

ABSTRACT
IN, OUT, BEYOND: A THEOLOGY OF SELFHOOD
AGAINST THROWAWAY CULTURE

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Within what Pope Francis calls “throwaway culture,” everything—non-human and human alike—is perceived according to the dictates of powerful individuals and impersonal analyses and systems. Throwaway culture’s anthropology is both individualist and collectivist. According to throwaway culture’s individualism, the human being is an isolated subject dualistically opposed to the world, engaged with the world through either appropriative consumption or defensive withdrawal. According to its collectivism, the human being is a meaningless object within a collective whole, determined by forces and realities wholly external to it. These apparently opposed perspectives are in fact mutually reinforcing.

To theologically respond to and critique throwaway culture’s anthropology, this dissertation offers a theological anthropology through a metaphysical and theological analysis of selfhood. This response engages and brings together two contemporary thinkers: William Desmond and Rowan Williams. For a metaphysical account of the self, I turn to Desmond. For a companioning Christian theological vision, I turn to Williams. Drawing on their writings, this dissertation articulates a theological account of the self that reveals the impoverishment of throwaway culture’s anthropology and offers a viable theological alternative.

The argument unfolds in three parts, according to a threefold account of the self as interior, exterior, and desiring. First, the self is an interiority that grounds the self’s determinate exterior expressions yet is not identified with any one expression. This interiority is the self’s irreducible and creaturely relation to God. Second, the self is a temporal and embodied exteriority, a surface that manifests its interiority and is constituted by relations with others, relations rooted in common creatureliness before God. Third, desire mediates between the self’s interiority and exteriority and between self and world. Desire is ultimately responsive and oriented to God. This threefold metaphysics of selfhood is confirmed and developed through Williams’s Christian theology, which describes the self in relation to Jesus, the Trinity, and the Church. According to this threefold account, the self is in no position to individually throw others away or to be itself collectively thrown away, constitutively related as it is to others and to the God (un)known both metaphysically and theologically.