

The Influences on the Theology of Rowan Williams

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Benjamin Myers claims to understand the theology of who has since become The Right Reverend and Right Honourable The Lord Rowan Douglas Williams of Oystermouth, and tells us the influences (Myers, 2012). At the time of publication Williams was finishing as Archbishop of Canterbury and becoming Master of Magdalen College. Now he has retired from everything, but since the pandemic travels to speak.

This understanding is in Myers' book, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (2012), and I bought and read it in 2023. It is a descriptive book, and lacks analytical criticism. The only negative criticism, taking further Williams's difficult writing, is a case where Williams's eagerness to give us his own view leads to misunderstanding Karl Barth's view in precisely the opposite direction than Barth intended (2012, 122-124).

I think Benjamin Myers misses adding one crucial stance in Williams's approach, and to this extent the apparent pursuit of truth in Williams's approach suggests instead the pursuit of fantasy. Either this or Williams's theology comes at a very high price of credulity.

Michael Hampson in *Last Rites: The End of the Church of England* describes Rowan Williams as a "liberal" (2006, 139). He is no liberal, as Myers shows conclusively. In *The Body's Grace*, Williams does produce a strong inclusive theology, but then Williams as Archbishop soon stood on his head and put the excluding Church institution above such a stance. In fact he went further, as he tried to introduce an Anglican Covenant to restrict the progressive movement of Western Churches towards such socially inclusive theologies as his own. He insisted on bishops as leaders but the General Synod still rejected his

proposal. Myers says nothing on Williams's ability to stand on his head and render selected parts of his own theology pointless.

In a 'big tent', the Radical Orthodox Graham Ward regards Rowan Williams, Fergus Kerr, Nicholas Lash, Stanley Hauerwas, David Burrell and Peter Ochs as using "tradition-based reasoning" to tackle social, political and critical theory and metaphysics. (Smith, 2004, 41, note 42, also 67, note 15)

Nevertheless, this does ask why Williams is so pro-Nicene and Chalcedon, that it may not be them in particular that draws his loyalty but the priority of the institution itself. Some people are oriented this way.

Rowan Williams published his study on Arius (1988) at a time when Anglicans Geoffrey Lampe and Maurice Wiles dug deeply into Christian doctrine origins - to be accused by E. L. Mascall of being "Anglican unitarians" (Edwards, 1989, 146-147). The likes J. A. T. Robinson were generating followings against the metaphysics of old. Robinson had rewrites of Tillich, Bultmann and Bonhoeffer into his own sandwich flavour; and Don Cupitt took his high and dry theism into an ordinary-narratives postmodernism and inspired *Sea of Faith* as a group of followers. Williams was on his own as he upheld Nicaea and Chalcedon. For Williams, Arius was heretic and conservative, whereas Athanasius showed what kind of innovation could be necessarily made (Myers, 2012, 46) - changes to assert better continuity. Nicaea became orthodox and it is orthodoxy via struggles with heterodoxies that lead to questions (2012, 47). Orthodoxy points beyond itself to answer more questions (49).

There weren't just the original Arians, but the simpler rational-leaning 'Arian' biblical readers of the left wing of the Reformation. They undermined orthodoxy by their plain biblical reading, whilst for Williams, Occam's Razor is replaced by Occam's Beard as complexity and complication is upheld.

So Myers describes Williams's influences.

He gives the first as the later Wittgenstein read by the teenager (13-20). This is where language has impact and shapes socially. We don't read in Myers Williams's early influences from English literature, drama, his English teacher, reading Thomas Hardy and discovering poetry (see Macfarlane and Williams, 2015). Didn't these impact theologically? Hardy isn't pro-Christian but there are themes in his work to extract theologically.

Myers says Williams is a Swansea Wittgenstein (15) in probing how ideas are used socially, taking the teenager into the man.

Donald MacKinnon is an oft-quoted influence at Cambridge. He combined Barth and a metaphysics of the moral priority of tragedy (22). Betrayal is right there in the Gospel events, and the Church is corruptible. Williams was attracted to this (23). (MacKinnon was no liberal: an orthodox Anglo-Catholic, lecturing on the complexities of the issues and forcing people to think matters through.) (See 2015a.)

Doctoral study involved Williams's second main influence: Russian Orthodoxy. His doctoral supervisor, Donald Allchin, and Williams himself, can be considered Orthodox in Anglican form (16). I have tried to read Williams's thesis on Lossky (a modern Russian theologian exiled to France) and I know nothing of Oxford standards but it seems to me to defeat

every presentational guide to doing Ph.D theses. Where is the 'problem' that Williams will address to satisfy a lack of knowledge among those who might mark such a work? No doubt full of rich content, it is an early introduction to incomprehensibility. Still, the subject of Lossky in Paris and such a modern person dealing with ancient texts involves a modern-ancient encounter, and an East-West encounter, and Williams likes to investigate impacts of Wittgensteinian language across boundaries (20).

