THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF THE LAST WORD:
THE THEOLOGY OF ROWAN WILLIAMS

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This paper seeks to explore the theology of Archbishop Rowan Williams in the context of the apophatic (or reticent) tradition of Christian theology and spirituality. It hopes to demonstrate a degree of conservatism in Williams' doctrine and method, but also shows something of the difficulties that a theology committed to dialogue and exchange (such as his is) poses to those with a stronger idea of the category of revelation in the Christian tradition.

I hope that as a passing Pom I may be forgiven for making early reference to two quintessentially English institutions that some of you here may never have heard of (or wish never to have heard of) and others will be on the run from, or think themselves well shot of. I refer to the Church of England and to the British Conservative (or Tory) Party.

Proverbially the Church of England used once to be described as the "Tory Party at Prayer". For all that the prevailing political and intellectual climates in the two institutions may have diverged over the years, there seem to be significant similarities in the ways the two have been seen to function in recent times. The Conservative Party, following disastrous defeats in two General Elections, is coming to terms with a massive loss of public support and with the catastrophic effect this has had on its self-confidence. One of the ways in which this is made evident is the treatment it hands out to its leaders. There have been three of these in the last seven years and each has been subjected to backbiting and criticism from within the party, gratuitous "advice" from senior figures and a general unwillingness amongst those led to trust the leadership for the sake of unity and progress. There appears to be a great battle going on for what is termed the "soul" of the party and leaders and potential leaders are judged (and loyalty given or withheld) on the basis of where they stand on certain key dogmatic issues, most obviously Europe. The misfortunes of the party thus torn apart have been broadcast, of course, by gleeful mass media that sometimes appear to hold disrespect for old institutions as perhaps the only guiding principle of their craft. Criticism of the media in their turn by the party has become axiomatic to its public pronouncements, almost to the extent that Conservatives are held in a sort of captivity of denial about the true parlousness of their party's condition. "The media misrepresent us so! If only the people could be told what we *really* stand for they would support us!" is the cry, when in reality the problem may be an unwelcome one of substance, rather than one of mere presentation.

The process by which the new Archbishop of Canterbury was chosen and appointed last year was presented to the world by the media as if it were some kind of election campaign. We were told about the "candidates", about what the "supporters" of each were saying, about the "briefings" and "counter-briefings" being made on behalf of representatives of different "parties" within the Church and all the rest of it. Those who hold the Church of England and its reputation dear no doubt regret this unseemliness (and would certainly want to claim that it did not really happen like this). The fact remains, however, that this is how the paper-reading, TV-watching, radio-listening public experienced the appointment process: as an exercise in politics, and a pretty squalid one at that. Regret this presentational issue as we may, there is an even more unpalatable issue of substance to be faced, namely that of a Church which has seen and is seeing a disastrous loss of public support in our time.

Within 12 years less than 1% of the population of Britain will be churchgoers. These are important features of the background to Rowan Williams' appointment and to the period that he will hold office and are a necessary starting point for a consideration of the theology of the 105th Archbishop of Canterbury.

Since his appointment (as well as before) there have been many commentators swift to make judgements of Rowan Williams' suitability to lead the Church of England and act as *primus inter pares* of the Anglican Communion. These judgements have been made on the basis of his position (or believed position) on certain dogmatic and ethical questions that the commentators (at least) believe to be of central importance. To an extent such a process is inevitable (and maybe not unhealthy) but there are two aspects to it which should, I suggest, be giving us cause for concern.

First there is the phenomenon that we noted in respect of the Tory party that can be put in the form of a question. Is a leader to be afforded respect and loyalty on the basis of the office that he or she has been trusted to occupy or solely on the basis of his or her perceived orthodoxy? For all that the process by which the Archbishop was elected is clearly an all too human one the Church needs to have confidence that the Holy Spirit is in some sense guiding its counsels. The first of the apostles (traditionally the forerunners of the bishops) not to be directly appointed by Jesus was chosen by the drawing of lots following prayer. The Crown Appointments Commission uses different means (as have the appointments making processes in every other Christian organisation in every age) but the hope and trust must be that the process is still one in which the Church as a whole (domestically and internationally) can confidently expect to see God's will done. Ours is a democratic and accountable age and the Church is rightly affected by that culture but at the same time we believe bishops to be ordained to exercise authority in leadership, teaching and guarding the Faith, and that involves a measure of trust and acceptance of that authority on the part of those led, and on the part of those sharing the Episcopal vocation. The issues of "Unity" and "Truth" and the extent to which they may be experienced as coming into conflict with one another in the loyalty claims they make are pressing ones at this precise moment in the history of our Communion and I shall return to them. For now I would suggest that there is real and serious cause for concern if significant sections of the Church of England (or the Anglican Communion beyond) make their acceptance of Dr Williams' primacy contingent upon what they judge to be his personal doctrinal orthodoxy.

