

Living the questions: The converging worlds of Rowan Williams

by [David S. Cunningham](#) in the [April 24, 2002](#) issue

Two years ago, at the relatively young age of 49, Rowan Williams became archbishop of the Church in Wales, one of the provinces of the Anglican Communion. By that time, he had already taught at various theological colleges in England, and had held two important academic posts (dean of Clare College at Cambridge and Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford). He had also published a shelfful of books for a wide variety of audiences—from sermons and popular works on spirituality to technical historical and theological treatises. He is frequently mentioned as a leading candidate to be the next archbishop of Canterbury.

Williams has an unusual ability to hold together elements and perspectives that many Christians assume are mutually exclusive. For example, he studies the Fathers of the church, and is convinced of their continuing relevance today, but he is also a tireless advocate for a more “progressive” ecclesiastical order, including the ordination of women and greater inclusion of gay and lesbian Christians. He is a powerful member of the hierarchy of the Anglican Church, but he is passionately committed to ecumenism, and particularly persuaded of the riches of Eastern Orthodoxy. He is a rigorous historian whose writings are attentive to the most technical details, but he is also a popular preacher and a published poet. His theological convictions point toward something very much like pacifism, yet he remains actively engaged in conversations with the structures of the British nation-state.

Perhaps the reason he is able to hold all these elements together is that he is a very patient person—willing to dwell deeply within the questions, rather than to rush toward quick and easy resolutions. His theological writings often leave readers with more questions than they had when they began. I asked him about his theological style, his chief influences, his theological commitments and his concerns and hopes for the church.

You are a theologian, a priest, a spiritual leader, a poet—can you say something about how this combination of vocations arose in your life?

When I was about 12, I encountered a parish priest who had an enormous influence—spiritually, intellectually and in all sorts of ways. He fostered both the vocation to ordained ministry and the vocation to thinking and imagining about Christianity. He was a great enthusiast for poetry; he got me to read T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden. He lent me Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison and was always willing to talk about poetry and theology. He was also a very disciplined priest of a rather old-fashioned kind, who spent a half hour in prayer every morning before celebrating the Eucharist. His blend of intense, personal, disciplined spirituality, on the one hand, and an excited approach to the world of theology and the imagination on the other— that was a big influence.

He reminds me of an important public figure in those days: Michael Ramsey.

Yes, indeed. Ramsey was archbishop of Canterbury during my teenage years. I see him as part of a galaxy of people who were in senior positions of Christian leadership at the time, who seemed to exude tremendous depth, contemplative seriousness and theological imagination. I would also put Pope Paul VI in that group, as well as the then patriarch of Constantinople, and the archbishop of Wales at the time. All of them stood for the fusion of the contemplative, the imaginative, the intellectual and the pastoral which shapes my sense of ministry.

Do you think that kind of “fusion” is harder to find today?

I think that, these days, the culture of the church at large is much more anxious, and much more issue-driven, than it was then, and this makes it very difficult to find that fusion and interaction of elements. Now, there's no point in being nostalgic; that's how it is. But if I were to set something Michael Ramsey used to say right alongside some of the debates in my church and other churches, I do have a slight sense that the horizon has narrowed. The tenor and temper of the discussion has become a bit ragged, and we've lost something of the exuberance of gratitude that comes with establishing broad horizons. That's something I'd like to see returning to the theological discourse of the church: the idiom of gratitude. I wish we didn't feel all the time that the gifts of God are such terribly fragile things that we can't take them out and enjoy them.

Who are some other figures who exemplify this idiom of gratitude, and this fusion of the spiritual, intellectual and imaginative realms?

When I was an undergraduate, I was studying with John Riches, who was very enthusiastic about Karl Barth. I had gone up to Cambridge in the late '60s to read theology, and was very enthusiastic about Thomas Aquinas. So we spent most of the first year quarreling ferociously. And at the end of that year, he suggested that I take a look at somebody who seemed to have the best of both worlds—a Swiss theologian named Hans Urs von Balthasar. I'd seen his books in the library in Cambridge because Donald MacKinnon—a professor at Cambridge and another great influence—was probably one of the first people in Britain to read Balthasar seriously.

