

## ROWAN WILLIAMS AND THE POSSIBILITY OF DIALOGUE. PART 1

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*This essay seeks to trace the intellectual journey which prepared Rowan Williams for leadership with Anglican Christians as they seek to engage with persons of other religions working for the peace of the world and the common good. This article (the first of two parts) attempts to show how Wittgenstein, MacKinnon, T.S. Eliot, Russian Orthodox theologians, and Freudian psychology, help to understand the mystery of the other, avoiding the projection of our own fantasies and prejudices onto others. It is claimed that these influences contributed, first to his understanding of the problems of peacemaking, then to communication in the multicultural reality of the Anglican Communion, next in ecumenical dialogue, and finally in inter-religious dialogue.*

The theology of Rowan Williams developed with a natural impetus throughout his ministry to include a focus as Archbishop of Canterbury on inter-religious relations. This essay seeks to trace this development. In his analysis of the theology of Rowan Williams, Benjamin Myers 'follows a chronological path' which, he claims, 'may be said to fall into three broad periods'.<sup>1</sup>

The First, an early period from the 1970s to the late 1980s, was dominated by his response to the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's questions concerning the relation between language and sociality. This supports Williams' search for assurance that Christians and Muslims can find 'enough of a common language'<sup>2</sup> for working together as citizens of Britain living in harmony, and seeking to promote world peace with justice for the common good of humanity worldwide.

The Second, a middle period from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, is dominated by the Hegelian question: Is society more than (simply) the sum of its parts? How can citizens of distinct communities contribute effectively to the whole of society?

The Third, a period from the late 1990s to the present, is dominated by the Freudian question: Is human desire necessarily trapped in selfish fantasy or can human beings enter into that mode of relating which the New Testament calls 'love'? The resonance (and assonance) of ideas about the love for God and neighbour in Christianity and Islam are central to the discussion.

Possibly the most significant contribution to the growth of understanding and trust between Muslim and Christian theological authorities in dialogue has been the series of annual residential conferences known as *The Building Bridges Seminars*. In 2002 the first of these was initiated by George Carey as Archbishop of Canterbury, soon after the political crisis provoked by attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. At that historic moment Rowan Williams was due to deliver a lecture at Holy Trinity Church Centre, New York, close to the World Trade Centre, and he was in serious danger of losing his life. He has written about the experience<sup>3</sup> and how it emphasized the importance of Christian/Muslim relations for him. These Seminars have continued to be convened annually by Rowan Williams since he became Archbishop of Canterbury and he has attended all of them. In spite of onerous duties he has made personal contributions and has confirmed his commitment to supporting the Seminars after retiring as Archbishop.

My task is to assess how Williams' theology has developed in response to the needs of peacemaking and reconciliation between Churches and political communities living in tension or in conflict during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In his study of the theology of Rowan Williams, Benjamin Myers, analysing the various influences contributing to the development of Williams' theology, writes:

Theologians often invoke metaphors of building to describe their work: the scholar as a grand architect, a wise foreman, an honest bricklayer. But for Williams, theology is less like a construction site than like a friendship. Not a monument to be built but something collectively ventured, explored, revised, negotiated, threatened by subtle conflicts and enlarged by subtle graces. It is not a solitary endeavour; personal relationships of loving opposition are the necessary environment for the zigzag of Christian imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Williams is a catholic thinker. The scope of his observation and the genres and idioms in which he works bear witness to the universal scope—the catholicity—of the gospel. That is why his

writing, from psychology and church history to poetry and literary criticism, is always gently, persistently theological. What holds it together is a conviction that Christ is universally available, that the gospel can be refracted through all the disparate fragments of human experience and tradition.<sup>5</sup>

Myers suggests that you could hardly find a better description of Williams' position than his own remark about Thomas Merton, written in 1978.

Merton's genius was largely that he was a massively unoriginal man: he is extraordinary because he is so dramatically absorbed by every environment that he finds himself in. [...] All these influences flow into one constant place, a will and imagination turned Godward.<sup>6</sup>

At a time when tradition is widely ignored and intellectual novelty is prized as an end in itself, Williams' uniqueness lies in this attentiveness and 'massive unoriginality', the expansive catholicity of a baptized imagination.

In attempting to trace the intellectual journey which has prepared Rowan Williams for leadership with Anglican Christians as they seek to find appropriate relations with people of other cultures and faiths we must ask: first, what the influences are that prepared him for his position—in interreligious relations for encouraging the development of the Christian-Muslim Forum in Britain and continuing the wider promotion of the 'Building Bridges' Seminars; and secondly, how he understands the evolution of the Church of England in response to the contemporary political situation.

### **1.1 Early influences: Wittgenstein, T.S. Eliot and Russian Orthodoxy**

Myers describes Williams as 'an uncommonly quiet and bookish boy' who, growing up as a pupil of Dynevor Grammar School in Swansea,<sup>7</sup> was influenced by the strong intellectual heritage of Swansea University.