This would be the case in any circumstances. It is particularly so when one considers the second reason to be disturbed about the judgements being so lightly tossed about in respect of Williams' theological, ethical and political opinions. This is that for the most part they seem to be based on frighteningly narrow criteria and on strikingly ill-informed appreciation of what he is actually saying.

With his tongue firmly in his cheek – Oh the dangers of irony when dealing with the humourlessness of some church people and the triteness of most mass media! – Williams described himself on his appointment as a "hairy lefty" and it seems that many have taken that estimation at face value and failed to explore the man or his thought any further. Here is a bearded academic, a political and social liberal and therefore, of course, "woolly" in at least two senses. Slack on issues of sexuality, slippery about standing by what the Bible says, dodgy on issues of good and evil (didn't condemn Iraq in terms Bush and Blair would approve): the caricature is already half drawn.

During the course of this lecture I hope that we will discover the unreliability of this caricature. I think that we will find a theologian and philosopher of great seriousness, perhaps surprising conservatism and reassuring orthodoxy but with an engaging freshness of thought and – most obviously – a very powerful intelligence. We will find a musician and a poet, a bard but *not* a druid! Above all, I suggest, we will find a thinker of real and convincing *humility* and it may be that this humility turns out to underlie a significant difference between Williams' theological method and that of some of his critics which has important implications for the Church and Communion he leads.

I have entitled this paper *"The Impossibility of the Last Word"*, suggesting that conversation and continuing dialogue and exchange is the key distinguishing feature of Rowan Williams' theological method and style. In a series of lectures delivered earlier this year in Salisbury Cathedral the Archbishop spoke of the importance of the study of Church History not least for its ability to "make us strange to ourselves", reminding us that things as they are, as we have made and shaped and approved them, are not necessarily natural, normal or correct. Christians are called, he said, to "understand" the world, literally to *stand beneath*, to take the lower place with humility and allow the experience and analysis of others to be heard. "Within the Body of Christ", he said, "all voices are worth listening to", even, he was suggesting in that context, across the ages (though the plea could well be better heard across the contemporary Anglican Communion as well). Listening is central to the Christian's calling and to the mission of the Church and this involves a distinctive openness and vulnerability. As Edmund Newey puts it in an article entitled "Reticence and Christian Orthodoxy" in the May/June issue of *Theology* this year: "To be able, as Christians, to answer others' questions and question others' answers, our own answers must themselves be open to questioning". A literary analysis of Williams' writing would, I guess though I have not performed such an exercise scientifically, demonstrate heavy incidence of words like "discourse", "conversation", "audibility", "language" and "dialogue". Fascinated by language and a master of several, he is deeply aware of its limitations to express truths about God (we shall return to this important theme). For now we should note a man who wishes to listen and wishes to be part of a Christian community that listens at least as much as it speaks.

The theologian, then, for Williams, is one who utters and engages with *questions*, rather than one who asserts eternal truth-statements. There is much in this that is clearly of importance to the contemporary pursuits for the Church of ecumenism, inter-faith dialogue and engagement with secular (even atheistic) philosophy. At the same time (it has to be acknowledged) there is also something problematic about a passive, reticent, always questioning theological style, at least to Christians in a more positivist tradition.

For some Christians "evangelism" is about telling and retelling the story, declaring and repeating the truths of Bible and Faith in hope and trust that those outside the community of the faithful will come in and become part of it. Williams is not an evangelist in this tradition of evangelism, or not primarily: listening carefully and taking seriously what he hears outside the community and on its edges is for him demonstration of Good News to those who are thus engaged with. For those whose approach is more comfortably expressed in words like "proclamation" and "message" this can be somewhat challenging. This, which is very far from the "Decade of Evangelism" thinking of Dr Carey and others in that tradition, marks a very different way of engaging with the non-Christian world (and of doing theology within the Christian community) and it remains to be seen how much of a fault-line these differences prove to effect.

In the Prologue to the collection of essays, pamphlets and articles entitled *On Christian Theology* that he published in 2000 (but which covers a fifteen-year period of prolific output) Williams says some important things about what a theologian is and does.

> "The theologian is always beginning in the middle of things. There is a practice of common life and language already there, a practice that defines a specific shared way of interpreting human life as lived in relation to God. The meanings of the word 'God' are to be discovered by watching what this community does – not only when it is consciously reflecting in conceptual ways, but when it is acting, educating or 'inducting', imagining and worshipping. The theologian emerges as a distinct and identifiable figure when these meanings have become entangled with one another … A person shaping their life in a specific way, seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God, is theologizing, forming a reflectively consistent speech for God. The believing artist or the liturgist or hymnographer is likewise engaged in a theological task. But it is likely to be only in crisis that people emerge who see their essential job as pushing forward the considerations of coherence and transparency that are already at work in more 'informal' ways."