Next influence to include is Hegel. In the 1980s, while approving of Donald MacKinnon, Williams was against Hegel's total scheme of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, a God of an idolatrous whole (52). By 1995 he'd changed, and it started in 1991.

He met Jewish philosopher Gillian Rose (also overlaps with Christianity, and interested in nineteenth century German thought), who in 1991 showed him another way to do Hegel - or change Hegel. She died in 1995. She made Hegel more oppositional and attached on French postmodern difference, seen in itself as anti-Hegel.

Hegel and postmodernity neat evaded the brokenness of the real world. Instead, Rose sought the flawed middle of difference (53) before synthesis and that one's personality there faces failure. But this is where change comes about. For Williams, unresolved difference becomes a theology of identity, being different and being social. Identity comes though such relating to others (54). Thus, as well as not being liberal, Williams is not a postmodern. He is often mistaken for either or both. But this does mean a lot of ongoing negotiation as little is ever settled or can be (55). It's the road to patient (as it finds its way) social human growth, and why Williams dislikes the one-way-down (take it or leave it) Karl Barth; the Church in all its width caters for a range of people attempting to discover and so

grow. Strangely, then, Hegel's philosophy and metaphysics (57) as reused becomes a kind of Catholic ecclesiology of the Holy Spirit, patiently growing people of varieties (56-58).

I was always told that to half-use and reuse someone's work was not to use their work, and they should be used whole. It's not what the originator intended.

Much is given to the influence of Henri de Lubac, rediscovering the Christian Fathers, interested in Bible reading as it developed literally and symbolically, the common misinterpreting of the Middle Ages' teaching to separate nature and grace and the creation and the Creator, Lubac's enjoying a dialogue with in particular Buddhism, and that one's Christian life and knowing is to happen within community - its collective prayer, Holy Communion etc.. This community aspect is a "benchmark" for Williams. (Williams, 2015a)

The Catholic Church, since the Resurrection, in its coherence of human belonging, should absorb all manners of people (60) thinks Williams after Lubac. This stands against a trending new tribalism without the common good where such postmodern difference takes away discussing human futures (61). We lack the vision and imagination to live together. Hegel (as adapted) suggests instead a (Church) community whose interest is everyone and freedom and rights come through community (61-62). One's own rights are given over to wider consideration, as in liberation theology. Christology, no less, goes on to drive interfaith dialogue; it's back to Lossky again, for an ecclesiology that comes from redeemed humanity (64). Mission means engaging with pluralist societies, the Eucharist at its heart where Christ's gift extends outwards (65).

Really? I remember being a Unitarian student at Luther King House, an ecumenical training federation. The Thursday night Eucharist was not some sort of reaching out, but

was powerfully exclusive. I took the view that Unitarians should not try and tag along as second class participants, but recognise the power of this ritual to its participants and stay away. Ritual is exclusive in power for the in-crowd, receiving their ritual means towards their salvation. Nor do those, on the outside, wish to be 'reached out' by others using their ideology. Up against the Eucharist, Unitarians as 'hangers on' did not function ecumenically. Christ's 'gift' is for the core; such is the nature of ritual.

For Williams, occupying ecclesial hierarchy is likely rotting your teeth (74). (He should know.) He prefers the witness of the saints, meaning those who make an effort to live holy lives and become as nothing via an intensified self for God (like a musician loses self and shines at the same time in the performance). There are many throughout the ranks who benefit the whole: of holy egoism, showing joy, allowing that sinners (who can grow) live among the saints (75-76). Thus Williams isn't attracted to clericalism, with Welsh non-conformity against that and Donald MacKinnon too (79). One should not forget holy lessons in failure and saints suggest the reality of God beyond many an argument (80).

Augustine influenced Williams on the Trinity - "the grammar of social life" (83). We should be pointed in unexhausted growing and learning towards this sum and end of enjoyment (84). This Augustinian view of desire produces a very pure love in gay relationships in relating to the desire of another and without instrumental interference, and thus gay love intertwines with the Trinity (85). (Until, of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and he ate a different pudding.) The Trinity, then, represents desire within into excess (86). Nevertheless he says less on the social trinity as he says more about human self-giving, with a place at the table as in Rublev's icon (88-89). The doctrine of the Trinity is about grace (89), as believers ally with Christ (90). God desires us as if we were God (90).