As a result of illness in infancy he couldn't become involved in the rough and tumble of the physical, sporting activities beloved by most boys in South Wales and withdrew into the slower, solitary consolations of literature, philosophy and history. By the age of thirteen, people would already remark on his wide reading. His discovery of the philosophy of Wittgenstein at that young age was not accidental. He was encouraged by a near neighbour who taught history at Swansea University.<sup>8</sup>

Ludwig Wittgenstein, the refugee Austrian Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, had spent his summer holidays in Swansea during the 1940s and developed a close friendship with Rush Rhees, the Professor of Philosophy at Swansea, who later became his literary executor. As a result Rush Rhees was the first person to develop the religious interpretation of Wittgenstein's work and, since the 1950s, this approach had dominated the Swansea philosophy department.

Although Wittgenstein himself was not exactly outspoken about religion or theology Rush Rhees and his colleagues 'were busily teasing out the religious implications of his philosophy. The Swansea school was marked not only by a religious emphasis but also by an interest in literature'.<sup>9</sup> They tested and developed their thinking through engagement with writers of fiction (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Melville, Conrad, Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor) and with the poets T.S. Eliot and R.S. Thomas. Williams himself later reflected a remarkable critical interest in all these authors in his own writing on artistic creativity.<sup>10</sup> The Swansea philosophers saw literature not merely as a device to illustrate more general philosophical truths but as a vital intellectual resource in its own right for uncovering the truth and particularity of human experience. They valued literature, with its attention to the particular, as an antidote to philosophical confusion. Wittgenstein had himself condemned the 'craving for generality' in philosophy, and for the Swansea school a commitment to particulars—particular experiences, particular practices—meant that all tendencies toward generality had to be resisted. This is also characteristic of Williams. Theology, they claimed, is not merely a system of ideas. It is part of a wider religious language that operates within embodied patterns of ritual, life and religious observance. As one of Williams' later teachers, the Wittgensteinian theologian Fergus Kerr, observed, 'if we cannot imagine what it is to observe rites, enjoy singing hymns and the like, the nature of religion is bound to remain opaque'.<sup>11</sup>

This priority of life over ideas seems to have gripped Williams' imagination as a young Welsh reader of Wittgenstein and this habit of mind has left a lasting impression on his thought. Decades later, it continues to orient his thinking about Christ, the Church and society. He reads, Myers claims, like a Swansea Wittgensteinian asking not simply about ideas, but how

those ideas are used and how they operate within wider social environments. He interprets language according to its use in specific communities and he reads texts as reflections of life, judging Christian ideas not only by their internal coherence, but also by their coherence with Christian practice. He learned from Wittgenstein to ask not simply about words but, more penetratingly, about meanings; not about individuals but about social life; not about the general but about particulars and not just about what people believe, but about how they behave. Above all Williams' early reading of Wittgenstein prompted him to think about human sociality itself as a theological reality, and this is what drew him, some years later, to study the tradition of Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>12</sup>

From this Wittgensteinian emphasis Williams began to analyse a Christian doctrine of humanity and, reacting against the Cartesian, rationalist emphasis on individuality, his interest centred on human sociality. He began to focus on understanding how human persons learn to relate through a shared language as part of a family and community, with all the tensions involved in the necessity of encounter at cultural barriers.<sup>13</sup> From early childhood he grew up on the margins where Welsh and English cultures meet and, with this experience behind him, he later showed the intellectual courage to explore the problems of communication between other contrasting expressions of faith and culture.

So it was when Williams went to Oxford for doctoral studies: though he could have selected a carefully circumscribed topic for his research, instead he chose to study an entire world, 'the darkly luxuriant world of Russian Orthodoxy',<sup>14</sup> and it would become impossible later to exaggerate the importance of Russian thought in the shaping of Williams' imagination. In his doctoral thesis, completed in 1975, he explored the 'negative' or 'apophatic' theology of the Russian émigré theologian living in Paris, Vladimir Nicholaevich Lossky, which speaks of God, not by attempting to define what God is so much, as by discussing what God is *not*—God's mysterious negative attributes. Unlike most of his contemporaries in Oxford, Williams was concerned here not with familiar questions about the nature of religious language but with the relation of theology and spirituality, social life and divine life, human persons and the persons of the Trinity. Negative theology, he argues, can never be reduced to 'a move in a conceptual game'; it is not a 'technique' or a linguistic trick, or a clever way of circumventing obstacles in our language about God. It is rather a process of transformation, 'transfiguration', a conversion of the intellect—or rather, a conversion of the whole self—whereby we are drawn outside ourselves into the presence of someone who is different. According to Lossky, the doctrine of the Trinity is a crucifixion of the intellect, 'a cross for human ways of thought'.<sup>15</sup> If the cross is a revelation of God's identity, then personality itself—what it means to be 'a person'—is revealed as a 'kenotic' reality (a self-dispossession), for in the Trinity there is no self-interest, no 'individual will', but only an enormous movement of painful, ecstatic self-renunciation. Williams believes this self-renouncing pattern of life is at the root of all *personal* being.<sup>16</sup> This tragic reality is expressed in the quotation: 'There was a cross at the heart of God before there was one planted on the green hill outside Jerusalem',<sup>17</sup> and this tragic theme can be traced back to Williams' mentor, Donald MacKinnon, in his discussion of the Atonement. (Professor Donald MacKinnon was a teacher who influenced Williams deeply as an undergraduate at Cambridge.)