Note the themes that are emerging here. Theology starts "in the middle of things" and seeks for meanings (not least meanings for the word "God") within the activities of a communal human life lived in relation to God. It is not about finding authoritative texts or proofs and interpreting them for the people's edification: it is about exploring the people's experience in their life lived before God and interpreting that in the ongoing quest for "a reflectively consistent speech for God". Theology is an inclusive activity – "seeking discipline and consistency in relation to God" – and covers the work of artists, liturgists and hymnographers (as well, no doubt, as poets and musicians more generally): it is, indeed, the work of all who study and speculate and pray within the community. In one sense we are all theologians but there is a specialised task for those who work towards greater formality and coherence within the theological activity of the whole community. Perhaps most interestingly the proving ground in which this interpretation and definition of informal community theological activity takes place is in "crisis".

Williams develops this idea:

> "When this happens [*ie* the theologian's task of formalising and interpreting the informal theology done by the community as a whole] the possibilities of crisis are actually multiplied: when you try to tidy up un-systematized speech, you are likely to lose a great deal. What the early Church condemned as heresy was commonly a tidy version of its language, in which the losses … were adjudged to distort or to limit the range of reference of religious speech. …
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> "In various ways these are still the issues that surround the proper role of theology in the Church. It may not be quite true that – as some radical contemporary theologians would insist – a real theologian is always a 'heretic' because that is implicit in creative religious thinking; but the risk of conceptual conflict is certainly increased when theology comes to its visible and public expression. This is one reason for the deep suspicion with which churches habitually regard theologians."

This last sentence may seem to be eerily prophetic of how certain elements within the Church have greeted the news of Williams the theologian become Williams the Archbishop. An opinion which holds that the proper functions of theologian and bishop are (or should be) wholly different from one another says something, surely, about the maturity or confidence of the Church community that holds it and that is a matter on which careful refection may be profitable.

Having set out something of his understanding of what the theological enterprise is, together with an idea of who is involved in it (everyone) and what is the role of the "formal" theologian (together with the potential for conflict inherent in that), Williams goes on to describe three main "styles" in theology.

First of these he terms the *celebratory*, the style which seeks primarily to express the richness of ideas about God. The attempt is to "draw out and display connections of thought and image so as to exhibit the fullest possible range of significance in the language used". The intention "is less to argue than to evoke a fullness of vision – that 'glory' around which theology circles so consistently". (It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves at this stage that the correct etymology of the word "orthodoxy" is "right *praise*" and not, as so many seem to maintain, "right *belief*".) Among the short but wide ranging list of exemplars of the celebratory style Williams provides, he includes much early church liturgy and preaching, Dante and Langland from medieval western Europe, Byzantine iconography and much in the Orthodox theological tradition. Modern western theologians are not excluded: Williams mentions Hans Urs von Balthasar whilst fans of his predecessor of the 1960s and '70s, Michael Ramsay, might want to include some of his work in this category, too.

The limitation of the celebratory style is that its theology can become very self-referential and inward-looking. There needs to be an influence to encourage the theological enterprise "to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment, and to display enough confidence to believe that this gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought".

The style that prompts the Christian theological community to break out of its own ghetto is that that Williams calls *communicative:* "a theology experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment". Again a wide array of diverse examples of this happening is offered: the Apologists and others wrestling with Platonic or Stoic ways of thinking and those who worked to develop the Christian implications of Neoplatonism being examples from the early Christian centuries. 'The Dream of the Rood' which restated the crucifixion narrative according to the conventions of Teutonic hero-lays is a medieval example; so, too, (of course) is the achievement of Aquinas and his appropriation of Aristotle (Aristotle, that is, mediated by medieval Jewish and Moslem scholarship) into Christian theology. In contemporary theology the willingness of some liberation and feminist theologians to use Marxist and secular feminist categories in their work would also demonstrate the communicative style in use. All such demonstrations witness to an attitude in Christian theology which is prepared to enter into fruitful conversation (a key Williams word) with the unfamiliar and expect to find there ideas to illuminate and enrich our understanding of our Faith.

