by the sense of self shutting down, being lost or being given up and instead experiencing things through others, "becoming others was my way of experiencing them."[65] In this, "an invisible monster within, a monster of self-denial"[66] is described as an instinctive survival response where the self is denied to enable mimicry, camouflage and masking. In various ways, this mimicking and 'becoming' the other requires self-negation and loss or underdevelopment of a sense of self. Thus, to enable relating with strange others, ways of being are developed primarily through and in reference to them. Both desire for control and relationship in an alien environment, and the need for ways of being with which to engage with strange others, lead to the female capacity and motivation for mimicry, masking and camouflage also known as the Female Protective Effect.[67]

The Female Protective Effect (subsequently FPE) describes the subconscious and conscious observation, practice and imitation of neurotypical behaviours in efforts to participate, gain a sense of belonging and as a defensive posture in an alien environment. It is often achieved through mimicking behaviours such as neurotypical eye contact, gestures and conversation pieces and masking social misunderstandings and the manifestations of high levels of anxiety. In a world where others are strange these instincts reveal a distinct survival capacity for camouflage shown to be common in HF autistic women, whereby their way of being remains hidden to enable survival and relating on neurotypical terms. With

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[65] D. Williams, *Somebody Somewhere*, 231.
[66] Williams, *Somebody Somewhere*, 34.
[67] Meng-Chuan Lai et al., "Quantifying and exploring camouflaging in men and women with autism," *Autism* 21:6 (2017), 690-692.

time and effort HF women can learn intellectually what their neurotypical counterparts do intuitively, through developing Theory of Autistic Mind. In this, they learn by intellectual analysis how to read, translate and respond appropriately to the social signals of others to enable participation in neurotypical relating. However, they practice this at significant ongoing cost to their mental energy and health and relating through such means can result in a loss or underdevelopment of a sense of self. Masking a lack of social understanding makes HF women vulnerable to abuse and the ongoing enactment of mimicry often results in exhaustion, poor mental health, low self-esteem, problematic development of the self and or controlling behaviours. The common experience of relating to others through the mimicry, masking and camouflage of the FPE entraps such HF women in a narrative of 'deficiency', whereby relating occurs through imitation of the 'normal'.

These ways of relating for HF women are fuelled by ways in which others relate to them. In the widely applied *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome,* ToM is described thus: "typical people 'mind read' relatively easily and intuitively… Most of the time we are right but the system is not faultless."[68] In the same section a commonplace situation is depicted where a neurotypical person profoundly misinterprets an autistic child's typical behaviour. They are described as making an incorrect moral judgement that the child is being deliberately rude and disrespectful, and they respond suitably. The reason given for this misunderstanding is simply that the neurotypical person did not yet know that the child was autistic.

What this commonplace neurotypical misunderstanding highlights is, firstly, the limitation of ToM to proffer intuitive understanding across neurological difference without

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[68] Attwood, *Asperger's Syndrome*, 114, 116, 126.

the addition of intellectual analysis. Without being informed of the child's difference, the person's intuitive ToM actually enhanced the illusion that they were understanding the child correctly which resulted in unjust treatment and increased confusion for the child. Secondly, the illustration and the author's lack of commentary reveal the *continued invisibility* of the limitation of ToM to give intuitive understanding across neurological difference for those who depend upon it. The disparity between the claim for ToM's accuracy and the illustration of a neurotypical person's inability to correctly understand an autistic person goes unnoticed or unacknowledged by the expert. As a result, the source of the misunderstanding is deflected back towards the autistic child and their difference, for if they did not lack ToM the neurotypical person would not have misunderstood them. Such a scenario is commonplace for HF women for whom, "being misunderstood seems to be at the root of most of our challenges."[69] Thus, for those whose development of a sense of self occurs primarily through and in reference to others through camouflage, mimicry and masking, this development is also occurring in an environment where others' unacknowledged misunderstanding of them frames them in terms of deficiency.

