

Review Article

THE “SECRET FIRE AT THE HEART OF EARTHLY REALITY”: The Theological Vision of Rowan Williams by Jane Barter Moulaison

To attempt to summarize the work of Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, is the height of folly, or perhaps hubris. His writings are numerous, his contributions vast, his tastes eclectic. A public figure, a Patristics scholar, a polyglot, and an occasional poet, he is not easily summarized. Yet throughout his writings there remains a constant theme: the Christian faith is foremost a labour of vision. Williams is drawn to visionaries, those whose perceptions of the world include a depth that is not commonly available. He keeps easy company with the likes of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, William Blake, Teresa of Avila, Simone Weil, and Flannery O’Connor. To these, as for him, at the heart of the Christian life is not so much a *knowing*, but a certain kind of *perception*. This perception is not a flight from the world of appearances; it is to see within the very world of appearances a hidden depth — of God at work in the midst of a world of decay (think of the Elder Zosima’s funeral in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*), within a world of myopic materialism (think of the attentiveness of Simone Weil), and even in the midst of all too human strife (think of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*; think of Anglicanism’s precarious communion). As Williams reflects:

Things are dark and difficult. The world is a terrible place, full of the threats of violence. The church is a terrible place. Do we panic? We look into the depth and see how the freedom of God is there even in failure, even in crisis, to bring life and love.¹

¹ Archbishop Rowan Williams, “Sermon at Canterbury Cathedral, Morning Service”, Transfiguration Sunday, 2003, <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1702>, accessed October 5, 2009.

Williams refers to this reality as “the secret fire in the heart of earthly reality”.² This fire is ignited at the very foundations of creation. The work of Christ involves a restoration of human beings, including the restoration of their vision, so that they might be able to “see” a reality that is concealed or obscured by the suffering and sin of this world.

Christ Redefines History

Such a vision is enabled by participation within a community whose gaze or desire has been transformed by its encounter with the risen Christ — the church. The church is central to Williams’s theology because it is the community that is bound together by the risen Christ — by its recognition of his Lordship, and by the power of sanctifying grace that infuses and shapes it. Because the community receives its shape and its mission from Christ, it is always a community that is compelled to keep its boundaries open to welcome the neighbour from a distant region or a distant time. The Christ who redeems human community also redefines history. No longer cast as linear progress, history becomes, in Christ’s church, the synchronous and mutually dependent commerce between the living and the dead. Thus the past is, according to Williams, present and actual, although it is also of course veiled. Because of the abiding presence of the past within the church, Christians have a greater responsibility to history than others. They have a responsibility to read the past with care and with nuance. Suspicion cannot be their primary posture:

The Christian past is unavoidably part of the Christian present in such a way that we have to be extra careful not to dismiss, caricature or give up the attempt to listen.³

To read Williams is to engage a mind shaped by a wealth of conversation partners. His readings, although conversational, are

² Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 81.

³ Rowan Williams *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) p. 28.

rarely conventional. Thus he can find theological wisdom from those one would expect him to critique or dismiss — Arius of Alexandria⁴ and Bishop John Robinson come immediately to mind — while he can be a gadfly goading giants from their repose, as his readings of Karl Barth display.⁵ One gets a sense in reading Williams of a mind trained to inhabit imaginatively the worldview of another. Such inhabitation gives him not only a capacity to survey a comprehensive pattern to diverse works (here his masterful work on Dostoyevsky may be taken as example), but also to expose raw nerves, the tendencies toward self-deception or theological error. The two are closely related for Williams, who is less interested in Christian biography as an uncovering of a pristine self than he is in identifying a self both unmade and made in the encounter with the risen Christ. Williams speaks of Christian spirituality not as an inner quest, but as a “self-discovery by way of confrontation with Jesus”.⁶

Confrontation with the risen Christ exposes, both individually and collectively, a good deal of recalcitrance and fragmentation within the soul on the way to being made whole. Oliver O’Donovan, a friend and former colleague at Oxford, characterizes his writings on politics and ethics as “night-time raiding parties, less interested in knowing how they work than where they break down. . . .”⁷ One reason for this is that Williams does not hold the confidence of an O’Donovan that the moral order of the universe is immediate or self-evident. For Williams, the perception of God’s purposes for the world and human responsibility within it is a fraught and endlessly complex task. Better to notice the fissures in human life and in human biography lest we idolatrously pursue our own ends when convinced we are serving God’s.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁵ Rowan Williams, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) pp. 106-170.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd) p. 135.

⁷ Oliver O’Donovan, *God’s Advocates: Thinking Christians in Conversation*, cited in Rupert Shortt, *Rowan’s Rule: Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) p. 13.