At this point, not surprisingly, comes the need for the third style, which helps to correct any tendency for the theological enterprise in communication with non-Christian traditions to become dangerously detached from its Christian roots. This is the style – termed by Williams the *critical* – that asks the question, "Is there a stable conceptual area in the discourse of belief that will always remain unaffected by mediation in other idioms?" "Critical" theology is that area which nags away at the question of what may constitute the "fundamentals" and comes (it has to be said) to a very wide range of possible conclusions. At one end of the scale will be those capable of making much positivist assertion whilst at the other will be those becoming critically less and less confident of what may be asserted as "fundamental". The dogmatic theology of the Roman Catholic *magisterium* belongs in this category, along with the theology of biblical conservatives: both would feel confident about making relatively extensive descriptions of what is the Christian proclamation, for all that the content of their bodies of proclamation would be somewhat different from each other. Perhaps surprisingly, "Sea of Faith" Christian agnostics, "demythologisers" *and* thinkers with serious doubts about the ability of language to convey anything of the richness of God also all work in this category, identifying (in widely differing formulations) what is the irreducible minimum that can be or must be declared as the truth about God.

It is with the last of these – those for whom language itself is proving to be inadequate to express a fraction of the rich mystery that is God (and who therefore must be very hesitant about what they feel able to declare) – that the cycle of *celebratory-communicative-critical* begins again. Each style, in a sense, needs each of the others and a critical-communicative-celebratory conversation between the three needs to be maintained for the health of the whole theological endeavour. This being the case, the point at which the cycle ends and begins again (a consciousness of the inadequacy of human discourse to assert much about the ineffable mystery of God) is a key point indeed. There is a specialised strand of theological tradition which explores this area and if we are to "place" Rowan Williams within a theological tradition this will be where we may most appropriately do so.

The technical name for this tradition is – rather depressingly – the *via negativa* or (even worse in prosaic translation) "negative theology" and it has always been somewhat controversial. Originating with the Neoplatonists and (within the Christian tradition) Pseudo-Dionysius (*c.* 500), the *via negativa* is a way of thinking that seeks always to hold before the thinker the fact that human language is hopelessly inadequate to treat of the ineffable God. It involves the rooting out (so far as is possible) of the anthropomorphic character of theological language, the habit we have of speaking of God in terms which apply properly only to human beings. (Consider, by way of simple example, what we may *mean* by such terms as "the mighty arm of the Lord" or "the voice of God".) The underlying assumption is that human speech developed to deal with human relationships and is not equipped to deal adequately with the divine-human encounter.

Edmund Newey in the article in *Theology* that I have already cited shows how the *via negativa* has always been influential in Anglican theologising from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onwards. He quotes Richard Hooker, from Book I of *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity:*

> "Although to know [God] be life, and joy to make mention of his name: yet our soundest knowledge is to know that we know him not as indeed he is, neither can know him: and our safest eloquence concerning him is our silence, when we confess without confession that his glory is inexplicable, his greatness above our capacity and reach. He is above, and we upon earth; therefore it behoveth our words to be wary and few." *(I ii 3)*

Newey has shown that this reserve is by no means peculiar to Hooker. “An emphasis on charity rather than controversy”, he writes, “on conformity to Christ rather than subscription to propositional doctrine is almost commonplace in the mid-seventeenth-century writings of the Cambridge Platonists, the Latitudinarians and many of the so-called Caroline divines. Thus across a wide spectrum of the thought of the Church of England this emphasis on reticence and reserve remains central”. It is reassuring to many of us that our latest archbishop finds his place within such an influential stream within the Anglican theological tradition.

Clearly the danger of the *via negativa* is that taken to a logical extreme it leaves its followers unable to say anything about anything (or at least anything of importance, which is the theological task). Indeed, in the Eastern Orthodox Church (where it is greatly stressed) the *via negativa* is known as the “apophatic” tradition, where *apophasis* may be taken to be the opposite of *emphasis:* reticence, rather than definitiveness in pronouncement. Wordless silence in the face of the almightiness of God is, of course, a wholly appropriate reaction but for useful productive theological activity to continue it is necessary for the *via negativa* to be tempered by a counter-vailing encouragement to communicate. The so-called *via positiva* lays strong emphasis on the doctrine of the creation and sees within it many marks of the creator’s existence and indicators of his nature. There follows from this a willingness to speak and to describe and to speculate about the divine but it is worth remembering that the apophatic method, which has had a powerful influence on Williams, begins in silence. Aquinas himself, who was responsible for much of the development of the *via positiva* (also developing the tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius) certainly held that the negative way was the necessary preliminary for any theologian wishing to embark upon the positive.

Consciousness of the inadequacy of language and concern not to be misled into anthropomorphism (and a sort of consequent over-familiarity with God and the divine) has a number of consequences. Probably most important of these is what it suggests for the use of Scripture. It goes without saying that apophasis and biblical fundamentalism are not capable of being reconciled to one another (but then little else of intelligent theology is reconcilable with the species of idolatry that is biblical fundamentalism). Metaphor, myth, parable and prophecy are all part of the welcome experience that Scripture offers to us: the necessary corollary they bring is complexity and conflict and this is not something to be denied or regretted.