T. S. Eliot is a poet with influence, and it is from him that we get hope of a kind that in eschatology criticises human desire. Hope alone suggests fantasy and projection, especially of an age to come (93-94). So much hope is basically selfish longing (94). With God there is no balancing of the books, no overcoming tragedy.

(Didn't Jesus and Paul believe in a world to come, and rather rapidly, about which they were wrong?)

Hope, then, is patience towards God's unpredictable newness without one's own theory or projecting wishes (95). Bulgakov refers back to history, that is tragic, but one need not be pessimistic (96). But from God all this is supreme joy (96). Christ unfinished retains eschatology (96-97), the eschatology as a point of judgement - the slain lamb in the ruins of history (97).

Do people pray in order to know God, or do they have to know God in order to pray? This is Augustine's big question within *Confessions* but the answer is in getting stuck in (99-100). Thus Williams uses Augustine to get into God.

Another influence is Simone Weil. Waiting is a spiritual discipline (rather than searching) by which true knowledge comes, she claims (102). Williams takes this as prayer leading to knowledge; there is spirituality in study (102). Meanings saturate us from prayer, hearing Scripture and celebrating the Eucharist (103). Thus one might move to silence and appreciate negative theology - so much is paradoxical (103). After Lossky, negative theology comes with personal kenosis (self-giving) (103-104), and the negative theology of desire again means the Trinity (104).

What prayer is to speech, what difference is to sociality, what the saint is to damaged humanity, so the cross is to the world, and Christ is to God. (105)

Freudian suspicion (mixed with Augustine) is another influence, once Freud's scientism is dismissed. Freud asks, thinks Williams, whether our theologies are driven by fear and insecurity, with God as projected human power and needs (109). Thus theology should unmask our fears and deal with God critically (110). But once again, as with Hegel, only part of Freud is being used, so is it still Freud?

Iris Murdoch says we need art, not therapy, and Williams pursues the moral importance of art (111) - it makes the world strange, and revolts against the ego. Augustinian realism and the Trinity solves the Freudian problem of fantasy (114) - God is love and so absorbs desire (115).

Myers here goes on to suggest that in tacking and taking in Freud (partly), Williams intends to make the Christian faith intelligible in the modern world (112). It is "subtle, elegant and imaginative" in response to Freud (115). The cost is sadness and tragedy (116). Yet, in the re-use of Freud, the reinterpretation of Hegel, and the whole notion of maintaining strangeness, it is not more the case that Williams makes Christianity obscure and unintelligible - assuming one does get through Williams's own more complex writing? Myers says Williams's writing is broad and investigatory (119) - Catholic theologically indeed (121), fragmentary and reluctant (119). It is its own spiritual discipline (120). But it can be laboured and ponderous, also thinks Myers. Williams thinks that novel writing is a kenosis of the author towards the characters, finding powerlessness against their growth (122). The characters are loved to let be (123). (One wonders if Williams will ever attempt

a novel of his own.) But, as for Williams reading others, he often imposes his own thoughts over the original (124) - the other side of the coin from his imaginative power (125).

So these are his influences. There is a little more to add regarding the pursuit of strangeness, using Williams's *Why Study History?* (2014). In it he maintains the validity of recognising the difference and strangeness of past eras as a form of continuity. Williams is completely biased towards doctrinal orthodoxy as a given, as a set of minimal statements for a Church to be resistant (2014, 54-59) and suggests more than history can do by involving a Christian divine input - "the pressure of Christ's reality" for future orthodoxy (58) - into the working and understanding of history.

In going back to the fourth century, as the faith was formulated, Lossky (thinks Williams) ought to attempt to match modern concerns with doctrine made back then; but Lossky says that language's long term shift itself generated modern concerns, and indeed others look for past writings to explain modern shifting views of identity (2014, 100-101). But Henri de Lubac is preferred for first noting that the critic looking at faith-origin (doctrinal) texts is afraid of making texts say more than they do, and the religious man wants to gain the full meaning (101). Williams prefers the critic for theological reading, to grasp the difference as well as continuity (101). The believer relates but to what is "irreducibly different" (102). One should not seek out a preferred era or manifestation of Christianity as such rarely delivers that preference desired (e.g. some idolise Celtic Christianity and find it does not deliver). There is prayerful action in the Body of Christ, and therefore we should not try to minimise the strangeness of the Church's past (103).