The writings of Christian disciples down the ages who attempted rigorously to live this self-renouncing pattern of life are explored in Williams' series of lectures at The College of the Resurrection, Mirfield—an Anglican Theological College in industrial Yorkshire—and were later published in 1974 as *The Wound of Knowledge*.<sup>18</sup>

For Williams the self-directed, autonomous individual<sup>19</sup> provides a picture not of what it means to be human but what it means to be 'fallen': one might think of Milton's Satan. The image of God in humankind, he claims, lies not somewhere 'inside' (waiting, as it were, to break out), but 'outside'—only as we begin to reflect God's image do we become truly human; only as we pull away from our own egotistical interests and relate ourselves to the interests of others. Indeed, for Lossky, the autonomous self is a kind of blasphemy, a broken mirror that reflects God's image as a grotesque and diabolical disfigurement. Only in the social exchange of kenotic (self-emptying) selves, each going beyond itself towards another, is God's image restored. Thus humanness is not a wholeness, in heroic self-mastery, self-containment—'we are most human when we are cracked, when each self bleeds out into the lives of others'.<sup>20</sup> In his discussion of

the saints, Williams claims that it is *they* who most reflect human potential by their openness to the light of Christ.

What then, can it mean to know someone, if what really constitutes a 'person' is not positive qualities like freedom or rationality, but something meek, negative, expressed in kenosis, self-renunciation, even the crucifixion of the self? Human persons can be known only negatively or apophatically, since personhood is itself a sort of negative property. Human persons, then, are in 'the image of God' to the extent that they reflect God's knowability, the mystery of crucified selfhood. Williams brings this Wittgensteinian imagination to bear on the Russian theology of personhood. The difficulty in all social exchange lies in the fact that human persons must always remain strange and mysterious to one another. And social life, therefore, is not about collapsing differences or engineering artificial unity: instead, differences should be accentuated as sharply as possible, so that what you experience in another person is not fantasy, not another deceptive projection of yourself, but the real intractable mystery of another self. You can never be done with another person, since every advance in knowing is an opening on to a greater mystery. It is in the most intimate proximity to others that we are most painfully aware of their difference and that is, for instance, what makes marriage the most demanding, and sometimes the most tragic, form of human relating.<sup>21</sup>

This sense of the intractable strangeness of other selves is one of Williams' deepest and most enduring intuitions. He is often described as an advocate of negative theology, though his work in these early years was always more concerned with what it means to be a human person and how a meaningful encounter between persons becomes possible. All Williams' early work on Russian theology is haunted by an even larger Wittgensteinian question: how can meaning be shared across two different Christian traditions, those vastly disparate forms of life represented by the Latin West and Orthodox East?<sup>22</sup> How can this dialogue, in the era of the Cold War, contribute to the peace of the world?<sup>23</sup> Later this question was modified: how can meaning be shared across different Abrahamic religions, those vastly disparate forms of life represented by Judaism, Christianity and Islam? How can this dialogue contribute to the peace of the world? This is the question to which he has been seeking to find answers as participant in the patient negotiations of the 'Building Bridges' Seminars. Throughout his career, Williams has continued to probe those sensitive boundaries, the jagged edges along which different selves and different traditions meet. What happens when differences collide? How can these collisions be negotiated? How can they challenge and enlarge us? How can they draw us out beyond ourselves instead of making us retreat into the safety of our own private worlds? How can we really see one another truthfully without merely projecting our own anxieties and expectations on to one another?

Williams' early encounter with Wittgenstein gave shape to a commitment that has remained foundational to his theological vision: a commitment not to faith as an abstract system of ideas but to Christian sociality as a real, embodied pattern of life. He clearly thinks that Christ came to create a community, not of angels, but of real human beings and that is where his view of the church differs from so many others: 'there are no wings in Williams' theology'.<sup>24</sup> Putting it less poetically, his theology has that strong emphasis on 'realism' which was affirmed by his early mentor, Professor Donald MacKinnon, while he was an undergraduate at Cambridge.<sup>25</sup> In his biography of Rowan Williams, Rupert Shortt writes:

It will be apparent that some of the leitmotifs in Rowan's work come from MacKinnon, including his sensitivity to the dark side of human nature, and his deepening sense that the data of our experience pose the questions to which Christianity supplies decisive but never unchallenging answers.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout his career Williams' thought progresses from language as communication between persons, to the relation of theology to spirituality. Recognition of the spiritually 'fallen' state of humanity raises the ultimate problem: how can the fractured image of God in humankind be restored to 'personhood', a pattern which reflects and witnesses to the relationship between the persons of the Trinity?