Thus all notions of Christian morality or responsibility can only be understood through the cross, through defeat. For Williams, Christian response within a world of sin must always be conditioned by the “material givenness of a particular life in death”.⁸ Williams draws on his Christian forbears, particularly the mystics, to counter the tendencies within contemporary culture to deny suffering or failure, or to seek to overcome it through technological mastery. The mystics offer tremendous wisdom to a culture which has forgotten the disciplines of silence and renunciation. In reading the mystics, Williams refuses the common interpretation of them as ecclesial revolutionaries, casting off all chains of dogma and extrinsic authority. In Williams’s reading, mystics (he acknowledges the myriad problems that are inherent in that category) such as Teresa of Avila represents both the church’s teaching in a highly focussed form, while they also spur the church out of complacency. “Teresa not only opens up a comprehensive sense of what Christian identity involves, but also alerts the tradition-conserving institution to ‘unfinished business’, and prevents it being too easily ready to suppose that it has mastered its own resources.”⁹

Keenly Attentive To The Novel

While he has been dismissed at times as an antediluvian academic (John Shelby Spong, for example, called him a neo-medievalist), Williams’s vision is one that is keenly attentive to the novel and the gratuitous. Oliver O’Donovan’s wry complaint is much more on target: “[for Williams] the Kingdom of God is always slipping its hand surreptitiously into the doubter’s back pocket and replacing the wallet and the credit cards with a better funded set.”¹⁰ Theology is never to rest content in its own rightness; theology ought properly to be attentive to the unassimilated difference that the other, even the complacent doubter, presents.

⁸ *Anglican Identities*, p. 136,

⁹ Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Continuum) p. 220.

¹⁰ *Rowan’s Rule*, pp. 13, 14.

This is an ontological conviction for Williams, for whom love of the other is the character of God's inner Triune life. Other-love is also at work in the love of God for the created world, and is represented in human affairs perhaps most perfectly by the creative work of the artist, (not quite the pick-pocket, *pace* O'Donovan!) whose craft depends not upon skillful sleight of hand, but upon a certain kind of letting go, a certain willingness to be surprised.¹¹

Letting go can take many forms — it can be artists giving themselves over to the other that is the object of art, or it can be the art of love itself — the two are closely related for Williams. Earthly love involves a form of dispossession, of a lack of possessiveness or coercive power, that is itself a window into the love of God. On September 11, 2001, Williams was in New York City, just a few blocks from the World Trade Centre. The close proximity of beauty and death, of religion and violence and love and hate that characterized that moment gave rise to a small and extraordinary book entitled, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11*. In it, Williams reflects upon the dissonance between the self-righteous religious rhetoric of the terrorists, justifying their deaths and the murder of some three thousand victims, and the tender and fragile last words communicated to family members by the victims. Religious ideology can make terror from strong sentiments; the non-religious utterances spoke of love in ways poignantly devoid of higher cause or reward. As Williams puts it:

The non-religious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about — the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.¹²

Slipping in back-pockets indeed! Here is a moment of such stark failure, of such terrible vulnerability, and yet in it we are afforded glimpses of an otherworldly triumph. All efforts to capture, to

¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005).

¹² Rowan Williams, *Writing in the Dust: After September 11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002) p. 3.

contain, or even to make religious meaning of such a precarious victory are doomed to be inadequate, as the media coverage in the days after September 11 amply attest. The doubter's new treasure is not merely better-funded, but of another economy altogether and thus is misused if treated merely as worldly currency.

In a world and church that favour clear political prognostications and policies, Archbishop Williams's penchant for nuance is often misapprehended. He refuses to treat political questions as straightforwardly obvious, and this is perhaps most evident in his handling of the vexed issue of same-sex blessing. Williams's position as Archbishop of Canterbury may seem inconsistent with his earlier and more liberal views as a professor of theology. The oft-cited lecture on sexuality, "The Body's Grace", was delivered to the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in 1989, when Williams was Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford. This paper continues to sully his relations with conservative Anglicans for its supposed libertine stance. It is, to my mind, the most significant theological writings on human sexuality of our time.¹³ It is also one of the most difficult.

The Body Capable Of Making Meaning

According to Williams, the body is capable not only of self-expression, but more significantly, of meaning making. Sexuality is a kind of language, and like all language, it is fundamental and a fraught with means of shaping perception. One's own knowledge of the self is shaped and to a certain degree controlled by this intercourse. Such a transformative encounter involves enormous risk — the possibility of humiliation, of bodily harm, and of profound personal woundedness — but just so, the body, in risking vulnerability also may, by grace, become an occasion for joy — both to itself and for others. This erotic joy is analogously related

¹³ The paper, originally delivered as the Michael Harding Memorial Lecture, delivered under the banner of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement. It was later anthologized in Eugene Rogers (ed.) *Theology and Sexuality* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003).

to the delight of God in loving that which is other than God. As Williams writes:

To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned or are learning about being the object of the causeless, loving delight of God.¹⁴

Those of us who are recipients of the creative desire of another — be it of God or of another human — can be caught up in a new way of perceiving ourselves. The self becomes, through erotic joy, an expanded self, but also what it was properly created to be — an arresting and irreducible source of delight. Yet such a heady celebration of erotic love is not without its implicit and lurking dangers. It is woefully hard to get this right. Indeed, the endless efforts of the church and society to habilitate the sexual by the establishment of criteria is destined for failure, for such effort serves only to domesticate the sheer gratuity and dispossessed nature of erotic love. Thus Williams rejects the Catholic delimitation of the erotic to the procreative. The erotic is in itself a good precisely because of its lack of teleology. Homosexual union can be, according the Williams's reasoning, an expression of such delight and homecoming.

