Rowan Williams and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Appeal of Polyphony

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

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Mikhail Bakhtin introduced polyphony into literary criticism in the late 1920s in relation to Dostoevsky's novels, and Milian Kundera later popularized the term in The Art of the Novel. However, despite its extensive applications in contemporary criticism, and particularly in discussions of African and Caribbean fiction, it is still unclear what precisely polyphony means to different critics and what kinds of novels it best describes. Bakhtin lays out his theory of polyphony in the seminal essay Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1929/1973). In his reading, polyphony evokes the particular capacity of the novel to accommodate contradictory positions and multiple discourses without imposing any central authoritative view. In the latest addition to his A-Z of Theory series, political theorist Andrew Robinson introduces, in a two-part essay, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most important theorists of discourse in the twentieth century. In part one, Robinson introduces Bakhtin's notions of Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia. William Shakespeare and Mikhail Bakhtin: Filming Dialogically. Bakhtin's writings in various fields can help explain how and why filmmakers locate their particularity in Shakespeare's "everywhereness." A range of movie directors—faithful to their individual moments and angles of perception yet responsive to Shakespeare's historically remote lines—have found a model for their expressive acts of co-authoring in Shakespeare's own theatrical practice of re-telling earlier utterances. Accompanying Bakhtin's principle of dialogism—with its egalitarian and dynamic premise—are many allied ideas: heteroglossia (the presence of two or more language types), polyglossia (the presence of two or more languages), double-voicedness.