

Church today is clear. These are urgent alarm bells that we in other denominations ignore at our peril. Duffy continues, ‘We grow from our own past, and we only flourish when we are in touch with that past.’

All of our churches today are threatened by a new generation dressed in jeans and T-shirts, armed with guitars, drumkits and powerpoint projectors. They display such a cocky self-confidence about the modernity of the faith that they see no need to respect the long history of the church that nurtured them. They are like rebellious children who disown their mother. Duffy’s crisis is one that all of us face.

Duffy urges the bishops to begin the vital task of educating the faithful in theology. Yet even as he calls for action, one cannot help feeling that it is already too late, that the treasures of tradition will continue to be trampled on or swept into spiritual dustbins or mocked by trendy clerics who are possessed by a Blairite urge to be modern without any regard to the riches of our heritage. The bathwater has disappeared gurgling down the plughole and we are now searching in increasing panic for any signs of the baby.

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*Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams, Mike Higton, London: SCM Press, 2004, pp. 160, ISBN: 0334029414. \$14.99*

Who is the most important theologian writing in the English-speaking world today? Opinions will differ on the best answer to this question, but a case can be made for claiming that title for the present Archbishop of Canterbury. His theology is important not only because of the high office he holds and the prestige given to the incumbent of Lambeth Palace by the worldwide church, but also because it is based firmly on Rowan Williams’ experience of God.

At the heart of the theology of Rowan Williams is a transforming encounter with the living Christ. Rowan Williams has been and is amazed and enthused by the experience of being held in the loving, accepting gaze of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. His theological thinking is a response to this personal gift. ‘What difference does it make to my self-understanding, if I believe myself to be held in a loving accepting gaze?’ asks Williams. Then, becoming aware that God who loves him loves the world also, he asks, ‘What difference does it make to our understanding of how we might live together if we believe that each of us is held in the same loving regard?’

Those of us who have wrestled with Williams’ books know that they are always difficult to understand. Williams writes in an obscure, abstract style, never using one short word where a dozen long words will do. One can sympathise with the minister who gave up reading one of Williams’ books after reaching the eightieth page, when it dawned on him that he had not understood anything of what he had read. Williams deserves the criticism that his style has earned from fellow theologians and the lampooning to which he has been subjected by the pens of satirical journalists. However, there is another sense in which his theology is difficult. Williams believes in the God who became utterly vulnerable in Christ and therefore ‘demands my soul, my life, my all.’ The gospel could not be more difficult than this. Williams believes that Christianity is not about a Christ who saves us the trouble of being crucified, but whose followers must also bear the cross. Williams believes in the Jesus represented by the empty tomb, a Jesus who has a continued, uncontrollable and inexhaustible presence in the world. This is difficult for all of us to swallow. Those who like to have their religion cut and dried are bound to find Williams’ uncontrolled and uncontrollable God difficult. Those whose theology rests on the bland and unthinking repetition of favourite ‘proof texts’ are bound to have difficulty with a thinker, whose study of scripture begins and ends not with certainty but with wonder. The evangelist who has a direct line to the Almighty and knows with absolute certainty the answers to all questions will hesitate before Williams’ view of God as ‘the great negative theologian’, who shatters all our illusions by means of the cross of Christ. Williams is convinced that ‘dogmatic language becomes empty and even destructive

of faith when it is isolated from a lively and converting worship and a spirituality that is not afraid of silence and powerlessness.’

Indeed the Archbishop has a special liking for the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel, a Jesus who holds back from revealing who he is, lest the words describing him should ‘take on the colouring of the world’s insanity’. Only at his trial in Mark 14 does Jesus speak plainly because by that time ‘there is little or no danger that we shall now mistake what he means’. This uncontrolled and uncontrollable Christ will not allow us to avoid our responsibilities, nor will he allow us to escape the many manifestations of his grace. Williams believes that ‘our faith depends on the possibility of meeting Christ in any and every place, and in any and every person’. Moreover when faced with a thorny problem the man or woman of faith should ‘look long and hard at an unpromising situation until God comes to light.’

In the realm of politics Williams’ convictions reflect the Christ who is present in and through the life of humanity. The voice of the other may contain the voice of Christ and therefore should be listened to. War, which inevitably means that nations stop listening to one another, is—almost always—wrong. The many voices with which humanity speaks reflect ‘back to God his own generous outpouring’. It is hardly surprising that this self-styled ‘hairy leftie’ has no time for chauvinism in whatever guise it appears.

In the realm of sexual morality Williams is conventional, considering sex before marriage and adultery wrong. However, he is also aware that for many of us it is in a sexually intimate relationship, more perhaps than anywhere else, that we learn how vulnerable we are to another, how dependent we are on another. The self-giving, vulnerability of love mirrors the life of God. Therefore Williams asks us to imagine a Christian homosexual saying, ‘I truly, prayerfully, and conscientiously do not recognise Romans chapter one as describing what I am or what I want.’ He suggests that a homosexual relationship might be one which can, like a heterosexual relationship, show Christ to the world.

Mike Higton is to be congratulated for throwing light on the often

obscure writing of a man of deep Christian faith. After reading this book many of us, who have found Williams difficult in the past, will return to his writings, saying with Jacob, ‘I will not let thee go, except thou bless me.’

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