Thus, HF Christian women face two significant challenges with regards to relations between self and other. Firstly, to different degrees HF women experience others as strange, difficult to predict and understand in a neurotypically shaped society where familiarity, predictability and understanding is assumed and expected. HF women often respond instinctively and consciously to this by relating to others through the mimicry, masking and camouflage of the FPE which enables a level of participation at great cost to themselves. Secondly, HF women's relationship between self and other is further shaped by

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[69] Simone, *Aspergirls*, 156.

the deflection of others' unacknowledged misunderstanding upon them and system of 'normal' and 'deficient' in which they relate. Both necessitate relating to others through assertion and defence in which transformative encounter cannot take place. We turn now to Williams's Christ the Stranger as a way into alternative relations between self and other.

3.2 WILLIAMS'S CHRIST THE STRANGER

In Section 1 Williams's trinitarian theology was introduced: in God is the endless movement of kenotic or self-emptying desire between Father, Son and Spirit where love is endlessly deflected without satiation or possession. An embracement of encountering the otherness of God draws one into a process whereby misplaced human desire is revealed in the illusions of mastered knowing, self-assertion and self-defence. These resulted in a fictive sense of separation, preventing communion with God and community with others; however, this begins to be exchanged for relations of self-giving trust with God in whom one is known and loved. Symbiotically, this liberates people into self-giving community with others in the trinitarian image of God.

This process is also brought about by embracing the encountering of strangeness or difference in *others.* In this, absolutising concepts about others and resultantly about the self and God are revealed and released as illusory and desire is re-directed into self-giving dependency with God. Thus, one of the unifying elements of Williams's theology is the continual pursuit of Christ who comes as "an intimate stranger".[70] Without mastery being dethroned by difference, relations with others remain self-referential and as such draw

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[70] Myers, *Stranger*, x.

continuously into rivalry and self-defence.[71] Thus, rather than difference between self and others being minimised or neutralised, it is to be emphasised, continuously faced and returned to. Such life lived in the tension of difference without synthesis reveals and draws into dependency in communion with God and the nature of human reality and learning as relational. In this way, encountering strange *others* becomes a path to liberation from the sinful illusions which separate self, God and others and into the possibility of a trinitarian pattern of community life.

Through critique of Augustine's approach to love, Hannah Arendt accuses the dynamic of using others to achieve the primary objective of communion with God of creating a relational hierarchy which results in indirect human-to-human love and an absence of true human interdependence.[72] However, Williams frames Augustine's address of the solidarity of sin through relationship with God as the only way to enable free and full human relating. He describes Augustine's understanding of people as "both *res* and *signum*, both a true subsistent reality and a sign of its maker… only God is *a sign of nothing else.*"[73] As such, it is only God who can withstand the human desire for Godself through which people are restlessly searching. To relate to others through this desire is to misrecognise them as less than they are by disregarding their capacity to also always be signalling something beyond themselves. It is to use or relate to others falsely as ends in themselves through possessive, controlling and self-abasing manipulation. Without relation to God who is beyond the realm of *res* and *signum* there is no way of relating to others within it other than through competition and control, consuming and being consumed.

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[71] Rowan Williams, "Augustinian Love," in *On Augustine* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016), 193.
[72] Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 7.
[73] Williams, "Augustinian Love," 196.

As self-assertion and defence is exchanged for self-giving dependency in God, possessive relations with others are exchanged for loving humanly. This is other-orientated love which loves others as they are: limited and mortal beings who are signs of God and already in some way engaged by and with God. Love that does not seek to find its end in the other is deflected towards God, and others are thus loved 'in God' which is irreducible from loving God for such love cannot be divided into parts. Thus, to love the other is to love one's self is to love God. To love in this way is to have "abandoned ourselves to the great landslide of self-displacement that is going on forever between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[74] This endlessly self-emptying love does not offer satiation but draws continually and generatively outwards into absence, otherness. In this pattern, to be turned toward God is to be loved, loving and turned towards all that God is loving with the capacity and response to fully love others humanly. Thus, for Williams the image of God is revealed in people's capacity for self-giving relations with others which are generated through encountering their difference.

