

Art and the religious imagination: A conversation with Rowan Williams

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Dr Rowan Williams is a noted theologian, poet and former Archbishop of Canterbury.



Introduction

On 25 September 2021, as part of the first *Art History Festival*, organised by the Association of Art Historians and held at the National Gallery, London, I was privileged to have a public conversation with Dr Rowan Williams, theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury. Our topic was visual art and the religious imagination. I was particularly keen to ask Williams about his own relationship with visual art, including as a poet. What followed was a rich, insightful, and wide-ranging exploration of the potential for the visual image to enliven and challenge entrenched religious thinking and believing. An edited transcript of that conversation follows. For this special issue of *Theology in Scotland*, I offer some brief introductory observations on the interrelation of image, faith and language.

It has been noted in some of the best art historical and art theoretical writing that the autonomous image is strangely resistant to the verbal. Horst Bredekamp, a prominent German art historian, finds something particularly disconcerting in the recalcitrance of the image:

While humanity has the distinctive capacity for spoken language, it encounters images as a distanced form of corporeality. Neither

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through the expenditure of emotion, nor through any amount of linguistic manipulation, can images be drawn back fully into that human order to which they owe their creation. Therein lies the essence of the fascination of the image. Once created, it is independent. It may then become the object of admiring astonishment, but also of that most powerful of all emotions: fear.¹

Michael Ann Holly goes further, suggesting how the image thwarts the very discipline most preoccupied with verbalising it:

The compelling visuality of the work of art resists appropriation by either the cleverness of historical accounts or the eloquence of descriptive language. *Something remains; something gets left over long after explanations are exhausted.* Consequently, I have been arguing, the discipline [of art history] is constitutionally fated to suffer from a quiet melancholic malaise. The distance between present and past, the gap between words and images can never be closed. In Freud's formulation, it is melancholy, or unresolved mourning, that unsettles us.²

If fear and mourning might be provoked by the encounter with the independent artwork, the British Marxist art historian, T. J. Clark, calls for caution in the face of the muteness of the image; a caution pertinent – his phrasing makes clear – in theological contexts too:

Powers of all sorts, religious, political and economic have seized on the silence and seeming transparency of the visual image, and filled the silence with speech (or sub-speech) that appears to emanate from the image itself.³

Such observations, variations of which have been formulated by generations of commentators, are worth bearing in mind when reading how Rowan Williams articulates his own responses to artworks. Our

¹ Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts: A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, trans. Elizabeth Clegg (Berlin; Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2017), 6.

² Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), 97–98. Emphasis original.

³ T. J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018), 10.

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conversation turned often on questions of word and image. Responding eloquently to particular works of art by a range of artists ancient and modern, Williams considered the limitations of language in the face of art while yet allowing for the generative potential of a verbal response that comes from an impulse to explore, ‘excavate’ and ‘tune in’, rather than to define, seal or impose meaning. As such, his remarks honour the autonomy of the artwork as those of Bredekamp and Holly do. They also recognise, I think, with Clark, the danger of overhastily filling the image’s ‘silence’ with speech. And yet we can also see how he draws together the artistic *and* the theological imagination to consider the inadequacy of conclusive language both for art *and* for God. I would suggest that, holding the theological dimension in mind, he thus opens possibilities for a generativity and even an intimacy with the image that, might actually *come* from a kind of epistemological humility, or what he has seen as ‘one of the foundational impulses of art’; namely, ‘to increase the “pressure” on habitual discourse or description in order to dismantle the world of fixed concepts and self-enclosed objects.’⁴ I’m also struck by Williams’s reflection, after looking at Gwen John, on faith having to do with a sense of the ‘inexhaustibility’ in the world. It suggests different possibilities than the ‘malaise’ (such as that articulated by Holly) after explanations are exhausted.