What I found in Balthasar's work was an extraordinary depth of contemplative understanding, along with vivid awareness of the tragic quality of human existence—the hellishness of humanity and God's involvement in it—which resonated very deeply with me. This was partly because of my awareness of some of the hell that was around at the time, figuratively speaking (this was the late '60s and early '70s), and partly because of my literary interest, my enthusiasm for Shakespeare. Balthasar seemed to be the theologian who was writing about such things.

You mention Donald McKinnon. Few people in North America even know who this man is; and yet he is thanked in prefaces and dedications by practically every major theologian writing in Britain today. Is he a parallel figure to Hans Frei, whose writings are not extensive or well known, but whose influence is so great because he was the beloved teacher of so many important theologians?

That's a very interesting comparison indeed, and, I think, a very fair one. Donald was a much more tormented character. And sometimes what he taught, he taught by his sheer inarticulateness.

Inarticulateness?

Yes. You'd sit and watch Donald facing a problem, and it could be a terrible sight—and I'm not using those words lightly. If nothing else, he would make you see that the sort of issues that theology was about were serious issues. When I arrived at Cambridge, I had read one or two little books on the problem of evil, and I had thought, "Well, this can be lived with." And then, in my first term, I went to

McKinnon's lectures on the problem of evil. From that experience, the one massive fact that emerged was that you could "live with this" only at considerable cost—and that the last thing you should do is look for theological solutions. You need to be constantly drawn back to the intractability, the reality of the problem.

Not solving the problem but, rather, recognizing that it's not a solvable problem?

That, in a way, is the theological response in Donald's eyes: to know why it's not answerable, properly; that's theology. So long as we're looking for a solution, we are not using theological categories. That's probably what drew Donald to Balthasar. Both were asking: Where is the pivot of the world's change? And both were answering: Not in a "solution" and a happy ending, but in some sense in Holy Saturday: the descent into hell. It's the unimaginable outreach of the fullness of redemption: that's what makes the difference.

Balthasar understood Christ's descent into hell as part of the glory of the resurrection. MacKinnon never said this, but I think he might have responded positively to the Eastern Orthodox idea that the real representation of the resurrection is the descent into hell.

That brings up another area of influence on your work: Eastern Orthodoxy. Could you say a bit about how that interest developed?

Initially, I suppose, it grew out of my teenage interest in Russian novels and music. This inevitably led to an interest in Russian Orthodoxy. Then, when I was an undergraduate, I heard the late Nicholas Zernov give a talk on the Russian religious renaissance in the early 20th century—what is sometimes called the Silver Age period, just before the revolution. At that time, a number of intellectuals were making their impression on the church—Nicholas Berdyaev, Sergii Bulgakov, Piotr Struve. And that lecture really fired my interest.

You've recently published your translation of a number of Bulgakov's essays.

Yes. I've become more and more interested in the sort of thing Bulgakov was writing before he was exiled from Russia. He was beginning to develop this great systematic vision, an overlapping between heaven and earth in a sense, a theology of beauty—not a million miles from Balthasar, again. But I'm also more and more

fascinated by the essays he was writing about the arts, economics and politics in the first decade of the 20th century, as he painfully made his way from Marxism into a slightly different kind of Christian politics.

Ramsey, Balthasar, Bulgakov—I'm struck by the connections that all these thinkers draw between theology and other large-scale enterprises: art, drama, economics, politics. What is it about theology's engagement with those kinds of enterprises that attracts you? Is such engagement a necessary part of theological thinking?

Theology has to include a vision of what it means to be human. Think of Irenaeus's much-quoted phrase, "The glory of God is the human being fully alive; the life of a human being is the vision of God." When I first came across that, it stood out for me in capital letters. If you start there, then our ways of imagining human possibilities through the arts and politics become matters of intense theological concern. And the theologian ought to be deeply involved in all of those discussions and reflections and should try to articulate what it might mean to hold something like Irenaeus's vision in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

What does that vision mean as you read King Lear? What does that mean as you ask about issues of international debt? What does that mean as you work with the homeless? To me, those questions have always been what gives theology its energy.

What you're describing is the framing of an entire imaginative world. Are we less skilled at that today? Things come to us today in very short segments, and our attention span is very short. We experience many things out of context—snippets of Web pages and so forth. Does theology offer a different vision?