As has been said, he finds a resolution to the problem in the Russian Orthodox apophatic theology of Vladimir Nicholaevich Lossky. Williams recognized the 'kenotic', crucifixion-of-self, at the very core of the relationship between the persons of the Trinity and, consequently, as essential to the restored nature of human persons as they seek to reflect the image of God. He understands that this kenotic relationship between persons in their rich diversity is deeply

mysterious and the closer the relationship, the more mysterious the differences may appear, which means that social life cannot be established by ‘collapsing’ the vast range of specific human differences and imposing a logically engineered, artificial unity. This is essentially how his ecclesiology differs from the doctrines of idealists and those doctrines which transmute so readily into ideologies.

The gravest temptation for so many theologians is to imagine the church as a spiritual ideal, a sort of Platonic form of ecclesiality, instead of the disappointingly earthy experience of embodied human community.<sup>27</sup>

A contemporary, tragic illustration occurred at the General Synod in York in June 2012 when conflicting sectarian groups within the Church of England pressured for the adjournment of the debate on the consecration of women as bishops because none were able to achieve their entire objective without compromise. The revised motion was sent back for further discernment in the House of Bishops before its return for debate in November, just before the retirement of Rowan Williams as Archbishop in December 2012.<sup>28</sup> The motion was, in fact, lost by six votes in the house of laity. It was a source of real pain for Archbishop Williams but with the patient help of professionals in the arts of conflict resolution a form of reconciliation was found and Synod accepted a resolution authorizing the ordination of persons with the vocation and appropriate spiritual gifts—of either sex—to episcopal ministry in July 2014.

## 1.2 The Theme of Tragedy in Williams’ Theology

Myers gives a very acute description of the theological scene at Cambridge when Williams went up to read theology in 1968.<sup>29</sup>

The 1960s were heady times to be reading theology. In Britain, Bishop John A.T. Robinson had hit the headlines with the publication of the blithe existentialism of *Honest to God*. In North America, left wing Barthians had gleefully proclaimed the death of God<sup>30</sup>. In New Testament departments, Rudolf Bultmann’s disciples were dutifully peeling away layer after layer of the mythology of Christian belief, while, down the corridors, beleaguered professors of divinity retreated into the recondite certainties of Anglo-American analytical philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

But none of these paths held any imaginative appeal for the young Rowan Williams, who had already, by the time he arrived at Cambridge, read more widely than many of his teachers. But one of his teachers really grabbed his attention: he soon fell under the spell of ‘the tortured genius of Donald MacKinnon’.<sup>32</sup>

Professor MacKinnon’s philosophical theology was ‘a peculiar blend of Barthian commitment to the uniqueness of Christ and a meta-physical realism that emphasized the moral priority of tragedy’. For MacKinnon, tragic experience functions as a metaphysical proof, a solution to the Kantian problem of the limits of knowledge. Only when we become aware of ‘the extremity of human life’ are we forced to acknowledge the inadequacy of any naturalistic explanation of the human condition and its solution.

MacKinnon refused to think of the problem of evil as an abstract intellectual puzzle; instead he returned repeatedly to the figure of Judas Iscariot, as a sort of anti-saint—a paradigmatic revelation of the nature of evil. For Christians, ‘the problem of evil is the problem of Judas Iscariot’.<sup>33</sup> (*My will be done!*) The gospel of Christ reveals God’s grace and healing for all humanity; but the path to this expansive salvation leads through the small gate of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal. At the heart of Christ’s story is this tragic sub-plot of self-will, disillusion, rejection and betrayal.

Because MacKinnon’s tragic interpretation of the gospel resonated with much that Williams had already intuited from his reading of English literature, Williams found his teacher’s approach absorbing and compelling. Indeed the depth of MacKinnon’s influence is most clearly gauged by the way Williams was thinking about poetry during his student years. After he left Cambridge and began doctoral studies at Oxford, he soon gained a reputation as an incisive interpreter of Russian Orthodoxy, but when the General Theological Seminary in New York City invited him to deliver a series of public lectures, the twenty-three year old scholar chose as his theme the religious vision of T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. Williams argued that Eliot shows not a renunciation of the world but that his clear-eyed acceptance of the brutal meaninglessness of history is evidence of ‘relentless fidelity’ to the world *as it really is*.<sup>34</sup> God’s loving endurance of the world produces a new redemptive vision of how the world is in itself—tragically disordered. In a homily on T.S. Eliot preached in 1984, Williams would again call up