Throughout the conversation, it was noticeable that Williams finds in art’s *indeterminacy* the most richness. Suggestive of apophatic and contemplative spiritual traditions, for him, the ‘fog’, the ‘veil’ in John; the ambiguity and ‘excess of meaning’ in Caravaggio; the ‘inexhaustibility’ of Paula Rego and David Jones are all generative. The inaccessible ‘darkness’ into which the face of the Daphni Pantocrator draws us carries more weight than the sharp radiance of Grünewald’s resurrected body.

The conversation reproduced here can be read, of course, as the reflections of one man on a handful of artworks. Taken as a whole, however, I think they both affirm and take us beyond the fear, malaise and perils of speaking (or writing) in response to the mute work of art. This has a good deal to tell us too, about the inexhaustible potential of the imagination as well as about the incompleteness of language in matters of thinking about God – theology.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 122.



Deborah Lewer: Rowan, you're a Welshman and a poet. You're also someone who looks very attentively at visual art. I'd like us to explore the relationship between the word and the image, holding that as a kind of red thread to our discussion. Evan Walters' *Blind Pianist* (1925) is a painting that you've responded to as a poet. What drew you to it?

Rowan Williams: Evan Walters isn't a very well-known artist, but he is one of the major figures to come out of that rich artistic environment in Swansea in the early to mid-twentieth century. I was very struck by this painting, particularly by the hand that you see, which appears to be the left hand. You don't know exactly what's going on anywhere else, but you see this very gnarled and bony left hand exploring, appropriately, in the darkness. The pianist was a real personality, a Welsh pianist. I wrote the [eponymous] poem in response to the picture.

You asked about the connection between word and image. I suppose what I think I'm doing when I'm trying to write a poem about a work of art is to tune in to whatever shape, energy or rhythm is going on in the picture, and to say well, what would that be in another medium? Just as the picture *itself* seeks for the rhythm, the structure within what's seen, you have to go to that level of structure and rhythm and pulse, just as the visual artist is looking for form, quarrying, excavating. In this case it's doubled, because that looks like a picture of somebody experimenting on the keyboard, excavating. So again, in the verbal response, you excavate for that pulse. I think that's part of what's going on.

DL: Hearing you speak in that way about a visual image, you're using the language of touch and of music (rhythm, metre, structure and so on). It opens up how artworks and images don't merely reside in the visual, as inert objects, but how they can connect with us very deeply in all kinds of sensory ways.

RW: I'm glad you mention touch, because one thing that I always find moving and striking in certain kinds of visual art is where you can see the tactility of the surface. You can see that this is not a surface you're meant to ignore, but it is a part of the work you engage with.

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Whether it's in terms of brushwork or of the contours of a heavy impasto, you're looking and feeling for that tactile element.

DL: That kind of tactile quality and distinctive impasto is a characteristic of the work of another Welsh artist for whom I know you have a great fondness: Gwen John. What is it that draws you to her work?

RW: It is the way she creates a surface. Although flat, there's a medium of density; in the best and most positive sense, a sort of fog. She doesn't do bright, clear, blazing colours. She makes you see almost as through a veil, with the light spreading, thickening around the figure. She also revisits constantly the images she works with. *Mère Poussepin Seated at a Table* is a picture of the foundress of a Roman Catholic religious order. Gwen John was a very devout Catholic in mid- and late life. The nuns asked if she would do 'a nice picture for the convent', not, I think, realising quite that she was arguably one of the best artists in Europe. There are some seventeenth-century engravings of Mère Poussepin. Gwen John took the very simple engraving and worked it and reworked and reworked it, very slightly shifting the angle of the treatment. Just as with Rembrandt's self-portraits, or the great Impressionist sequences, it's as if that repetitive engagement says: here is something I'm not going to get to the bottom of, here is something on which it's worth spending indefinite time. That's one of the things I find compelling about her painting. Her brother Augustus said that he believed Gwen John's painting would be remembered when his was forgotten. How very right he was (my prejudices showing there ...!) But it is that sense of patience, revisiting and an undramatic persistence in seeing. There's a sequence of young girls in church, there are pictures based on the life of St Thérèse of Lisieux and evocations of a chair with a drape in a room by a window. They're comparable, I think, to some of Van Gogh's similar treatments of ordinary bits of furniture, with the same kind of density and depth of the ordinary object or person. It's not that when you've 'got' the subject, you've got the person, it's all tied up. You haven't, and there's both an ambition and a humility in that, for the painter. It's a way, I think, of encoding in the painting itself the time that art takes. It's one of the things about Rembrandt, certainly about Gwen John: you see the time taken and you know it's

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not a moment of instantaneous capture but a relationship that goes on.