I have spent a fair amount of time on this rather brief essay because I think that the essay speaks to the careful manner in which the Archbishop of Canterbury has generally attempted to address matters of human sexuality and same-sex blessing. Although he has distanced himself somewhat from this article, and although his views have given rise to uncomfortable and, in my view, problematic political decisions, his does not represent an unthinking perspective on sexuality. His caution over same-sex blessing is in keeping with his warnings about the potential of violating or distorting the Body's grace. Through it all, there is a constant refrain: "Wait for one another." (1 Cor. 11: 33). As a global church, whose recent history includes missionary colonization and the unremitting imposition

¹⁴ "The Body's Grace," *Theology and Sexuality*, p. 310.

of British mores upon indigenous communities, the capacity of the churches to wait for one another is certainly being tested in this case. As Archbishop, Williams has been firm in insisting that communion has something to do with the risk of attending to one another across distance (cultural and ideological) and over time.¹⁵ The political repercussions of this conviction are well-known and need not be rehearsed here. Does Williams's plea for patience ask gays and lesbians to risk disproportionately for the sake of the Communion? Cannot this plea become a form of ideological deception? I believe it does and I believe it can.

"Rowan Bear"

In 2003, just in time for General Synod, a new toy was added to the British market. "Rowan Bear" was hirsute and bespectacled, adorned in a cassock with 39 buttons, and crowned with a mitre bearing a dove. I don't know what is more remarkable: that an Anglican Archbishop could inspire a toy or that one could advocate pacifism! For Williams, a resolute member of the disarmament movement in the 1970s and 1980s, peace is not an abstract concept or ideal: it is a lived possibility because Christ's crucifixion and resurrection unleashes an incursion of peace, which although precarious, is real and compelling. The New Jerusalem is apprehensible, although dimly, and it is to this peace, and not to the illusions of the earthly city, that the church must set its sights.

Thus the Christian faith must always exist at an angle to the worldly order (it should be no small surprise that an Archbishop of Canterbury should affirm this), and yet the disjuncture between Christian faith and political order should not give rise to a sentimental and naïve utopianism. Christian faith that fails to engage the earthly city robustly amounts to a faith destined for self-

¹⁵ The latter is, at essence, Williams's understanding of the role of bishop: "My role is not just keeping the Communion together," he tells me. "When I teach as a bishop I teach what the church teaches. In controverted areas it is my responsibility to teach what the church has said and why." - Interview with Paul Richardson, *Church of England Newspaper*, www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2114?q=sharia, accessed October 5, 2009.

enclosure and political failure. Williams criticizes the peace movement for its “utopian hope of justice and reconciliation that is consistently vulnerable to its own failure to transform more than the interpersonal, and thus tempted to reinterpret failure as success.”¹⁶ Read in this light, the peace movement is often equally prone to inuring itself from vulnerability or critique as is the political right. Peace comes, according to Williams, not in such narratives of self-mastery, but through a willingness to attend to vulnerability. In other words, politics ought to be cruciform — which includes not only a renunciation of power by the powerful (as in Nietzsche’s contemptuous pity), but a recognition of a shared vulnerability that our illusions of control seek to obscure.

Thus the Christian engagement with the political order ought always to keep in view a shared vulnerability with others, particularly with our supposed opponents. Thus Williams is especially aware of the vulnerability of religious persons within contemporary secular society. In drawing attention to matters of Muslim identity in British politics he has been much maligned and much misunderstood. In February 2008, at a lecture delivered at the Royal Courts of London, Williams argued that under certain conditions, Sharia Law should be recognized and accommodated within British civil law in the same way that religious convictions of other faith communities are accommodated within British jurisprudence. The public reaction to this lecture supported one of Archbishop Williams’s main points — that within the West the image of Islam is generally one of a benighted and oppressive community antithetical to the free and democratic values of the West. In the lecture, Williams employs his own standard: a key to peace involves an overcoming of distance not between the free and the un-free, but between those two un-free parties caught up in enmity. Such a vision involves the turning away from the illusions of mastery, in this case of the double standards and the falsehoods that are concealed in much of the West’s rhetoric of freedom.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000) p. 272.

To Williams, cases such as these are urgent *Christian* causes because to him the light of Christ is concealed under the machinations of the strong and is revealed in vulnerability. The Christian task is to perceive and to refuse to turn away from this light, “this secret fire”, at the heart of earthly reality. Such perception transfigures bodies, political and ecclesial, because it is begotten of an eternal light that shines in the darkness. Perhaps the best way of closing this reflection upon a visionary is not through summary but by verse. The poem “Morning” is written in memory of his friend, philosopher Gillian Rose. These lines depict her interment on a cold and foggy morning. It is a poem of lament, but it is also a poem of trust, and thus it is a parable of Archbishop Williams’s vision:

And down, a long way down, below the frost
must be soft embers sending up the light
from fires the night-fog has muffled but not killed.¹⁷

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, “Morning: *Winterreise* for Gillian Rose, 9 December 1995,” in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, foreword by Phoebe Pettingell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 84.