the stark theological vision of the *Four Quartets*. In it he concluded that our capacity for love emerges only as we refuse consoling fantasy and accept that ours is 'a world of meaninglessness, of destruction, violence, death and loss.'<sup>35</sup> The impulse to protect ourselves from this hard truth—to project our own reassuring patterns of imagination on the world—arises from a beguiling illusion, a refusal to see the world as it is. Love emerges only as we are dispossessed of such fantasy. By looking straight into the abyss of the world's 'empty destitution' our illusions are burned away and only on the other side of self-centred fantasy can we make room for the work of love and communion. In short, what Williams finds in Eliot's bleakly redemptive vision is the logic of the gospel: death and Resurrection, 'unbearable violence' and 'unbearable compassion'. By contrast, worldly optimism is exposed as a prophylactic against reality: it must be plunged into the purgative crucible—'redeemed from fire by fire,'<sup>36</sup> as Eliot says. The possibility of the world's transformation only then emerges from endurance, from a truthful and unprotected seeing of what is really there. In Gethsemane, Christ prostrates himself on the earth, begging that the cup might pass from him—and then adds, 'nevertheless not my will but your will be done' (Luke 22:42). That 'nevertheless', Williams claims, is the salvation of the world. The whole nightmare of world history is borne up and redeemed by that shattering moment of resolve, and so we align ourselves with Christ's work, only when our own disappointment with the world resolves itself into an even deeper commitment, a sort of hope beyond hope, a commitment beyond despair: only, in fact, when we learn to 'walk by faith, not by sight'.<sup>37</sup>

Mike Higton has given his assessment of the theology of Rowan Williams in the title of his book, *Difficult Gospel*.<sup>38</sup> It is this refusal of a comforting fantasy—the mythical victory of a divine love which avoids or circumvents the tragedy of the passion story—to which Higton is alluding. It is not easy to accept that 'God's grace is, after all, most powerfully at work where God is most hidden: in the lonely shadows of Gethsemane and Golgotha'.<sup>39</sup> This thought is reflected in Gillian Rose's *Love's Work*<sup>40</sup> where she quotes the words of the monk Staretz Silouan of Mount Athos: 'Keep your mind in hell and despair not'. The importance of T.S. Eliot in Williams' thought and imagination can hardly be overestimated,<sup>41</sup> nor indeed its contribution to expounding the impact of MacKinnon's metaphysical 'realism'.

Throughout the 1970s Williams' attention was fixed single-mindedly on the theology of the cross,<sup>42</sup> but in the 1980s, as a young curate in Cambridge, he turned his attention to the meaning of the Resurrection.

### **1.3 Language, moral life and social belonging<sup>43</sup>**

In 1981 Williams was invited to give a series of Lent addresses to clergy in the East End of London. These were published the following year as *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*.<sup>44</sup> They form an extended meditation on the New Testament accounts of the Resurrection. The book's main argument is that these accounts are about the creation of a new form of life—a new shared language for God. They are 'texts about religious language itself' and the community that seeks to share this common language.<sup>45</sup>

Williams thinks our real problem is not that God is too distant but that, in Jesus Christ, God has come unbearably near. There is no safe, objective position from which we can speak about God, no panoptic, objective vantage point from which we can propose a philosophical/theological definition. 'Christians must learn to speak of a God from whom their lives are not to be separated, a God, therefore, involved with the whole fabric of being'.<sup>46</sup>

Back in 1966 MacKinnon took part in a broadcast dialogue with Geoffrey Lampe, another Cambridge Professor of Theology, and a book based on the dialogue was later published in which MacKinnon criticized both liberal and conservative readings of the Resurrection;<sup>47</sup> the former were seen to represent the Resurrection as myth and the latter simply as a verifiable historical event: either it happened or it did not! Both views he dismissed as opposite sides of the same coin. MacKinnon urged acceptance that the Resurrection transcends what we normally understand as history. 'It lies deep down at the root of things.' It is 'more than event', more than anything that could merely be proven or observed. For Williams, deeply influenced by MacKinnon, theology is not meant to 'clear things up' but to perform a kind of semantic unravelling. Williams argues that:

The Christian tradition is generated by this bewildering event and by the alarming narratives that speak of it. Thus, the social patterns of early Christianity are marked by a profound sense of

rupture and discontinuity. Right from the start, the church is aware that its own social life is the result of a violent rending of existing systems of meaning. Christian language takes shape as part of a whole new form of human community.<sup>48</sup>

Though he never makes it explicit, Myers claims that Williams' underlying metaphor here is that of psychological trauma. Williams had certainly been studying Freud around this time.<sup>49</sup> It is not surprising, then, to find that he uses Freudian theory while challenging its conclusions. This complex psychoanalytical metaphor thus gives him a way of linking past and present: of articulating the mysterious connection between the church as a form of life extended through time and Christ's Resurrection as a real event of the past, which nevertheless remains central to Christian language and experience in the present and is in this sense an *anamnesis* (remembrance) 'transcending history'. Christ, he claims, as the light of the world, traumatically disturbs our equilibrium since the light interrupts our blindness and complacency. Producing 'a kind of vertigo, it makes me a stranger to myself, and to everything I have taken for granted'. Christ is light but 'when God's light breaks on my darkness the first thing I know is that I don't know, and never did.'<sup>50</sup> Williams argues that unredeemed religious language tries to bring God under control, to assimilate God within our own ready-made systems of meaning, so that even within the Church there exists a tendency to turn God into a reassuring projection of our own needs and desires. Such language is a barrier to experiencing God's strangeness and that is why God's attack on language in the *logos* made flesh is launched primarily 'against the beachhead of human religiosity'.