DL: Do you think that relationship has something to do with artistic maturity as well? Is it characteristic of an older artist?

RW: It probably is yes, and certainly older artists often exhibit this revisiting. You can't stop looking because there's always more to see. And to touch on the title of our conversation, something about faith has to do with that sense of an inexhaustibility in the world you're looking at, in the person you're engaging with; the sense that there's something there that you will never come to the end of because it always opens out onto something *other* than your perception of that instant. So, looking at *Mère Poussepin*, she's looking at the artist, she's also looking past the artist. That's something which I think is significant in painting at times too.

DL: Perhaps something of the infinite in the finite.

RW: Exactly: that gaze is not just for you.

DL: That brings us to another field of art I'd like to ask you about. I'm thinking of your long-standing interest in Eastern Orthodox theological traditions and their very rich visual culture. You've remarked on the importance of icons in Eastern spirituality. You've responded in your poetry to icons, such as the *Trinity* by Andrei Rublev, and to other examples of Byzantine art, like the mosaic of the *Pantocrator* at Daphni. What do you find in such imagery?

RW: The icon, of course, is meant not to be a reproduction of anything. It's a surface you are meant to look *through*. The icon is painted by somebody who's saying their prayers. They are painting in a state of attentiveness, almost of contemplation, so what is painted carries that contemplative relatedness. The flat surface of the icon is very important. It's a window, it's not an object you can walk around. People have remarked on how perspective in the icon is often reversed. Things converge on you as a viewer and open out onto infinity. If you look at the Rublev icon of the *Trinity*, you'll see that

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it draws the eye in towards where *you* are. At the same time there's a chalice or calyx shape there. It's a receiving shape, whether you think of that as the chalice of the Mass or the calyx of a flower. There's a holding going on and a circulation of lines: the heads of the figures constitute a sort of flow around a circle. All of that – the invitation to you to occupy the place at the front of the table, the circulation of the heads, the gaze of the figures – all that is meant to take you into the centre.

Quite often in an icon you'll see a representation of Christ being transfigured and behind him there will be a blaze of light, a mandorla of some sort, an oval with spikey rays of light coming out from it. Trace those to where their centre is and you often find they're in Christ's belly. You might think of the Buddhist language of the *hara* – the belly from which spiritual energy flows. That's a theme you find in Eastern Orthodox spirituality as well: the area around the navel is where the spiritual energies settle, where you focus your thought when you're praying. So to be drawn into the middle is not just where your eye is drawn. It's also in some sense where your whole responsive self is drawn. You're being invited into that mysterious and – in this particular icon – dark centre. All the shaping, the rhythm of the flow, the directionality of those images is taking you into that place.

DL: I'm fascinated that you describe it in terms of an inward direction, a kind of force that draws us in, because in your poem on the *Pantocrator* of Daphni you wrote of 'his sweaty heaviness, his bulging eyes drawn inwards to their private pain ...'.⁵ So there's something like that going on here too, at least in your response to it.

RW: That's right, I've always been fascinated by the way in which the Christ of this image is not looking at us. The eyes slip away as if remembering something internal. And when we're drawn into this image, we're drawn into that very dark, very mysterious place. It's been called by some commentators an image of a face that has been into darkness and back. It's rather like the face of Christ in Piero della

⁵ "Pantocrator: Daphni", in *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2014), 31.