In a very important essay entitled ‘The Discipline of Scripture’ Williams explores some of the implications of this. He makes a plea for what Thomas Aquinas called the “literal sense” of Scripture. This, he says:

> “is not dependant on a belief that all scriptural propositions un-complicatedly depict real states of affairs detail by detail: it can and does include metaphor within the literary movement that leads to the movement of God within the time of human biography.”

The essay is an attempt to re-state the case for an intelligent, critically respectable appreciation of the “literal sense” in the exegesis of Scripture against the fundamentalism that equates “literal” with “historical” on the one hand and the exegetical anarchy of unlimited pluralism on the other.

In part this is achieved by an insistence on maintaining a tension between two different ways of reading Scripture that Williams terms the *diachronic* and the *synchronic*. The first of these allows a text to unfold its meaning dramatically through time, as in an unfolding story. Synchronic reading treats the text more like a "'field' of linguistic material, of signs that refer backwards and forwards to each other in a system of interaction more like the surface of a picture than a performance of drama or music". In such a reading variations, even outright contradictions, within biblical texts become opportunities for enrichment, rather than in some sense threats to the integrity of Scripture.

> "We can and must read the cross-currents and subversions in a text, but we do not thereby escape the 'literal'. We are still concerned with how meanings grow and are produced …"

Literal meaning implies far more than mere historicity: it takes seriously the theological intention of the writers and allows proper attention to be paid to the processes which shaped their thought. This, I would suggest, should reassure those more conservative commentators who worry that Williams is a demythologising modernist (in the David Jenkins mode) more concerned with the meaning of texts for now than for the meaning intended by their original authors. At the same time, of course, some of the real theological and intentional *differences* between writers have to be much more boldly faced and accepted by this kind of seriousness than they are by a sort of romantic quasi-fundamentalist harmonisation of variant texts. Such cosiness is not an option for Williams. Indeed, he reminds us, "the meaning of one portion of scriptural text is constructed *in opposition* to another" and the responsible reader, reading diachronically with a mind to the literal sense of the texts, will not be satisfied with the false harmonies created by some non-literal readings. He argues strongly for a "dramatic" reading of New Testament texts that takes very seriously their original context, holding this to be as important for sustained passages of theological argument (such as Romans 9-11, for instance) as for narrative texts.

Developing the point in relation to the Gospels themselves, however, he is at his most thought provoking:

> "… the existence of four versions of the fundamental story of Jesus, three (at least) very closely related to each other, reflects not only the fact of pluralism, but the fact of engagement *between* theologies: the story is rewritten in the conviction that previous tellings are unbalanced or inadequate; yet the rewriting has the same risk and provisionality … [The Gospels'] own independent ways of taking time over the story of Jesus reveal something … of early communities in animated and often critical dialogue, and oblige us to take time not only in the reading of one sequence but in the 'cross-referenced' reading that observes the time in which their differences are produced."

Those of you familiar with the work of – for example – the modern (and by no means liberal) Roman Catholic commentator Raymond E. Brown (author of *Birth of the Messiah* and *Death of the Messiah)* will recognise the richness of this kind of "cross-referencing" approach to reading the Gospels.

Not only is this approach to Scripture deeply respectful of the texts and what they are each saying (in a way which should be reassuring to Bible-loving evangelicals), it also takes very seriously the whole process of the production of the Bible as we know it. Williams is interested in the development of the Canon and sees this as a proper part of biblical commentary (a point often forgotten by liberals and conservatives alike). “Scripture, with all its discord and polyphony,” he says, “is the canonical text of a community in which there are limits to pluralism”.

The significance of this community lies in the discipline its existence brings to the reading of the texts it has produced and authenticated. This is what sets the limits to the pluralism which could otherwise bedevil biblical interpretation. Williams quotes with approval Luther’s axiom *crux probat omnia* (the Cross is the test of all) but there is no suggestion that this absolves the Christian community from the obligation to struggle (and, indeed, contend) in the process of exegesis. This is what he says on certain ethical issues and the Bible:

> “Our time – perhaps more than earlier Christian ages, or perhaps more self-consciously than earlier Christian ages – is characterised by profound conflict in many areas as to what is authentically Christian – conflicts over areas of sexual and personal ethics (especially in the West at present, the admissibility in the Church of overt homosexual partnerships), over economic and public matters (the Church’s relation to capitalism), and over the major issues of war and defence (the legitimacy of the nuclear deterrent). Honesty compels the admission that none of these questions is likely to be ‘settled’ in the foreseeable future, especially not by appeal to what is commonly taken to be the ‘literal sense of Scripture’ (i.e. particular clusters of quotations). Yet peaceful co-existence in an undemanding pluralism is an inadequate response when the matters at issue seem to relate to basic questions about how the gospel can be heard in the struggles of contemporary social existence. There is a case for protest, even for ‘confessional’ separation over some issues. But … the existence of conflict and even conscientious division may not be a sign of eschatological polarization but a necessary part of that movement of the story of God’s people and their language towards the one focus of Christ crucified and risen that is the movement of Scripture. There can be an exacting patience in the debates of Christians; the confidence … that it is *worth* struggling for the life of the Church in and through the awkwardness of dissidence and conscientious protest imposes the discipline of ‘staying with’ the public life and liturgy of the tradition, rather than seeking the shortest solution of a newly constructed community of the perfect.”

Evangelical and other critics who have been accused of promoting schism in their threats to reject the authority of Archbishop Williams have (some of them) responded with the slogan “Truth before Unity”. This passage would seem to suggest that neither principle is perhaps quite as simple a concept as the slogan may suggest. It certainly seems to suggest to me a theologian-bishop who is well aware of the preciousness, and therefore the costliness, of both.

In his Sarum Theological Lectures on Church History at Salisbury earlier this year, to which I have already made reference, Williams showed that the grounds for the Church’s unity have varied and shifted at different stages of its history. The Early Church (before the fourth century) had no agreed canon of Scripture around which to unite (for this came later), no single pattern of church government nor codified doctrine yet different and differing Christian communities were able to recognise each other’s authentic Christian identity on the basis of the witness of each other’s martyrs.

The Churches of the European Reformation were not agreed on the basis of doctrine or confession, nor yet on structures of organisation or discipline, yet different and differing Christian communities could recognise each other's authentic Christian identity on the basis of God's evident activity within their ecclesial life. The grounds on which we may look for or expect to find unity in our time, either ecumenically or within our own Communion, are likely to be different again and – in Williams' charming and engaging phrase – we need to "apprentice ourselves to the truth", in faith that "the Spirit will lead us into all truth" but not expect that process to be without "conflict or even conscientious division".

In a collection of essays published earlier this year to which the Archbishop contributed a Preface, entitled *Anglicanism: the Answer to Modernity*, one of the contributors, Ben Quash, gives an account of the Anglican Primates' meeting in Lisbon in 2000, which he had attended as a theological adviser. The crisis the Communion was facing at that time centred on the consecration in Singapore of two *soi-disant* "orthodox" bishops to minister in the USA to Anglican congregations there that were unable to accept the Episcopal ministry of their own bishops on the grounds of their position on various issues, mainly the acceptability of same-sex relationships (sound familiar?). Then, as now (again), schism looked like a real possibility – "Truth before Unity" – and it was the contribution of the new (as he then was) Archbishop of Wales that was very influential in pulling participants back from that particular precipice. The principle was again (as in the cases of the pre-fourth-century Christians or the Churches of the Reformation in Europe) one of recognition and recognizability. Quash reports Williams' question to his fellow-primates in these terms: "Are we really prepared to say that Christians who are united in their affirmation of a single baptism in the threefold name of the Trinity, of the authority of Scripture in matters of doctrine, of the creeds of the undivided Church, and of Episcopal ministry are not mutually *recognizable* to one another as Christians when they differ on matters of sexual ethics? …

What does it take for someone no longer to be recognizable as a fellow member of the body?" (I could add – to bring this excursus on the theme of recognition and unity fully up-to-date – that the same thinking strongly underlies two important public statements of the Archbishop in the aftermath of the Jeffery John affair. I would refer you to his presidential address to the General Synod of the Church of England earlier this month, published on his website, and to the sermon he preached a week ago on Sunday to the same gathering that is well reported in the *Market-place* newspaper, published here in New South Wales.)

The challenge to recognise authentic Christian vocation across deep and sharp differences in the Christian community is a demanding one but I should have hoped that it should be clear from all this that Rowan Williams is very far from being an "anything goes" theologian. "Peaceful co-existence in an undemanding pluralism is an inadequate response …", he says and in this intolerance he is more at odds with the spirit of the postmodern age than many of his critics seem to have noticed. We should be clear that what he is intolerant of is not opinions that differ but the attitude that accepts that such plurality of conclusion can be the last word. "You with your belief and I with mine: that's the last word about truth." Post-modernity, both Christian and secular, effectively maintains a plurality of truth "proved" as it were by the plurality of human "truth-options". Williams belongs to a much more conservative philosophical tradition that must insist on the unity and objectivity of truth, whilst at the same time being very hesitant about definitive description of it. In this respect it is very interesting to look at what he considers to be the nature and purpose of dogma, that somewhat feared, often misunderstood and largely unfashionable concept in the theological vocabulary.