Williams Considers that "good historical writing" connects who we are with the strangeness of the past, material that is not easy for us. Who we are then encompasses things we don't fully understand, a heightened awareness of strangeness. (2014, 23-24)

I object to this. An anthropologist travelling through space, and a historian travelling through time, is well aware of the strangeness of the distant or of the past, but the point is to translate it and clarify it as much as possible. And whilst beliefs are vital to understand human motivations at another time, there are no extra unseen actors involved. We cannot ever know what a Christ or Holy Spirit is determining, and such is beyond research. It is not about being a critic, but about being a historian. Historians including Troeltsch (also a sociologist and theologian) laid out the boundaries (see Hebblethwaite, 1980, 118-119) to exclude miracle. We can find out something of what humans did in creating these beliefs, and formulating them, though we may be limited in translation. Good historical writing aims to clarify, where possible, showing the limitations of historical method, but not to accept the obscure as an aim in itself.

So let's be simple and clarify with a basic understanding of Christianity as a 'given' - what the historian must exclude. The notion is that whilst God the Father is Creator, God the Son, who proceeds from God the Father (at least), is eternal and as Logos is Wisdom (Paul in 1 Corinthians, Justin Martyr, Origen) and, in extracting from the Hebrew Bible, was the agent in creation and so carried out making the purpose and meaning of the universe as we received it. The Holy Spirit was preparing the way (a minority considered it Wisdom). Then, on earth, in Palestine, about 4 BCE, God the Son came in two natures in one person, as divine and also human. The human nature could suffer, and did, but it was his full cosmic divinity that gives that suffering salvation power, as he suffered in a process towards salvation to put right what Adam with Eve made wrong. Christ's power was

demonstrated in the defeat of his death likely before 30 CE at the hands of the Romans in power. The two natures in one person as resurrected continued on earth for a limited period, until Ascension, after which, at some point in the future, Christ will return for the final days in judgement. All the time God the Holy Spirit engaged, but Christ also left the Holy Spirit to do his active work while he sits in heaven, though for some he isn't only in heaven.

So this is supposed to have happened, though no academic modern historian can make an argument for it.

Beyond its crudity as given, there are immediate objections. The universe has its own pattern and coming into being, says the physicist and needs no such Christ-Wisdom agency of creation. Pinpointing a tiny planet seems rather particular, although presumably God had to choose somewhere with sentient, thinking, creatures for a salvation drama. There was no first human to sin, but many species of common ancestors, after which apes went one way and there were many species of humans. Where was Adam in all this and how could he have made a crucial mistake? Nevertheless, later on, a fully human fully divine man was born on this planet, and was able to benefit from the cruelty of the Romans in order to die and therefore return to life.

If put like this as an alternative to physics, biology, history etc. then the mythology seems ridiculous. It belongs with thoughts of ancient peoples and their collective imaginations. What is its claim to anything now?

But we have Rowan Williams on You Tube saying that if Jesus was not resurrected then he would be like a saint and inspiring, but not the one encountered through prayer and in

the Eucharist (2021). In other words, Williams's belief depends upon a miracle. To not help clarity, Paula Gooder says the resurrection is "not historical" in itself and Rowan Williams shows no reaction of dissent. The evidence is in after-effects. This is like eating the cake and having it, because a community's belief in something is not the same as the unseen miracle having happened.

When humans die the brain lacks oxygen and is rendered useless. And also if a person dies, there is a break, and whatever may rise beyond must be a copy - think of Star Trek and the death of those who energise before copies are reconstructed immediately afterwards.

Of course this resurrection stuff is mythology. BUT it becomes a test of commitment to orthodoxy, and this tradition demands loyalty. It flies in the face of the closest Arian divinity reading of John's Gospel and the non-divinity of Jesus in the synoptic gospels. So much for the faith always preached: Williams accepts development into orthodoxy - but a mythical world view that simply flies in the face of scientific work.

Williams is well aware of evolution to humans, naturalistic science in general, chaos and resulting interacting systems, and all that mathematics and research shows how our patterned universe has come about - with revisions that follow new evidence. Mythology needs no evidence. Who is not fully human? A disabled person? We are all fully human. This 'fully human' is introduced because of a claim of unique full divinity. Is the universe to end in the Kingdom of God, in its billions of galaxies? No, it will expand and get ever colder, and the latest thinking is it will become smooth and distant where time will cease to have relevance or even existence under the second law of thermodynamics.

Ancient myths tell us nothing much beyond cultures, nothing like the search in mathematics and physics. And we have the research from social sciences to tell us so much more about human reality as it interrelates.

Why don't universities have Departments of Astrology, where some professors can be committed to orthodoxy about how some planets and their interactions lead to particular understandings of meaning?