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Francesca's *Resurrection* in Burgo San Sepolcro. I think those two images of a triumphant Christ are among the most powerful in the whole history of Christian art. The face and the eyes do not engage in a kindly or benign way. They are saying to the observer: you know, death and resurrection are more serious than you could begin to imagine. Behind this is such a hinterland of darkness and light that you just cannot be allowed to imagine that it's easy. Compare it to the resurrection image on one of the panels of Mathias Grünewald's great *Isenheim Altarpiece*. It's a wonderful evocation of the blazing light of the risen body, but there's something about the sheer *terror* of newness, the terror of change in these images which the Grünewald doesn't come anywhere near. That's part of why I find this such an overwhelming image, such a weighty image.

DL: A weighty image that holds a paradox in that it's on the one hand a very public, monumental image – as is the Piero *Resurrection* fresco in the civic hall – and yet at the same time can speak of that private pain.

RW: And something I noted in the poem: the book is closed. Normally the Pantocrator would be holding an open book, but this one is slammed shut, clutched on his arm. That's significant. We're back with word and image, and how words get you to the edge of what you can't say.

DL: Let's turn our attention to another period in the history of art, one of urgent and divisive questions of representation. This is the era of the Baroque, the seventeenth century, in Rome. Artists at this time tested the role of the visual imagination in faith, posing questions, again, of the relationship between word and image and even questions about what art can be, what painting is. Caravaggio, arguably the great innovator of his age, I know is an artist who speaks to you. This painting, *The Calling of Matthew*, was commissioned for a small chapel of the Church of the French in Rome where it can still be found today. I wonder if you could talk us through it and how we might read it, how we might respond to it theologically.

RW: Goodness, how long have you got?! It gains part of its power I think simply from the use of light, as you'd expect in the Baroque – the

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source of light clearly being where Christ is standing. But it's a very odd and ambiguous illumination. It doesn't immediately solve things. Commentators have enjoyed pointing out that we don't know for certain which of the figures on the left is St Matthew. This is the call of the apostle Matthew, but there, on that end of the painting, are a group of early seventeenth-century characters doing what they do, their business at the tax office. Now, who is the future disciple? What kind of response would be appropriate to a future disciple? You could say that all or any of those might work. Is it the person who's bent over, counting, intent on the work? Is it the person trying to pretend that it's somebody else that Christ is calling? Is it even the old man looking on who's semi-detached from it all? Any of those might be a response on the part of Matthew the tax collector to the call of Christ. One of the things that the Baroque does at its best (and this is pretty good) is to confuse you in a wonderfully exuberant way. It's to say there are a number of possible responses that the world could show to the mystery that's impacting upon it. So, the Baroque is not just about excess and display, it's certainly not just about surfaces. It's about another kind of excess: the excess of meaning. The relative darkness in which Christ stands, though the light is coming from where he is, is part of that. The summons from Christ to a human being, is, yes, the pouring of light into darkness, but it's not as straightforward as you might have thought. The responses we make – evasive, displacing, or eager – all these possibilities are there. All that is going on in this moment when the transcendent summons. Don't try and foreclose too quickly, don't try and settle on what this painting is 'really' doing because it's doing the whole lot.

DL: So it's an expansive and generous painting in many ways.

RW: Yes, and again one that makes you take time. In contrast to most medieval art, the sheer diversity of human responses depicted is part of what the painting is doing. If you've got a crowd of people in a painting by Giotto or Duccio, you don't need to look at every face – that's no criticism. But already in very late medieval art like Rogier van der Weyden's *Descent from the Cross*, you *do* need to look at the different faces because there are lots of different sorts of grief going

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on. And then when you get to the full-blown Caravaggian Baroque, you have the sense that all those variants matter.

DL: There seems to be a multitude of possible relationships implied in this painting. I'm always struck when I see it by the most infinitesimal sliver of a halo that designates Christ's holiness in this rather dubious interior, and how that shines so faintly, almost in contrast to these endless possibilities that you've been talking about. I'd like now to take us closer to our own era, into the twentieth century. Remaining with images of calling, of the summons of God to human beings, let's think about how modern artists challenge our seeing and perhaps our believing. You have thought a lot about the art and writing of David Jones, about paintings like his setting the Annunciation in the Welsh hills. You're also very interested in the work of Paula Rego. There's a connection between Rego and where we are now – in the National Gallery: she was the inaugural artist in residence here in 1990 and made work responding to this collection. More recently she's created a cycle of remarkable pastel drawings including radical re-imaginings of the Annunciation and the Nativity. Can you tell us what you see, as an artist yourself and as a theologian, in Paula Rego's work?