I suppose what we're saying is that theology is a deeply unfashionable discipline! But I can live with that. Yes, theology ought to be in the business of engaging in, and encouraging, "thick description"—that is, complex accounts of the various and interrelated worlds that we inhabit.

Someone recently suggested to me that the success of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books could be attributed, in part, to the persistent hunger for (and relative lack of) these "entire imaginative worlds" in children's fiction. Rowling has responded to that need in a way that hasn't been common since C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien.

It's an interesting case in point. And that hunger is present in adults as well, which may help explain why so many adults read Harry Potter. Or again, to take a very different writer, Phillip Pullman, popular in the UK as a writer for teenagers. He's written a sort of anti-Christian Narnia cycle (The Golden Compass, The Subtle Knife and The Amber Spyglass)—and I do mean anti-Christian: deeply, passionately anti-Christian. It's a trilogy. Splendidly written; very exciting; and, ideologically, very much up the creek! But it does exactly this: it creates an imaginative world. That's why adult readers can be seen trying to half-conceal the title of the book as they read it on the train.

This relates to the argument you make in Lost Icons about how the loss of assumptions that once sustained our culture—assumptions about children, joy, repentance—has not diminished our hunger for them.

That's right. One reviewer of Lost Icons, a sympathetic reviewer, seemed a bit puzzled that I thought some of our problems could be addressed by having better drama in schools. That was a fair criticism in many ways; but I am concerned about good drama in schools—for the simple reason that schools ought to help us learn to manage a world that is filled with both danger and excitement.

I think we've suffered from an educational philosophy that has become more and more functionalist, and that more and more assumes that education's single task is to transfer "skills" from the possessor to the nonpossessor. With that educational philosophy, replacing teachers with information technology can sound quite plausible. But if that's not your philosophy of education—and it is emphatically not mine—then I can think of nothing more destructive and dispiriting than trying to concentrate on information technology as the provider of a primary education.

You're suggesting that the church might have something to say about how state-run schools might do their work. Can the church really can bring about significant sociocultural change? Some theologians in the U.S. would be nervous about that notion, because it's hard for the church to speak the language of the wider culture without abandoning its own idiom and its own convictions. Does that question just look very different in the United Kingdom than it does in the United States?

It does look different. Someone like Stanley Hauerwas poses some very hard questions for someone like me on this point. But the circumstances in the UK are

different: I can go into a prison or a school and speak from Christian conviction, with very few questions asked. That to me is very important. These are audiences that I am, in some sense, “authorized” to address. As to what effect it has—well, who knows? But as much as anything, it’s a way that the church can say, “We’re still here,” and that we have something distinctive to offer.

In Wales, we have an interesting balance: We don’t have an established church; we’re not a state church. But we have some of the memory of the established church. So for most people the language of the church is just strange enough to be interesting, but also just familiar enough not to be absolutely bizarre and threatening. That’s an interesting space to occupy, and I feel it’s worth working with it. What worries me a bit, however, is the bureaucratization, centralization, professionalization and political management that we in the UK are undergoing, just as much as—and in fact, on the model of—the U.S.

This conversation about the relationship of sacred and secular points to some of the questions being raised by the emerging Anglo-American theological school of Radical Orthodoxy—the school associated with the work of such people as John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. Your name has sometimes been associated with those writers. Do you find yourself in sympathy with them?

I have a very deep sympathy with their claim that the classical doctrinal scheme of catholic, orthodox Christianity is a real working map. They recognize it as an important resource, because it has been hammered out not in an idly abstract or politicized way, but as an attempt to make sense of—Irenaeus again—the idea that the human experience is somehow reflective of the image of God.

Doctrine has been hammered out in practice.

Yes. All those aspects of Radical Orthodoxy I applaud. I also very deeply applaud its challenge to the notion that there is no gap between creation and fall. For example, Milbank has pointed out that for a great many modern theologians, the fall is already built into creation—a hidden idea that violence is a necessary part of creation. Milbank insists that such a view can’t be right; and that, I think, is very important.

Radical Orthodoxy also offers an interesting engagement of the theology of the body: the significance of bodiliness, and therefore of time. And along with that, it is highly critical of our modern fear of being limited by time and by the body. It argues

that such limitation is not a curse; it's a gift. It allows you to live with real confidence in the world as a gift.