There is an immense shadow lurking in the background of Williams' spiritual awareness: the (now unfashionable) Christian vision of the world as 'fallen'—what Vladimir Lossky calls the 'nocturnal side' of creation.<sup>51</sup> Following Augustine of Hippo,<sup>52</sup> Williams sees original sin as an ugly wound running right through the middle of things, and most acutely through human reason and experience itself. This is not simply a moralistic obsession with individual vices, but a vision of universal tragic disorder—the whole 'frame of things'<sup>53</sup> has become disjointed.<sup>54</sup>

More than almost any other contemporary thinker, Williams has resisted the deep undercurrent of Pelagianism in modern thought. He rarely speaks explicitly of 'sin', but his thought begins to make sense only against the backdrop of the doctrine of original sin, in something like its full Augustinian form. The importance of Augustine is foregrounded in Williams' first book, *The Wound of Knowledge*,<sup>55</sup> written in his late twenties and published in 1979. Augustinianism is realism for Williams. Its opposite is not a cheery human optimism, as is often thought, but a cruel and disabling worldliness.

In a lecture on modern literature, T.S. Eliot once said that when the idea of original sin disappears from a culture, the representation of human beings tends to become more and more unreal; more dreamlike and 'vaporous'.<sup>56</sup> Williams claims that this awareness—that things are fundamentally disordered, and that our own thinking is part of that disorder—keeps us morally alert, suspicious of easy certainties, attentive to the real tissue of human experience with all its tragic failings and uncertainties.

'From the silence of Holy Saturday there emerges a new community whose vocabulary has been shattered and reformed'.<sup>57</sup> This community has to begin the slow work of reshaping its language, 'subverting and reconstructing other traditions and vocabularies'<sup>58</sup> as it tries to make sense of the world into which Christ has risen. The Christian Tradition as a whole, Williams argues, is the continuing process of the conversion of human language to God. Theology, as Williams also learned from Wittgenstein, is not really about ideas but about life. Through Christ's Resurrection, the reality of God has become woven into the fabric of human experience. God is what fractures our natural identity, and God is the new coherence of our stories. To perform this coherence—to make God's reality legible in the embodied pattern of our lives—is what it means to speak of God. Simply put, 'to live the forgiven life wholeheartedly is [...] to speak of God'.<sup>59</sup>

#### 1.4 The Trauma of the Resurrection: new meaning in a new world

As Myers understands him, then, Williams claims that Christ's Resurrection is hardly a source of edification and consolation: it is a traumatic wound that strikes at the roots of human identity. The Resurrection causes 'a tectonic upheaval in the landscape of human community'.<sup>60</sup> This earthquake, this 'shaking of the foundations' is the beginning of the Church, and the Church's subsequent history is a series of tenuous attempts to make sense of its traumatic

beginning. The Church is that traumatized community which God's intervention has left in the world—a wound for the world's healing.

Myers reminds us how in one of his poems Rowan Williams describes the 'bored and pious air' with which trained ecclesiastics 'calmly intone about the mystery of the Resurrection'<sup>61</sup>—much of his writing from the 70s and 80s forms a protest against such pious boredom and conformity on the one hand, and against the temptation to compromise in 'modern theology' with the language of scientism and utilitarian materialism on the other.

In the classical theology of the Cappadocian Fathers, Christ is said to take on our human nature in order to make it whole. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, 'whatever is not assumed is not healed',<sup>62</sup> and that is how Williams sees it, except that he identifies humanness not with any substantial 'nature', but with the whole world of language, mediation and social exchange. In Christ, human sociality is crucified and resurrected, judged and redeemed. What the Resurrection produces, then, is not an ideal or perfected human society—not utopia—but a real flesh and blood community marked as much by failure as success. Yet it is a community in which all the normal human boundaries have been decisively altered. The whole shape of what is possible for human life has changed: the barriers have come down—this is fundamental to his theology of religions—and the Resurrection, Williams argues, is a universal happening. For Christ creation has no frontiers, and the existence of the church is already implicated in the existence of the risen Christ because the Resurrection immediately gives rise to a new community whose imagination has been converted to this new unbounded world. Williams' vision here is shaped above all by the imaginative world of modern Russian Orthodoxy where redemption is envisaged as the removal of boundaries and the creation of a new organic catholicity (*sobornost*). He adopts the vision of Vladimir Solovyov, a nineteenth century Russian theologian, who saw God overcoming the dark power by which humanity is fragmented into a 'chaos of multiplicity', and salvation as the 'sanctification and renovation of the whole human essence'. Sergei Bulgakov, another Russian (who abandoned Marxism to become an Orthodox priest and theologian), in less speculative form, describes redemption as 'the removal of the limits of limited being' so that a new humanity comes to share in the limitless life of Christ.