This love is not rooted in a competitive system but liberated into the reality of gift. Through Hans Urs von Balthasar, Williams asserts that God is neither *an* other to creation and therefore within the same system, nor an eternally alienated absolute other, but a God who loves God in and through that which is other, that which is not God.[75] As *non aliud*, God does not create out of need or negotiation but gift and grace, thus in God persons are enabled to relate to themselves and others beyond the sphere of negotiating space, as dependent occasions of gift. A new kind of recognition emerges which is beyond concepts of self or other, a recognition of unnegotiated bonds of non-competitive relatedness. In this,

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[74] Myers, *Stranger*, 89.
[75] Rowan Williams, "Balthasar and difference," in *Wrestling with Angels* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 80.

the illusion of separation from others reduces *without* reducing the reality of difference, thus reconciliation through living into the difficult reality of relatedness and difference can increase. Furthermore, in human community in the self-giving trinitarian image of God, this becomes "a recognition that my good or dignity has no substance, no life, without someone else's good or dignity being involved… It is an acknowledgement that someone else's welfare is actually *constitutive* of my own."[76] This reflects the presence of God in history through Christ, "living in its other, realising its 'interest' in its other"[77] and thus the shape of human community renewed in God's image.

This is a *generative* way of being rather than a *generated* concept to achieve. It is both a vision of God and of the meaning and purpose of humanity in time whereby relatedness is what is and what is being lived in to. Williams's emphasis on Christ the Stranger places the encounter of difference in others as that which enables such an ongoing process. This path of transforming or growing is egoistically unsatisfying for it is necessarily one which remains present to ongoing misrecognition, failure and difficulty as the generative ground of learning love. In Section 2, Williams's description of self-dispossession was explored as a way of being, made possible through dependency in God, which enables people to live in the tension of difference and thus into the learning and living of unmastered newness. Here, positions and action are taken without absolutising, resulting in an ongoing ability to live with failure and thus momentum towards ongoing transformation and encountering otherness. Rather than self and other or identity and difference cancelling each other out, neither is fixed and they are able to learn and grow together through

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[76] Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 77.
[77] Williams, "Metaphysics," 72.

adjustment and negotiation as "mutually constituting realities".[78] Such negotiation is not rooted in competition for space but in loved, self-giving love lived out and grown into with time and difficulty.

However, feminist and queer theologian Linn Marie Tonstad demonstrates unacknowledged competition in the use of Balthasar's spatialised kenosis. Unable to envision relations beyond a system of scarcity, one must orient towards the other *instead* of the self, make space for the other *by* reducing the space the self is taking up, a historical problematic for women and minority groups under patriarchy.[79] Tonstad's significant work clarifies how kenosis and self-giving equates to negation of the self for those, like HF women, whose self is already defined in relation to others. Masculine self-emptying encompasses both masculinity and femininity, thus self-giving is to "be squandered and poured out, without losing their primacy or their fullness."[80] Whereas, femininity is only ever feminine and so has no such opportunity for she was always already given away, defined in relation to another, thus self-giving equates to loss of self.

This critique necessitates clarification on our use of Williams's approach. To respond to the other through the denial or negation of *self* as *res* and *signum*, limited, known, loved and entrusted to God, reflects human solidarity with sin whereby one allows oneself to be possessed or defined by the other rather than God. Furthermore, loss or negation of the self neutralises the generative power of the self's difference to draw into an ongoing learning of love through "self-loss and self-recovery" with others. This is the ongoing movement of engagement, taking up positions, judgement and transformation with others that Williams's

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[78] Myers, *Stranger*, 52.
[79] Tonstad, *Difference*, 241.
[80] Tonstad, *Difference*, 45.

way makes possible, not for the purpose of mastery but for mutual flourishing. In this, Williams clarifies that the loss of ego this requires and enables is not the loss of self but rather denial of illusions of independence of the self and the actions which result.[81] His kenosis refers to the emptying of independent self-assertion and defence which prevents encounter with God and others. In this, self-dispossession is entrusting the self to loved communion with God, which liberates human relating from competition into self-giving love of others, *with* others. Whereby people continually develop, fail and flourish together and in this relating reveal the image of God.

For Williams, all such engagement begins with inequality not illusory neutrality and Tonstad specifies how the inequality of people like HF women means that self-giving theology invisibly drives self-negation. Thus, in applying Williams's theology whilst ensuring that indeed his self-denial does not mean loss of self reveals the capacity for his theology to engender non-competitive relations despite his use of Balthasar. Indeed, applying his theology of difference to HF women will contribute to further liberating kenosis from its patriarchal and neurotypical cradle.