Some people would argue that, whatever the insights of Radical Orthodoxy, it's written in a cryptic academic code that few people can read; it needs to be "translated into English."

Well, I do sometimes wish that it could break out of its tribal idiom. But I do think some of its insights are being "translated," as you say. The movement is concerned about the primacy of peace over violence; it's concerned about the primacy of the sacred over the secular. I think it's perhaps a little bit too harsh a judgment on Radical Orthodoxy to say that it doesn't relate to the real church. At its best, it simply reminds the church of its mission.

Any reservations or disagreements with its perspective?

My reservation about Radical Orthodoxy, and my continuing, slight and amicable disagreement, concerns the tragic. Granted that violence isn't primary, it might still be going a bit too far and too fast to say that the church within history achieves the peace it speaks of. Some of the rhetoric of Radical Orthodoxy just seems to come a bit too fast; I think it's important to emphasize that the brokenness, the woundedness of the Christian body in history, at every level, just doesn't go away. But this is primarily a difference of emphasis; at the end of the day, not many of the people associated with Radical Orthodoxy would actually disagree—though Milbank is very critical of some of the ways that I use the word tragedy.

You would want to say that, while the church has many resources for peaceableness, it doesn't always tap into them very well?

And also that, historically, it has developed resources for diabolical unpeacefulness—which it does seem to tap into.

Because you're also a bishop, perhaps you have a day-to-day awareness of the church's failure to be peaceable.

I do suspect that has a little to do with it. The ministry of a bishop is always bound up with conflict. It's not defined by conflict; but because it's defined by the attempt to minister to the unity of Christ's calling in the church, it's necessarily involved in conflict. And sometimes the bishop's ministry is precisely to draw such conflict out

into the open so that it can be understood and resolved without resulting in destruction.

It presents a person with a mixture, a dizzying mixture sometimes, of responsibilities: being a teacher, a pastor and—well, prophet is a very slippery word, but someone whose job, occasionally, is to say, “now hold on a minute.” And also an administrator, negotiator, troubleshooter, peacemaker—sometimes troublemaker. It’s quite daunting, responding to all the challenges.

And as a bishop, you have opportunities to bring some of these complex theological insights into public view. Are there other writers who seem to be communicating profound theological material in an accessible way?

Two that come to mind are Angela West and James Alison. Both seem to me to be absolute exemplars: they achieve clarity without popularizing, and they write wonderfully. The writing is conversational, direct and very, very subtle.

Another way that this material gets into broader circulation is through sermons. Your own sermons often draw on whatever is happening in the world around you, even while probing profound theological questions. Can you say something about your own preparation process for preaching?

In preparing a sermon, I always want to be asking: How is my preaching going to bring people to a gladder and more grateful awareness of Jesus Christ, and of creation? How is this going to help people bring a distinctively Christ-centered focus to whatever they may encounter tomorrow? Sometimes I preach at big events; there, I try to steer away from just providing decorative words. I’m reminded of the words of William Stringfellow—a great hero of mine—to the effect that the clergy are too often seen as superfluous and ceremonial, brought in just to give a little bit of verbal decoration.

I had to preach earlier this year at a service where there were a large number of merchant bankers in the City of London. I preached about death—and how being acquainted with death is one of the marks of maturity and liberty. Somebody came up to me afterwards and said, “I can’t believe you just preached a sermon on death and failure to the corporate clientele of the City!”

It may have been just what they needed to hear.

Well, who knows? But I was trying to find something that wasn't just decorative.

The sermons that you've published as A Ray of Darkness always make some kind of reference to current events, to literature or to whatever people may be encountering in their day-to-day lives.

Again, it's a matter of not trying to preach to or for an abstract event. What is "the human condition"? One can't answer that question. What's the human condition of these people on this morning? Perhaps it's a human condition in which people's minds have been formed by the image on the front page of the papers yesterday and today, of a Catholic child weeping on the way to school, surrounded by Protestant loyalist demonstrators throwing rocks—and bombs, God help us. If you're going to preach, you can't ignore that. It's not that anything I say in church in the next few days will be bound to mention that; but you've got to be aware that it's part of what's in everyone's mind. And equally, the human condition, at this time and in this place, can be evoked by a television program, a play, a book that's being talked about. It has to be made concrete and specific.

