Anglicans and others: The TLS's Rupert Shortt

by Amy Frykholm in the October 6, 2009 issue

Rupert Shortt is religion editor of the Times Literary Sup plement *in London* (*he also covers the fields of Latin America and Spain for the* TLS) *and author of two recent biographies*: Benedict XVI: Commander of the Faith (*2006*) *and* Rowan's Rule (*2008*), *a profile of Rowan Williams*, *archbishop of Canterbury*. *Shortt has also collected a series of interviews with theologians*, God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation (*2005*).

How would you describe the state of Christianity in the U.K.?

Until very recently, the story was one of steep decline. But it has become a lot more complicated over the past five years or so. One factor has been the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Poles since Poland joined the European Union. Mass attendance has rocketed.

Furthermore, we need to make a sharp distinction between London and anywhere else in the U.K. London has become an even more cosmopolitan city than New York. As much as 40 percent of the population are immigrants. Most of the faith traditions are doing rather well as a result.

While it has caused grinding of the teeth in some quarters and indifference in others, the Roman Catholics now form the U.K.'s largest group of churchgoers. Meanwhile, anti-Catholic prejudice has declined, partly because of ecumenical progress, but also because of secularization.

Secularization seems to take a different form in the U.K. from that in the U.S.

Secularization has a very long history in this country. This has a lot to do with the identification of Anglicanism with the establishment. One of the reasons that the churches have done so well in America is that they have not had the taint of establishment. Churches have consequently been more entrepreneurial. The Church

of England was badly damaged by the close relationship between church and state, and by its failure to take account of demographic shifts arising from the Industrial Revolution. In consequence, the nonconformists were able to gain wide support among the working classes.

How did you come to write a biography of Rowan Williams so early in his tenure as archbishop of Canterbury?

I wrote a profile of Williams for the *TLS*. It was an open secret in the summer of 2002 that he would be appointed archbishop, so the *TLS* took a chance—and I wrote a piece that would be ready to be shoehorned in at a moment's notice. That led to an invitation from a publisher to write a guide to Williams's theology for the general reader. It was felt that he was more admired than understood, and we wanted to demystify him.

I had mentioned to an editor that I would like to do a biography of Williams at some stage of his career, perhaps after his retirement. The editor pointed out that the wheels of publishing turn more quickly these days. We wondered if the Lambeth Conference in 2008 might not be Williams's main moment. If so, then 2008 would be the high-water mark of his tenure. So I went to see Williams with two questions: Would he agree to my doing this? And would he agree to my doing it now? He said yes to both.

What surprised you the most as you researched Williams's biography?

One of the things that surprised me was how candidly the people in Wales spoke about him. Their praise for his personal qualities was balanced by a sense that he had performed less well as a manager, administrator and judge of character. His former colleagues tended to think that his reluctance to bang the table meant that he was manipulated by some "unsavory characters." He was also thought to have made a number of appointments that proved to be unwise. At the root of all this was his tendency to side with the underdog and to give people second chances.

You can see the problem this creates. If I hurt you, you are free to forgive me. But if I hurt a third party, it may be your duty to call the police. In the view of his critics, Williams tended to give the benefit of the doubt to people who went on to cause considerable trouble in a diocese.

How does that translate into his work as the archbishop?

The question his critics ask is, given this avoidance of conflict, has he been too reluctant to face down conservatives? That’s one of the questions on which my book hinges, but I don’t think it is my place to give a firm answer—not least because I am myself a Roman Catholic. I trust readers to make up their own minds, and in any case the answer you supply will depend a good deal on your prior assumptions about ecclesiology.

To a liberal, Anglicanism’s genius springs from its openness. Like the proverbial Australian farm, it has many wells but few fences. Disagreement over second-order issues need not impair the bonds of affection uniting the communion. But conservatives feel vindicated on the same ground. The church has been muddling along for too long, they say, and its structures now need to be streamlined. Unity was stretched to the breaking point over the consecration of women bishops; it is now being stretched beyond the breaking point by the ordination of noncelibate gay clergy. If the communion is going to change its mind on a contentious issue such as sexuality, then this should not happen until there is a critical mass of support for reform.

Williams famously expressed pro-gay views before his appointment to Canterbury. But he does not believe that he can impose these views on the church by fiat. So has Williams been the statesman or merely the man who blinked first? There isn’t a simple answer to that. But you could certainly argue that some words Williams once wrote about the allegedly lily-livered Pope Paul VI have proved prophetic in unintended ways. Figures like Paul, he suggested, “are destined neither for charismatic triumph, nor for the overtly noble and tragic role of the straightforward martyr: they carry the unresolved tensions of their communities in their own persons, and so guarantee that uncomfortable truths are not buried. There are worse ways of leading churches—given some of Saint Paul’s remarks about the contradictions of being an apostle.”