At least we'll see that Williams engages with modern thought, and I would contrast his approach with the fantasy of John Milbank, who in his incommunicative complex verbosity (see Smith, 2004, 11-20 for an example) rejects modern social thought in a much more thoroughgoing dogmatic spread. He thinks postmodernism gives him the right to direct the traffic from a premodern Platonic Christian Church stance and condemn social science and sociology in particular as heresies, whereas they are the ones that return research results - including results we often don't want. Mythology returns nothing but what we construct from wishes, fears and expectations from a different cultural setting. Radical Orthodoxy tries to build a movement, but its practitioners use such rarefied language that it can only ever be small, and it can only be sectarian and very distant from the modern world where scientists and social scientists ignore such theologians.

On this, John Caputo says that Radical Orthodoxy: "appears utterly dumbfounded by the fact that mediaeval metaphysics has lost its grip on contemporary thinkers. (2001, 61, quoted in Smith, 2004, 54). The same might be applied to Rowan Williams. Indeed it has been, as recalled by Andrew Anthony:

One of his most acute critics, American liberal bishop John Shelby Spong, has called Dr Williams a 'neo-medievalist' for preaching an orthodoxy to the faithful in which he

himself does not believe. To which the archbishop counters that he really does believe in 'the Resurrection and the empty tomb'. (Anthony, 2008)

So what is it that undermines Williams regarding many of his utterances? He frequently refers to "stories" and, to be Wittgenstein-consistent, it's all about communal talk. He does refer to questions, conversations, dialogue, and he will engage, and can chew the fat. This is where one asks is it believed or is it just being included as talk? The crater afterwards rather than the bomb (Gooder and Williams, 2021) is itself a lot of talk, in the messianic expectations of the community about the expected returning chosen man. Paul never met Jesus but could build a salvation scheme through him in expectation, and this influenced all that followed textually. Bultmann knew that the 'not so historical texts' in the New Testament were mythologies of the early Churches. (A historian cannot even regard them as primary sources even of the early Churches.) Of this Easter Faith the synoptics build an ever more imaginative story (much of it contradictory) until John's Gospel has gone somewhere quite complicated and reformulated.

There is no difficulty linking the early Church's belief in resurrection to its Jewish background - that is indeed doing history - but it is not historical to rely on the chasm of a miracle bringing a human being back to life who was brain dead and not some kind of a copy, whether that person ended up being eaten by scavengers, thrown in a pit, or buried in a grave.

Williams says, in reaction to the direction of theology in the 1960s and into the 70s, that one cannot strip Christianity of its metaphors and symbols.

If you try you end up with a very very thin kind of Christian picture, you end up with a sort of doctrine that it's nicer to be nice than be nasty." (Williams, 2015b)

It's a good start! But instead of delving into metaphors that come from the Mediaeval period, why not base theology on the science and social science that explains so much more today, and creates their own questions? There is plenty to do there, plenty of detail. Quantum weirdness gives plenty of detail for analysis. The problem with using ancient inherited myths is that they are always a moment from being demythologised and lost: precisely what Bultmann knew.

"Stories" can be very detailed. The focus can be tight. It looks like history as one converses the theological meanings, e.g. of parts of the birth narratives. But in the end, stories are just that: claims, imagination and indeed strangeness. Such stories motivate and cause actions, but it doesn't mean anything is behind them beyond shared cultural assumptions of a place and time. One can chew over a story if it is supposed to be normative, according to authority, the topic to return to over and over again, but it doesn't mean it 'happened' or it explains anything beyond.

Williams is caught in a faith and doctrinal set-up that assumes history from the miraculous supernatural. The more 'realist' he gets, the less metaphorical, the higher the price.

Williams knows no more than anyone else about the existence of a unique first of the resurrected man, but on his doctrinal rules of 'fully human' I can rule it out. When the brain dies, that's it. Only a whopping miracle can overcome that. Relying on Resurrection as real, as happened, comes at a huge price. It isn't just a God of the Gaps but the God of a chasm. Either that or it's just talk and motivation among a 'post-Easter' community.

'Strangeness' is not a get out of jail free card. Modernity really is different, with the philosophers laying out secular reasoning, and thus so many Anglican theologians saw the

necessity of taking a liberal and liberal-radical route - towards, perhaps, the niceness of being nice. Williams can talk about the 'stories' involved in their metaphors, but he can't have it both ways. In as much as he does, he has opted for the most traditional and official claims as unsustainable facts. John Milbank says that we beyond are all heretics, but he is in his own echo chamber while we get on with finding out.

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