In a 1989 essay originally entitled ‘The Incarnation as the Basis of Dogma’ Williams develops the idea of dogma as the mechanism by which the theological endeavour is tested rather than being the end product assertion of the process, in Edmund Newey’s words “not … a narrowly defined body of right belief, but … a continually renewed attempt to live more faithfully to the whole reality of God’s love”. Given his reservations about the capabilities of language it is hardly surprising to note Williams’ deep sympathy for Bonhoeffer’s longing for “religionless Christianity”. Commenting on it, he says this:

> “Bonhoeffer’s attack on the jargon of ‘religion’ is far from being a liberal reformist proposal that hard words be made easy or strange words familiar; he is concerned that the real moral and spiritual strangeness – and thus the judgement – of the Gospel should again become audible. If we should now learn a greater reticence in talking fluently about ‘incarnation’ and ‘atonement’, it is because they have become the familiar words of religious talkers. *They no longer bring the Church to judgement, and so no longer do the job of dogma.* They have become simply ideology in the most malign sense. And, of course, ‘conversion’ and ‘judgement’ are easily conscripted for the same ends, *if the theologian is interested primarily in a truth-telling that is confined to systematic explanation and comprehensive conceptualities.*” [emphasis added].

Dogma exists, therefore, “to bring the Church to judgement” and is thus the mechanism by which the institution and its theological endeavour is constantly brought back to the Cross (Luther again).

> “Dogma reflects a commitment to truth that grows out of a particular set of historical relationships, at whose centre lies the narrative of Jesus – not a theoretical construct, but the abiding stimulus to certain kinds of theoretical question.”

The Incarnation (the basis of dogma, according to Williams’ thesis) is of course the giving by God of God’s being in the person of Jesus Christ, born as man, crucified, risen and living. Dogma, “representing the Christian concern with truth” is the means by which is preserved “the possibility of the kind of encounter with the truth-telling Christ that stands at the source of the Church’s identity”.

As with Scripture so with dogma: there is a given and there is dialogue with and speculation about it:

> “The ‘shape’ of the Christian faith is the anchoring of our confidence beyond what we do or possess, in the reality of a God who freely gives to those who are needy enough to ask; a life lived ‘away’ from a centre in our own innate resourcefulness or meaningfulness, and so a life equipped for question and provisionality in respect of all our moral or spiritual achievement: a life of *repentance in hope.*
>
> “Nothing is more promising and nothing more difficult. That the Church repeatedly seeks to secure a faith that is not vulnerable to judgement and to put cross and conversion behind it is manifest in every century of Christian history. But in so doing, it cuts itself off from the gift that lies beyond the void of the cross, and imprisons itself in the kind of self-understanding it can master or control.”

The theology of Rowan Williams, for all that it is informed by the experience of the community, is firmly God-centred and centred on converse *with* God in a way that is perhaps less true of some of the late twentieth century theological traditions (Feminist, Marxist/Liberationist and others) that have been his partners in dialogue. In a 1991 essay entitled 'Theological Integrity' he writes: "Christian reflection takes as normative a story of response to God in the world and the world in God, the record of Israel and Jesus", and, a few paragraphs further on, "Speaking of God is speaking to God and opening our speech to God's."

Theology, the exchange of God-words, therefore, is intimately bound up with prayer, worship and spirituality and for all his intellectual rigour Williams holds this to be central to the theologian's task and method. We have noted how a Church and its theologians that took dogma seriously (properly understood in its judgmental function) would be a community committed to "repentance in hope" and it is in this that the characteristic humility of Williams' method is most apparent.

> "Having integrity … is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final. It does not seek to prescribe the tone, the direction, or even the vocabulary of a response"

He goes on to point out the difficulty of this proposition for theology:

> "Religious talk is in an odd position here. On the one hand, it is making claims about the context of the whole moral universe … [and] … thus not likely *prima facie*, to be content with provisional statements. On the other hand, if it really purports to be about the context of the moral universe, it declares itself to be uniquely 'under judgement', and to be dealing with what supremely *resists* the urge to finish and close what is being said."

Anyone participating in the conversation about what constitutes the "context of the moral universe" does so, of course, from within that context. It follows (argues Williams) that any claim to understand and speak for the whole context, to have what he calls the "total perspective" – definitively to say "This is the whole truth: I/we have it" – is, in fact, a claim for power rather than anything else and so a prohibition of free response and continuation.