So you might affirm Barth's remark that you "preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other"—but add perhaps a volume of Shakespeare?

Perhaps Shakespeare. Or W. H. Auden.

I like the counsel you offer in an essay titled "Theological Integrity," which invokes Joseph O'Leary's appreciation for a theology marked by "venture, slowness and strain." Those traits seem to characterize your work; could you give an example of how you try to embody that approach?

Obviously, the theology of God as Trinity has been very much in my mind over the years, as it has in yours. When I first started thinking about it I was very taken with the whole "social Trinity" model—God as, by definition, a communion of persons in relation—the Trinity as the perfect social structure, a model society. It seemed a wonderfully apt analogy. But in trying to think through that and to live with it, I find that I've got to rein in the urge to use it. The idea of the social Trinity is crying out, "Use me, use me!" And I have to say, "No, no. That's too easy, too fast."

Do you mean "use me" for solving some issue or problem?

For addressing some practical issue, yes. Providing a nice, easy theological gloss to a complex problem.

So we have an environmental crisis, for example, and we imagine that the social Trinity gives us “the answer.”

Exactly. I feel we need to hold back—remembering what the doctrine of the Trinity is, and what it’s not. It’s not a tidy description; it’s just the “least worst” way we’ve found of talking about something very disturbing and inexhaustible. And I suppose that’s why I’ve been trying for many years to write a book on the Trinity.

Your theology is very attentive to contemporary concerns, yet you regularly draw on figures from the early church, such as Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers. How did you become convinced of their relevance?

I came to the study of the ancient writers through their use in 20th-century theology—particularly in Eastern Orthodoxy and in Roman Catholic theologians like Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac. So I came to these writers by seeing them used in the context of contemporary discussion; consequently, I was saved from seeing the history of the early church as a compendium of councils and heresies. For me, it was what you might clumsily call “the history of spirituality.” So it’s related to Irenaeus’s statement about humans being the vision of God.

We all grew up with the slogan that “the past is a foreign country,” but the trouble is that we coupled that with a sort of paranoid chauvinism about foreign countries. Foreign countries are full of people speaking a bizarre lingo, they eat funny things, they think funny things, they do funny things. Now, most educated people recognize that it’s much more appropriate to treat foreign countries with respect and delight and surprise. But if we could treat the foreign country of the past with that same sort of delight, we’d get a long way forward.

It’s very easy to treat the past as the source of all our difficulties. For example, Augustine is often made a scapegoat for all sorts of evils.

Augustine is the school whipping boy, I think. People look around at Christianity, with all its imperfections, and imagine that “somebody must be responsible for messing up this wonderful Christian idea which Jesus (and I!) had.” Augustine, because he’s a big figure, gets a lot of the blame; but we would do better to get away from the blame issues. Other Christians don’t have to be right about everything in order to be

Christians, or for us to learn something from them. One might want to say: “Fine: Augustine (in common with most of his contemporaries) held this view (of women, or whatever). What did Augustine not hold in common with his contemporaries? What’s particularly Augustine about him, as opposed to just any old patriarchal authoritarian?” And it’s that specificity, I think, that does take time to pursue.

Let’s turn to another question that has required a good deal of “venture, slowness and strain” of late. You’ve been a strong advocate of a more inclusive or “affirming” account of gay and lesbian sexuality in Christian theology and in the practices of the church. Can you say something about how you arrived at your stance on this question, and about some of its theological contours?

When I first taught Christian ethics, I was quite happy to teach a very traditionalist approach; but when challenged on this question, I found it extremely difficult to mesh the traditionalist account with what some entirely responsible and spiritually mature gay Christians I knew were saying about themselves. And that’s where my confidence rather broke down. I also became more and more uneasy about our tendency to exclude from the discussion people’s own description of themselves. The church needs to get out of the mind-set that says, “I will tell you who you really are.” That’s always a dangerous thing for one person to say to another, and a particularly dangerous thing for one Christian to say to another. So much of the anger, the frustrations and the hurt of gay and lesbian Christians comes from having been told that someone else is in a better position to tell them who they “really” are.