In this section we have concluded a theology of difference which relates to the shape of HF women through Williams's description of Christ the Stranger. This builds upon Sections 1 and 2 to demonstrate the relationship between encountering difference in others and ongoing transformative relations between self and other. In this, the difference encountered as self relates to other is that which, firstly, reveals and breaks down illusory concepts of self and other which confine relations within a self/other referencing, competitive system. When embraced, this draws into self-giving communion with God,

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[81] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 140.

enabling the full expression of human-to-human love and generating self-giving community rooted in gift rather than competition. Secondly, the difference encountered in others thus leads into new recognition of that which is unnegotiable in self and others, the essential relatedness and dependency of creation. In this, the experience of others as profoundly strange or different becomes the very *means* by which a new way of encountering can be entered into. We propose that applying Williams's approach of Christ the Stranger to HF women's experience of the other as strange opens up a way for HF Christian women to learn Loving the Strange Other Rightly. This is a self-giving *way* of encountering others and growing into newness together in time, difficulty and difference as the meaning and purpose of life lived in the image of the triune God.

3.3 LOVING THE STRANGE OTHER RIGHTLY

Here, we will apply Williams's Christ the Stranger to HF women's experience of strange others and offer Loving the Strange Other Rightly as an alternative to relating to others primarily through the FPE. With emphasis on relations between self and other this will be applied and demonstrated in three ways. Firstly, Loving the Strange Other Rightly begins with accepting the experience of the other as strange as revealing and reflecting a significant aspect of reality as opposed to being something which must be defended against through the FPE. When embraced, encountering strange others can break down illusion and draw into communion with God. Secondly, encountering difference in others can draw into transformed human relating, whereby self and other are encountered as primarily engaged with by God, not determined competitively through relations defined by self and other, or through loss of self. Thirdly, *being* the strange other rather than neutralising difference

through the FPE allows self and other to be continually drawn into an ongoing, difficult, self-giving process of transformation together. Here, HF women embody *krisis* in their communities and thus a transformative way of encountering for all.

Firstly, Williams's theology of Christ the Stranger views embracing and encountering the strangeness and difference of *others* as that which can draw into a profoundly alternate way of relating and loving. HF women's development of self and other without ToM to proffer an instinctive sense of understanding, familiarity and predictability means that they *already* experience of the other as profoundly strange or different. This is their instinctive reality and as such offers an important opportunity and perspective, alongside being extremely challenging, particularly in a neurotypical society. Instead of relating to others through the FPE and defending against the difference of others, Williams's theology empowers and enables HF women to encounter others in their strangeness. Loving the Strange Other Rightly begins with maintaining the reality of others' difference and in this *their* "apophatic dimension".[82] Encountering unknowability of the other breaks down illusory constructs of self and other which offer a sense of stasis and mastery, instead drawing the HF woman into self-giving dependent communion with God. In this, she is known and loved in God and a sense of self grows in reference to God and affirming relations with Godself.[83] Consequently, she is enabled to encounter the others' difference from beyond a competitive system of assertion and defence and, thus, with self-giving love in the pattern of the triune God. In a society which cannot tolerate difference because it

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[82] Williams, "Lossky," 13.
[83] Williams, "On Creation," 65-66.

risks the stasis of a mastered self this capacity is radically alternative and introduces the possibility of ongoing learning and transformation across difference.

Secondly, HF women often experience an absorbed, fluctuating or absent sense of self which differs from their neurotypical counterparts, whilst experiencing others as strange. Combined, these often result in anxious desires for belonging, understanding, control and survival which manifest in clinging to others, 'becoming others', experiencing a loss of self and subconsciously developing a sense of self and way of being through mimicry, masking and camouflage. Here, relating is bound to possessive, consuming relations with others, "struggling to swallow them up or longing to *be* swallowed up by them."[84] In this 'inhuman' relating, the distance between self and other is reduced to absorption and relating is entirely self-referential, reduced to using others and being used by others in attempts to satisfy central desires and fears. However, Williams's Christ the Stranger demonstrates how drawing into self-giving dependent relations with God liberates HF women from relating to others in this way, making them "dependent in the right way… seeking to remain open to that selfless agency as it transforms our relation with the world and each other."[85]

Thus, Loving the Strange Other Rightly describes the transformed relationship with others that results when desires for security, understanding and belonging are directed towards God instead of towards others through the FPE. In this, other-oriented love is made possible which loves others without seeking an end in them or to be an end for them, neither need be owned or consumed. As both *res* and *signum,* the primary reference point

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[84] Rowan Williams, "God in Search: A Sermon," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 210.
[85] Williams, "Augustinian Love," 205.

for the HF woman is not her relation to the neurotypical or neurodiverse other, but her relation to God. In whom she is loved, loving and turned towards all that God is loving with the capacity to genuinely encounter others in their difference or strangeness, and love them humanly.