RW: I'm fascinated by the deliberately eccentric and challenging use of light. Often in Paula Rego you're looking from a quite unexpected perspective on figures. They're foreshortened or oddly isolated in their space and the light is, as in that annunciation, very much from the direct frontal perspective of the artist. It's as if the artist is saying: what you're seeing is, let's be clear, what *I'm* seeing. This is my world; these are my figures. I'm also fascinated in these images especially by what you might call the queering of the angelic figure – an almost stereotypical Hispanic male face, a flounced dress and saying something about the fact that the narrative of the Annunciation and of the Nativity is, in the widest possible sense, a queering story; it's a story in which issues around gender and identity and power and compliance and all sorts of other things are just rolled in together in a wildly anarchic way, more than we often realise. And that says something highly significant about the nature of the narrative and why it continues to appeal to artists. And I think with

the Nativity picture there's a very deliberate echo there of the *Pietà*. Instead of the mature Virgin with the dead Christ draped over her knee, you have the angel supporting a Mary who almost looks at the end of her life and is blood-stained. Again, a deliberate messing with your theological mind. You're invited to think right outside theological and representational boxes, to expose yourself to the strangeness of the narrative, the strangeness of the image. Going back to what we were saying at the start of this discussion, the work of art seeks to tune in to the pulses and the rhythms of a scene or a narrative or a theme. It can make us understand just how disruptive, how strange those pulses are. I think that's one of the things I sense in Paula Rego's paintings on these themes.

It's very different from the way in which David Jones handles it in that lovely picture *Y Cyfarchiad i Fair*, Mary in the Welsh hill setting. As always with Jones, the detail is almost unmanageably precise and finicky. You look at all the small birds in that picture, all birds you will see in the countryside of Wales. There's the wattle fence around Mary, the garden enclosed. There's the Brecon Beacons background and the angel, dressed as a Deacon at Mass, because he's announcing the gospel. In an apparently fairly flat surface, he's layering, very delicately and skilfully, the natural world, the world of the mountains, of birdsong, the cultural world of Mary within the enclosed space of cultivation and domesticity, the ecclesiastical world of the proclamation of the gospel in church, the political world. The angel is carrying a sword that speaks not only of the sword of power but also of the sword that will pierce Mary's heart, theological and spiritual. Jones complicates and tangles and knits his lines everywhere so that in this apparently flat image you have a depth of reference. It's a very different exercise from Paula Rego but it's Jones's way, I think, of doing what Rego's doing in making us see the strangeness of what's going on here, the odd harmonics of this story. We're back to time-taking, the inexhaustibility of what this is seeking to represent. That's one of the things that is religious about imagination: that sense of not having done with what's there, not knowing what's around the corner of your vision and always moving steadily to adjust that corner and finding more vistas and taking more time.

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DL: Thank you Rowan, so much. I wish we could carry on talking because I would love to hear you say more about art. I'm wondering what it would have been like if you had been called not to the church but to the study of art history ...

RW: I think I might have had a quieter life!

DL: ... but you've certainly enriched our appreciation of art history and given us a wonderful and fitting conclusion to this inaugural *Art History Festival*, organised by the Association of Art Historians. I thank you for your generosity in sharing with us so eloquently your responses to art, in showing us the plenitude and abundance of possibilities around art-making and viewing and for inviting us into a relationship with the imagination of the artist. Thank you.

With thanks to Rowan Williams, to the Association of Art Historians, and to the journal Art+Christianity⁶ (in which this transcribed conversation was first published) for their permission to publish the conversation in Theology in Scotland. A video of the event is available online via YouTube.⁷

⁶ <https://www.artandchristianity.org/>

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yI1iubPTcJI>