



Reviews



On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays, Matheson Russell (ed.), Eugene: Cascade Books, 2009, pp. xxiii, 238, ISBN 978-1-55635-973-6. £20.46

In the preface to his most recent book, Rowan Williams writes, ‘Systems of meaning ... seem to operate by allowing us to see phenomena in connected instead of arbitrary ways. But this means the capacity to see things in terms of other things: it means abandoning the idea that there is one basic and obvious way of seeing the world which any fool can get hold of ...’¹ In this collection of essays which find their *loci* in the theological work of Williams, a group of Australian scholars put his theory about knowledge to the test, exploring Williams’ own theological *Weltanschauung* and its relation to the wider theological endeavour. However, this exploration of Rowan Williams’ own theological work does not proceed simply from the concerns of the *academe*: as Matheson Russell puts it in the introduction, ‘Rowan Williams’ stature as a first rate scholar is unquestionable ... Within the church, things are not so cut and dried.’ (xiii) There is, therefore, an undeniable ecclesial bent to this volume; it arises out of the Australian wing of the Anglican church, with the authors writing out of a context of engagement within this particular confessional milieu. As the title intimates, each one of these essays, whilst evincing Williams’ thinking in a number of key areas, concludes with a critical engagement with this thinking vis-à-vis its wider Anglican consequences.

At the risk of labouring my point, the book operates on two levels, each of which adds to the broader *raison d’être*: firstly, the book is simply an ‘unofficial’ *Festschrift* in which the various authors celebrate the theological work of Williams, focussing on a number of key nodal points which make Williams’ theological writings so unique; secondly, these nodal points are submitted to rigorous critique

¹ Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (London: Continuum, 2008), ix.

so that the ramifications of these theological points may be fully realised *precisely within* an ecclesial situation. That is to say, what is actually taking place within these pages is an example of what Williams himself might term a ‘continuity of conflict’, an ongoing ecclesial struggle as ‘the creative project of making room for the past to extend itself into the present’. (54–5) Thus, this book should not simply be read as an introductory textbook, although it is a useful starting point for exposure to Williams’ theology, but rather should be read as an ecclesial engagement from within a theological tradition. In this way, anyone operating from within an ecclesiological tradition and seeking to understand the relationship between theology and the church should look no further than this book. It is simply a concrete example of such a relationship.

The book itself actually develops its theme quite directedly. Whilst the first essay focuses on the ecclesiology of Rowan Williams as a unifying theme, the following essays move from a genesis in Williams’ apophatic theological method, through a couple of explorations of his notion of the theological and ecclesiological task, into a discussion of his interaction with Hegel’s philosophy (which formally underlies what goes before) and the anthropological ramifications of such a philosophical engagement. The essays then move into a more detailed exploration of the Williams anthropology, both generally and specifically (in his exploration of ‘Desire’ and the gender debate), before concluding with a couple of political pieces on war and the importance of aesthetics to politics. In some ways, although it makes for a beautiful architectonic, this is in fact the book’s main downfall: when reading the book through, one feels as though there is a high level of repetition as each author offers introductory material on often similar themes. For example, negative theology is explored as a methodology within the consecutive essays of Andrew Moody, Ben Myers and Michael Jensen. Whilst the apophatic approach is undoubtedly a vital aspect within Williams’ theology, the entry-level discussion of the *via negativa* in each essay could have been carefully pared down by the editor.

Rather than simply re-presenting the content of the various essays, I would rather give a general overarching appreciation of the architectonic of the work so as to give to the reader the sense of the

development which is going on within this collection. The placement of the first essay is paramount. Rhys Bezzant's essay focusses upon "The Ecclesiology of Rowan Williams", undoubtedly to indicate the topography upon which the rest of the work will seek to build. In this sense, this essay indicates the progressive nature of this interaction of Anglican scholars with Williams' work. The following three essays, therefore, build upon the foundation laid by the first essay, offering a methodological scaffold around which the remaining essays may be fitted. Andrew Moody takes Williams' 'negative theology' as a starting point; Ben Myers explores the notions of 'heresy' and 'orthodoxy' within Williams' theological work; and Michael Jensen analyses the governing nature of Williams' Christology through the exploration of 'Krisis' against 'Kritik' within his theological method.

From here, the essays become more substantial in terms of contentual doctrine. The first shift is towards the place of humanity within the schema of God: the editor, Matheson Russell, presents us with an invaluable piece on Williams' Hegelianism (of sorts) which moves into a helpful discussion of his political writings and indeed actions. This dovetails nicely with Byron Smith's essay on anthropology *tout court* within Williams' writing. The final essay of this ilk is an exposition of 'desire' and, through this, human sexuality, in Andrew Cameron's offering. These three essays, therefore, pull together the various strands which make up much of the problematics in Rowan Williams' position as the Archbishop of Canterbury, involving him in politically fragile situations and touching upon the debates concerning the place of women within the church and the approach to homosexuality, which have punctuated his tenure at regular intervals.

The final essays turn back towards Williams' status as visible public figure. Tom Frame offers us an essay which examines Williams' positions on political unrest and war. In what is probably the most critical essay, he accuses Williams of over-intellectualising the political process and, consequently, distracting from the process of peacekeeping more often than not. Greg Clarke's interest lies in Williams' notions of aesthetics, particularly in his oratorical work as Archbishop. Taking a fascinating route through a number of Williams' speeches as Archbishop, Clarke develops a model of Williams' own approach to beauty and ethics and shows how Williams' own

valedictory style is influenced by this aesthetic.

In conclusion, I hope that I have expressed sufficiently the immense importance of this book from the point of view of a genuinely positive relationship between theology and the Church. Whilst in terms of the broad sweep of Rowan Williams' own work, these essays are perhaps sparsely spread, their true strength resides in their attempt to take Williams' theology and apply it to their own ecclesiological situation. Thus, for any minister, church leader or pastor who is interested to know how theology fits into the broader work of the Church, this book is invaluable: a concrete example of putting into practice that which is preached. Furthermore, if this were not enough, the bibliography pertaining to the incalculable material produced by Williams' is arguably worth the price of the whole book!

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Public Theology in Cultural Engagement, ed. Stephen R. Holmes, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008, pp. xiv, 196 ISBN 978-1842275429. £19.99

Answers are increasingly sought and given for the relentless onslaught of problems in the world. But what voice should Christians – unashamedly committed to the Bible's authority – have in this arena? Rather than shying away from culture into separatist isolationism, as sometimes marks the Christian position; and rather than resigning itself to a feeble neutralized assessment of world phenomena, this volume displays a serious 'theological' engagement with culture. It asserts that Christian theology, which is 'universally – and so publicly – true', is competent to engage with all creation. Unlike some studies, this volume has no intention of 'working on the interface between theology and sociology, cultural studies, social anthropology, or any other field' since it intends to give 'not a vaguely Christian form of sociology, but a thoroughly theological and biblical analysis.' (x–xi) As Holmes asserts in the introduction, 'Christian theology must have the confidence to be what it is: a coherent account of all created