> "If what cannot be answered (or rather, cannot be conversed with) cannot honestly be said in the first place – because it will be a statement about the speaker's power, not about what the speaker claims to be talking about – it seems as though integrity in religious discourse is unrealizable.
>
> "This is very nearly true, and it is essential for anyone wanting to talk theology to know it."

The defence against this worrying conclusion becoming wholly true (and thus subverting the whole theological endeavour) has to do with exercising great care about the claims we may make for our perspective of the "moral universe". Absolute statements (claims to a "total perspective") are out because they are statements about the power of their maker, rather than anything else. This leads to a remarkable conclusion:

> "To say that a religious discourse is 'about' the whole moral universe may be simply to say that it offers a sufficient imaginative resource for confronting the entire range of human complexity without evasion or untruthfulness; only when divorced from this context of a kind of imaginative skill does religious discourse fall into the trap of pretending to be a comprehensive system for plotting, connecting, 'fixing' and exhaustively accounting for the range of human behaviour. In other words religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God *declines the attempt to take God's point of view* (i.e. a 'total perspective').

The conclusion brings us back to the apophatic respect for reticence and hesitancy: humility in pronouncement, the "impossibility of the last word". It also shows to us most clearly why, for Williams, the activity of prayer is absolutely central to the theologian's task.

> "Prayer … is precisely what *resists* the urge of religious language to claim a total perspective: by articulating its own incompleteness before God, it turns away from any claim to human completeness. By 'conversing' with God, it preserves conversation between human speakers."

Not surprisingly for one enriched in the apophatic tradition the practice of contemplative – wordless – prayer is of particular importance but the formal praying of the community as a whole, and especially the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are also hugely influential. Baptism (although the symbolism is much weakened in the contemporary western rite) demonstrates loss, a disappearance and the submerging of an identity in the presence and reality of God. The Eucharist identifies the worshippers with the unfaithful apostles at the Last Supper and has at its heart a "breaking" that signifies something of the cost to God of our restoration to wholeness. The practice of corporate worship (in the biblical and liturgical metaphor the "sacrifice of praise") is, in Williams' words: "nothing if not the struggle to voice how the directedness of my regard depends on, is moulded by, something irreducibly other than myself."

As Archbishop of Wales Rowan Williams acted as theological consultant to a Working Party, chaired by the educationalist, Lord Dearing set up to review the work of Church schools (in England part of the State provision of education) which was published some eighteen months ago. At a conference of people involved with ministerial training in the Church convened to explore its implications for their work, he spoke about Mission and I should like to end this lecture with a few thoughts based on the definition he offered then of this highly loaded word.

"Mission," he said, "is the process by which Jesus Christ impacts on human life and communities and opens up new relationships with one another and with God." It is, therefore, first and foremost, the activity of God in Christ. Christians have a role in mission but its originator is God. God ineffable cannot be packaged and presented as a sort of evangelist's answer to the problems of "life, the universe and everything" (in *Hitchhikers' Guide to the Universe* terms). Rather the task is to engage in and open up new relationships with God, or rather respond to God's self-giving that constantly extends the invitation and opportunity for this to happen. Relationships such as this are based on conversation and exchange and must begin with listening, rather than telling.

The whole paradigm of the Incarnation seems to tell of a God for whom that is the *modus operandi*: entering the human condition in order to engage with it, to have a conversation with it, one might say. In his introduction to *Anglicanism: the Answer to Modernity* Rowan Williams says this:

> "Anglicanism 'answers' modernity because it has bothered to listen to it and thinks it worth talking with. In a good conversation, something is *contributed* towards a common future, but always in response to the reality of what's been presented, rather than in lecturing or preaching mode. It is easy to pretend with some affection [*sic* – "affectation"?] of superiority that this is a weak and unconfident style – and this has regularly been said about Anglicanism (and is said, in no friendly spirit, by some Anglicans themselves). But conversation in fact assumes quite a bit of confidence, since it requires a high degree of confidence to enter into an unstructured conversational exchange convinced that there will be opportunity for what you believe to emerge strongly enough to challenge and even transform whomever you are talking to."

Mission based on conversation is very different, I would suggest, from Mission based on mere proclamation. "Oppression", wrote Archbishop Rowan in the essay entitled 'Remorse' in his book *Lost Icons*, "is a situation where people don't talk to each other; where people don't find each other difficult". We are certainly at a point in the history of our Communion when some of us are finding each other "difficult" (to say the least of it!) and it may be that some will feel that the only way out of the difficulty will be by closing down the conversation. I do not believe that Rowan Williams will be happy to see that "last word" moment arrive and I, for one, will be one of those praying earnestly that it does not.

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