The limits of the Church, then, coincide with the limits of the power of the Incarnation and Pentecost but, 'since these limits do not exist at all, the universe is the periphery to the cosmic face of the Church'.<sup>63</sup> For Williams, then, the Resurrection brings forth new *social* patterns—forgiveness, peacemaking, patience, truth-telling—which overcome whatever barriers had previously been in force. And this new form of social life entails a new way of speaking about God. In Wittgensteinian terms, redemption is the creation of a new form of life and a new shared language and this is in essence what the process of religious dialogue has sought to discover over the ten years of Rowan Williams' Primacy. As Williams has said more recently:

We learn to look at all human faces with the rather disturbing knowledge that they are faces that God has already looked at [...] Any divisions in our world of class, race, church loyalty, have to be confronted with the painful truth that apparently we find it easier than God does to manage without certain bits of the human creation.<sup>64</sup>

For Williams the Resurrection is *both* God's unequivocal 'Yes' to all the diverse 'bits of the human creation' *and* God's commitment to a reconciled world. This is why the first Christians understood questions of social identity and social boundaries as questions about the identity of the God addressed by Jesus as 'Abba, Father'. Through the Resurrection, the world has been fundamentally re-ordered in relation to Jesus. His life cannot be described as though it belonged to *just one* partition of reality for there is no corner of human experience from which he is absent. Thus Williams insists on the importance of the empty tomb and on the physical embodiment of the risen Christ. If Christ were not raised in bodily form, then he would remain foreign to embodied human experience, to all those awkward joys and sorrows of community life. It is *bodily* Resurrection, Williams claims, that secures Christ's relevance to our lives here and now.

Redemption, as he understands it therefore, is never a matter of 'private' spiritual salvation, nor is it simply a vaguely edifying symbol of human striving for life and justice. It is, rather, an embodied occurrence within our world, something that changes what is possible for *all* human lives. The Resurrection alters the world at its deepest level—that is what the early Christians recognized when they said that one particular human life had become the foundation of the

cosmos (1 John 1:5). If the Resurrection creates a new community which is universal in its potential scope, from here it is only a short step to viewing the significance of Jesus as parallel to the very act of creation itself. The 'generative' character of the Resurrection 'is as radical as the generative significance of our language about the world's source and context, God'.<sup>65</sup> Here, again, Williams remains close to modern Russian thought and the fact that Sergei Bulgakov's system includes the doctrine of creation, not as a separate topic but as one branch of ecclesiology, is no accident. The boundaries of creation are identical with the boundaries of the church.<sup>66</sup> Thus Williams sees the established Church of England as a church that is all-inclusive in its pastoral care; not a 'privileged' community.

As Donald MacKinnon had also argued, the Resurrection is the 'projection of a raw piece of human history'—a happening of universal importance—so that one event discloses the meaning of creation and of God's relation to all creatures.<sup>67</sup> In Williams' view it is in the Resurrection community, the fellowship of the Spirit, that the creative and sustaining power of God is shown to be identical with the compassion and forgiveness that renews and reconstitutes the relations of human beings with each other. God appears in human history under the name of 'the one whom Jesus calls Abba'.<sup>68</sup> It is not that there is no meaningful life beyond this community; but here it is named and in becoming identifiable becomes more readily communicable. Christian faith and the Church offer the whole of humanity a language in which to speak both of its ground and its aspiration. 'There is no other *name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Williams' interest in the Theology of Sergei Bulgakov is expressed here in *The Philosophy of the Name, (Filosofiya Imeni)*.<sup>69</sup>

Within the Christian family we take it for granted that the meaning of what it is 'to be saved' is self-evident to all people. But Williams was faced with the difficulty of explaining the meaning to Muslims in conversation with Professor Mona Siddiqi in a public conversation at Glasgow University, October 2010. He writes in explanation,

Christian believers make the bold claim that no other language than that which speaks of the crucified [Lord] and his Resurrection can speak comprehensively of what it is to be 'saved', to be whole as a human being before God. The Christian can respond to the work of salvage and restoration wherever it occurs by 'naming' it as Christ's work. This is not to attempt any 'kidnapping' of human projects on behalf of the Church: any effort at squeezing them into the institutional boundaries of the community. It is not even to underwrite any theory of 'anonymous Christianity' beyond the Church's frontiers. But the claim is made that human salvage and restoration is most fully understood and becomes most fully and critically self-aware when explicitly brought to the light of the Easter proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>70</sup>

In this sense Williams makes universal, exclusive claims for the 'uniqueness' of Christ: 'Christians simply find themselves unable to speak of God without telling Jesus's story. Jesus has entered into the very definition of God by his impact on the life of a human community', and 'Nothing is more fundamental than Jesus, nothing will bring us closer to the heart of being itself than Jesus'.<sup>71</sup>

But we must then ask, in his view, what positive relation is left with other religions or ideologies?