This requires and enables HF women to forgo or unlearn the loss of self and self-denial that equates to self-erasure that is a common experience for them. For, this self-giving way of love resists competitive self-giving where the flourishing of the other requires the loss of self, which Tonstad rightly warns against. To Love the Strange Other Rightly, the HF woman embodies in all her difference the gift and cross of Christ to the other, without loss or erasure of self in communion with God. Whilst recognising that "there is in reality no self – and no possibility of recognising what one is as a self – without the presence of the other. *But* that other must precisely *be* other",[86] though representationally, not as a terminus for desire. Both the self and other as *res* and *signum* are called to be present in this encountering, in their difference and relatedness, "both – and, not either – or".[87] In this, the HF woman submits to encountering which requires her presence as a being who is limited, signalling God and already engaged by God, equally with those to whom she relates. As well as enabling transformation in others, this encountering will continuously reveal her own misperception, resulting in an ongoing reconceiving of the self and other and the ways in which they can flourish together.

Thus, this theology of difference constructed from Williams's work demonstrates that, despite his use of Balthasar without recognition of the competition Tonstad identifies,

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[86] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 153.
[87] Tonstad, *Difference*, 137.

his theology retains the capacity for non-competitive relations. In applying his theology for HF women in a way which recognises Tonstad's important contribution, HF women are empowered to experience and practice self-giving love in a way which takes it beyond its patriarchal roots. This is essential for HF women who would otherwise be extremely vulnerable to understanding and practicing self-giving love through their instinctive tendency towards self-negation or loss of self. Furthermore, HF women are empowered to embody a new way for all who would otherwise remain in an unrecognised system of competition whereby their loss of self is incorrectly valorised as imaging God.

In these ways, Loving the Strange Other Rightly enables the HF woman to unlearn the aspects of the FPE which she has consciously or subconsciously adopted in attempts to satiate desires for control, belonging, understanding or survival in a system of rivalry. She is liberated from competitive relating whereby she defines herself in terms of the other, attempts to become the other and in doing so defends against the other. These are practices which maintain that system and her place in it at the significant cost of her mental and emotional well-being. They are to the detriment of her community who do not get to see beyond what the masking, camouflage and mimicry projects. Instead, the HF woman is liberated to love others humanly and to be loved humanly by others, in the reality of difference, limitation and ongoing learning together. This does not mean that HF women begin to relate to others as neurotypical people do, rather that they are empowered to begin to relate equally as *res* and *signum* whilst continuing to experience others through an absorbed, fluctuating or absent sense of self. In these ways, Loving the Strange Other Rightly describes the capacity to love others beyond a system of competition whereby relations with others are used in attempts to secure the fears and desires of the self. In learning to love in this way, HF women are enabled to grow both into their difference and

into their relatedness with others and the purpose of life as growth together in self-giving community in the image of the triune God.

Thus, thirdly, for HF women Loving the Strange Other Rightly enables and requires *being* the strange other, rather than attempting to camouflage this reality through the mimicry and masking of the FPE. Being the strange other means embracing the reality of being ultimately unknowable to self *and others* whilst being known in and by God. This enables HF women to cease viewing themselves through the lens of others or 'normalcy' and concluding 'deficiency' or even 'superiority'. It enables them "to stand for a total difference that uncovers the incompleteness or fragmentedness of the [other]".[88] To be the apophatic other whose presence draws others into transformative encounter with self, God and other through the breaking down of illusory mastered understanding. Through projecting neurotypical ways of being through the FPE, HF women acquire a level of familiarity, predictability and being understandable and as such avoid drawing out the rivalry of others in a competitive system. Or, it permits them a level of participation on the understanding that they are the same but lacking and therefore deficient. Loving the Strange Other Rightly enables and requires HF women to live their proficient difference. No longer masking difference and thus allowing others to continue defining them in relation to themselves, as a resolvable difference rather than a difference that breaks down illusory mastered understanding. Loving the Strange Other Righty enables and requires HF women to stop submitting to "being reduced to what will satisfy the other… what is acceptable and gratifying"[89] to those caught up in a competitive system which cannot tolerate difference.