The Anglican Communion has now made a commitment, though a bit reluctantly, to listening to the experience of gay and lesbian people. I think that’s very important. It’s one reminder that—as in the case of women, and people of other ethnic backgrounds, and even, for that matter, in the interfaith dialogue—that we have to begin with what people are actually saying about themselves, rather than what we think we know about them. In the Middle Ages, the Crusaders thought they knew what Islam was about: “Christians worship God; Muslims worship a pagan god called Mahmood. We know they do, and we’re not going to be bothered to find out anything further.” But at the end of the day, that approach is simply sterile—completely useless and deeply un-Christian.

I’m not suggesting that self-accounts are the only things that matter, or that they are ultimately determinative. But you’re not going to have a theologically serious

discussion, unless a person's self-description is heard and honored. And so you just have to tackle the question: If the life led by a lesbian or gay Christian looks, in certain significant respects, holy according to most of the criteria that are used, that presents a serious challenge to the traditionalist argument.

How have you gone about developing conversations—and I know there have been many—with people holding views on the subject radically different from yours? What are the most effective forms of dialogue about such questions?

Some of the most productive discussions have been about the Bible itself—some quite protracted and quite roundabout discussions. Only through the practice of reading the Bible together, I think, can you come to appreciate how the other person relates to it. Otherwise, we talk past each other: the “liberal” calls the “conservative” a fundamentalist, and the conservative responds that the liberal isn't taking the Bible's authority seriously. The only thing that's going to get past that deadlock is actually sitting down together with a few chapters of Romans. It's in that kind of shared engagement that the stereotypes are bound to break down. We ought to be doing an awful lot more of that; otherwise our perspectives are clouded by caricatures.

I can't conclude without asking about your interest in poetry and drama. When did you first start writing poetry of your own?

I was very enthusiastic about Dylan Thomas as a teenager and so of course I wrote imitation Dylan Thomas poems, as every self-respecting Welsh teenager had to do. I wrote some slightly more serious stuff when I was an undergraduate, and I published a few things here and there in student magazines. But I think it was really engaging at some length with Auden's poetry in my early 20s that gave me a bit more of a feeling of how disciplined you had to be to write. That was a bit of a turning point. He and, I suppose, Geoffrey Hill were two big enthusiasms in my early 20s. R. S. Thomas, of course, was another inescapable presence in Wales, and elsewhere; his overall vision of the tragic, his rather bleak vision—I could relate to that. But I found Thomas much less use as a model or an inspiration: his is a very, very distinctive idiom, very spare, very deliberately awkward and fortunately not imitable.

I know that you have also found T. S. Eliot significant as a poet and as a theological source.

I spent a long time mulling over the Four Quartets in my 20s and 30s. Ultimately it seems what he's doing is quite the opposite of what he's sometimes said to be doing: he is giving a very deep valuation of the self in time, an incarnational picture, with all the ambivalence that incarnation entails. And what I love about the Quartets is precisely what their title indicates: they're meant to be different voices. Some of those voices are wonderfully lyrical; Eliot has this Shakespearean facility for the memorable compressed lyric—"the dove descending" being an obvious example. And then he will quite deliberately scramble it, as if you pressed a "scramble" button, and you'll go into an abstract, clumsy mode as if to say, as he does say at one point in the Quartets: "That was a way of putting it." Don't listen to the music—just shuffle, clatter, and hear the words going around— don't hang onto that. And that alternation between the lyrical and the fragmented, I think, takes you so close to the edge, and to the niche of real poetry.

Shakespeare's name has come up a couple of times. Can you say a bit about how he became important to your theological outlook?

Above all, in reading King Lear at school. It's a very non-Christian play—or so everybody says. Shakespeare quite deliberately takes us to a non-Christian, alien setting—to a world which is both ancient Britain and a kind of parodic version of Elizabethan society. (It's every bit as surreal, in that respect, as Planet of the Apes.) And the play asks (as Flannery O'Connor—to take another writer—so often asks): in a world like that, what would grace look like? And what's the absence of grace like? What is it that poisons humanity? What's left of humanity when you take away the props? As Lear says on the heath: "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art."

Well, is he? No, actually. But the low point of the play is where you have the