Other stories and other confessions enrich the Christian's commitment: a prolonged sharing with a Jew, a Marxist or a Buddhist will uncover facets of the human world which conventional Christian speech is unaware of. The challenge then becomes that discussed earlier, to manifest that such insights are essentially 'at home' with the vision of Christ as universal *logos*. If he can be found at the heart of another truthful, visionary and compassionate human project, the Easter gospel can indeed be seen to be catholic, and the pressure towards such a discovery is the pressure which keeps the Church open and imaginative: the pressure of the Spirit of the risen Jesus.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum, T&T Clark, 2012), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'A Common Word for the Common Good' <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1893> Preface p. 2.

- <sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *Writings in the Dust: Reflexions on the 11<sup>th</sup> September and Its Aftermath* (London and Grand Rapids: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: Continuum, T&T Clark, 2012), p. 4.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. vii/xi.
- <sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, 'A Person That Nobody Knows: A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton', *Cistercian Studies*, 13 (1978), p. 401.
- <sup>7</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, pp. 13–20.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.
- <sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005).
- <sup>11</sup> Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1986), p. 183.
- <sup>12</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, pp. 15–16.
- <sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Fifth Annual Theos Lecture' (Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, 2012).
- <sup>14</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 16.
- <sup>15</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1957), p. 66.
- <sup>16</sup> Rowan Williams, 'The Theology of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique' (unpublished DPhil, Oxford: University of Oxford, 1975), pp. 14–15.
- <sup>17</sup> C.A. Dinsmore, *Atonement in Literature and Life* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1906), p. 232.
- <sup>18</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 2nd edn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1990).
- <sup>19</sup> Williams, Fifth Annual Theos Lecture.
- <sup>20</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 17.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 17–18.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.
- <sup>23</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Truce of God* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1983), pp. 46–64.
- <sup>24</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, pp. 18–19.
- <sup>25</sup> Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008), pp. 61–63.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.
- <sup>27</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 20, Myers explores the theme of negative theology as an antidote to religious fantasy.
- <sup>28</sup> See 'Amended Women-bishops Clause Speaks of Respect', *Church Times*, 21 September 2012, p. 2.
- <sup>29</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger* pp. 21–27.
- <sup>30</sup> Werner and Lotte Pelz, *God Is No More* (London: Gollanz, 1963) cited by Myers.
- <sup>31</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 22.
- <sup>32</sup> Shortt, *Rowan's Rule*, p. 61.
- <sup>33</sup> Donald MacKinnon, 'Philosophy and Christology', in *Borderlands of Theology and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1968), p. 67.
- <sup>34</sup> Balachandra Rajan, 'The Unity of the Quartets', in *T.S.Eliot: a Study of his Writings by Several Hands*, ed. by Balachandra Rajan (London: Dennis Dobson, 1974), pp. 86, 95.
- <sup>35</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Lazarus: In Memory of T.S.Eliot', in *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1994).
- <sup>36</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Little Gidding, IV.
- <sup>37</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:7.
- <sup>38</sup> Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004).
- <sup>39</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 'Tragedy', pp. 21–27.
- <sup>40</sup> Gillian Rose, *Love's Work* (London: Vintage, 1997).
- <sup>41</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 25.
- <sup>42</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002).
- <sup>43</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, pp. 29–35.
- <sup>44</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1982).
- <sup>45</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Communities of Resurrection', in *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, 2nd Edition (Cleveland OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002), pp. 45–67.
- <sup>46</sup> Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, p. 87.
- <sup>47</sup> Donald MacKinnon and Lampe, G.W.H., *The Resurrection: A Dialogue Arising from Broadcasts* (London: Mowbray, 1966), p. 63.
- <sup>48</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 31.
- <sup>49</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Freudian Psychology', in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Boden (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983).
- <sup>50</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness, Sermons and Reflections* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1994).

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- <sup>51</sup> Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 13, cited by Myers.
- <sup>52</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, chap. 4, cited by Myers.
- <sup>53</sup> *MacBeth*, III. 2. 16, cited by Myers.
- <sup>54</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 33.
- <sup>55</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1979).
- <sup>56</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 34.
- <sup>57</sup> Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, p. 35.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 35.
- <sup>59</sup> Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, p. 87.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37.
- <sup>61</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Carol' in *Headwaters: Poems by Rowan Williams* (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 2008), p. 27.
- <sup>62</sup> J. Stevenson, ed., *Creeds, Councils and Controversies* (London: SPCK, 1966), p. 98.
- <sup>63</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb: On the Divine Humanity*, trans. by Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 266–267.
- <sup>64</sup> Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Ikons of the Virgin* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002), p. 72.
- <sup>65</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation (1986)', in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 138.
- <sup>66</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb: On the Divine Humanity*, pt. III.
- <sup>67</sup> Donald MacKinnon, 'Atonement and Tragedy', in *Borderlands of Theology and other Essays* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1968), pp. 102–103.
- <sup>68</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, p. 64.
- <sup>69</sup> Rowan Williams, *Sergei Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 11.
- <sup>70</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, p. 65.
- <sup>71</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), p. 71.
- <sup>72</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, pp. 64–65.