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[88] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 152.
[89] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 158

This is to live and grow in the tension of both the egoistically unsatisfying difference of self and other and the bonds of non-competitive relatedness. In this, "the ideal position is one in which an indefinite number of agents perceive their welfare as including their relations to each other and their consent to and enjoyment of each other's flourishing."[90] Rather than defending and asserting themselves through the FPE, HF women are continually drawn into loved, self-giving love whereby to love others humanly, is to love God, is to love self. The purpose of life in the image of God is such relations within human community, no longer competing for space but growing together into newness, through working together towards each other's good.

This is not a sentimental experience of love but "an austere asceticism".[91] It is an ongoing process of adjustment and negotiation which learns and grows with others without synthesis, through the ongoing revealing and confessing of misperception and its violent results. It requires and enables HF women's Self-Acceptance and Self-Expression which submits to ongoing learning and the refusal of self-mastery whilst taking up positions and actions to enable collective human flourishing. It requires and enables her to identify to others the cost of a competitive system that may otherwise go unrecognised. As in the example given in 3.1, her unjust experiences of being misunderstood and her 'deficiency' held responsible for others' misunderstanding. In these ways, Loving the Strange Other Rightly allows HF women to cease grasping after inclusion into a system which requires their mimicry and acceptance of deficiency, whilst participating in the exclusion of others whose

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[90] Williams, *Lost Icons*, 77.
[91] Myers, *Stranger*, 113.

difference is less maskable. It enables them to embrace the cross and gift of being a source of *krisis* and invitation to newness for the other.

3.4 CONCLUSION TO SECTION 3

Using William's approach to Christ the Stranger, we have completed a theology of difference constructed from William's work which makes use of aspects particularly suited to some of the challenges facing HF women in the 21st century. In this section we have applied this approach to HF Christian women's experience of others as strange and the Female Protective Effect which results. With emphasis on relations between self and others we have shown three things. Firstly, that HF women's experience of the other as strange reveals and reflects something of reality in finitude for all relations between self and other. Secondly, that when embraced as such, rather than defended against through the FPE, their experience of others as strange and of being the strange other become a means by which an alternative way of Loving the Strange Other Rightly can be embodied. In this, self and other can love and be loved humanly rather than as a means to securing the self in a competitive system. Whilst each other's strangeness continually draws into communion with God and self-giving community with each other. Thirdly, this alternative to camouflaging difference through the FPE enables HF women to embrace their particular shape as a unique means to embodying *krisis* in their communities and making possible the learning of a difficult and transformative way of encountering others for all.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated that HF Christian women's common experience, 'the other is already strange', makes them uniquely suited to embodying Rowan Williams's theology of difference. Their experience of detachment, unnatural language and experiencing others as strange makes their lives in neurotypical society significantly challenging. Frequently, they respond to this through seeking a fixed identity or tribe, learning neurotypical use of language and relating to others through mimicry and masking. We have shown how such responses procure them into a competitive system which cannot tolerate difference. In this, they are understood as deficient and inclusion comes at the cost of participating in the exclusion of others. The theology of difference we have constructed from Williams's work offers a radical alternative to this which is uniquely suited to the strengths of HF Christian women. In embracing their experience of others as strange, rather than neutralising it, this becomes the very means by which they can enter into and pioneer an alternative way of encountering self, God and others. Through Self-Acceptance, Self-Expression and Loving the Strange Other Rightly we have shown how HF women can experience and embody this generative way of encountering. In this, ongoing self-giving transformation occurs through meeting what is not owned or controlled in others: difference or strangeness. Thus, a people group labelled as dis-abled find themselves in fact to be en-abled and empowered to learn and embody an alternative way of love in a society otherwise imprisoned in a system of rivalry and defence.

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