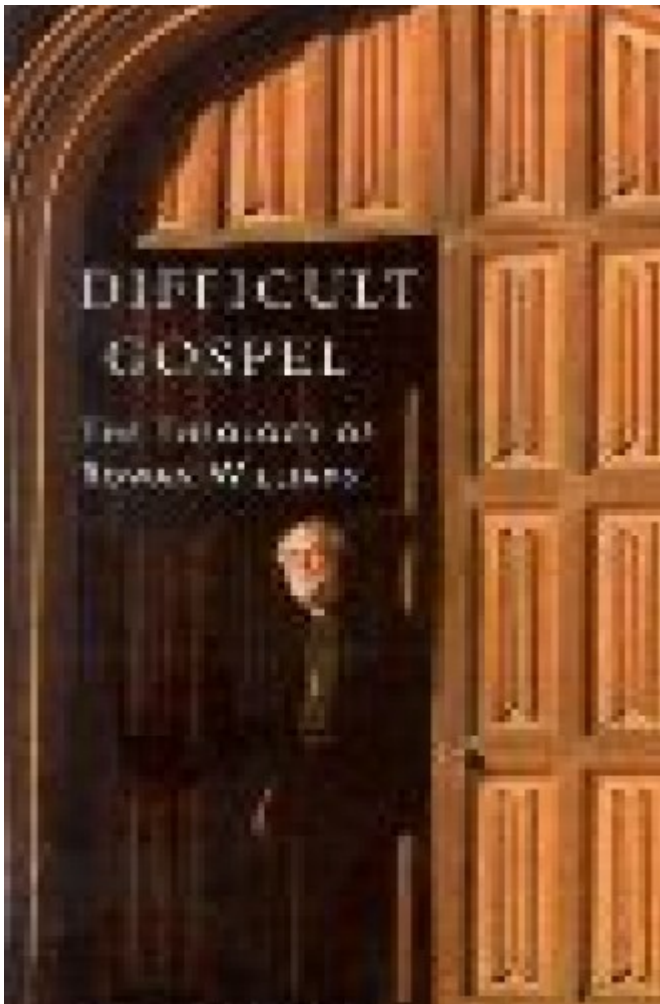


Difficult Gospel/The Truce of God/Where God Happens/Why Study the Past?

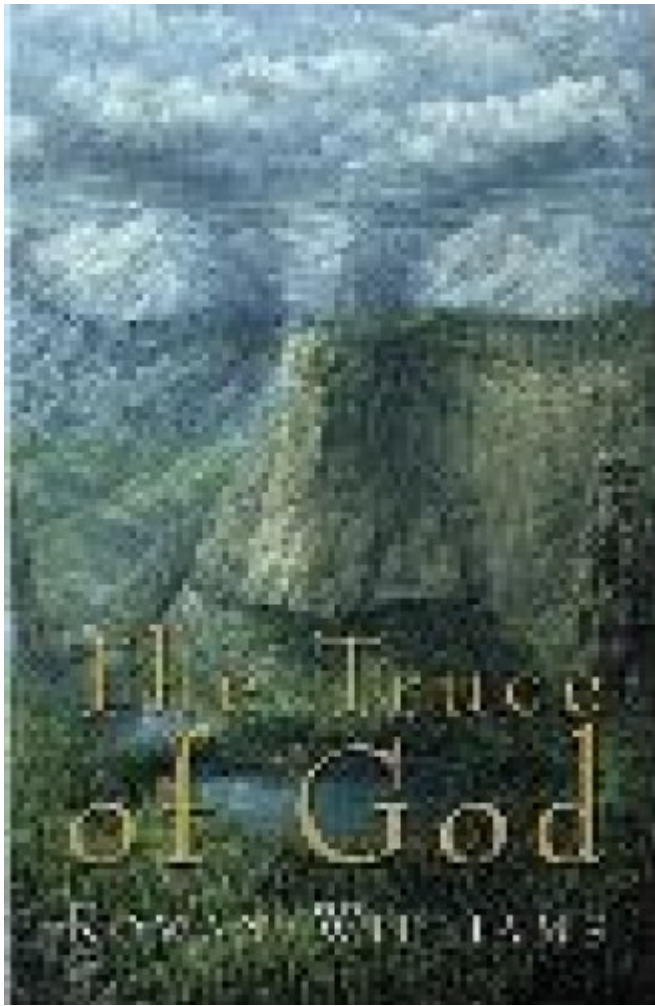
reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [June 13, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams

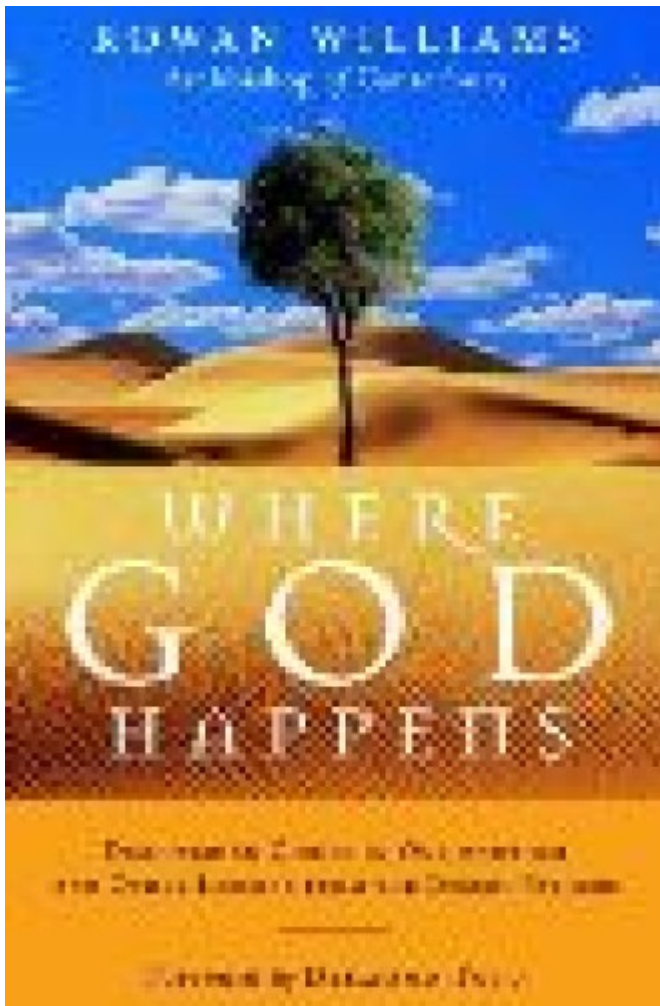
Mike Higton
Church Publishing



The Truce of God

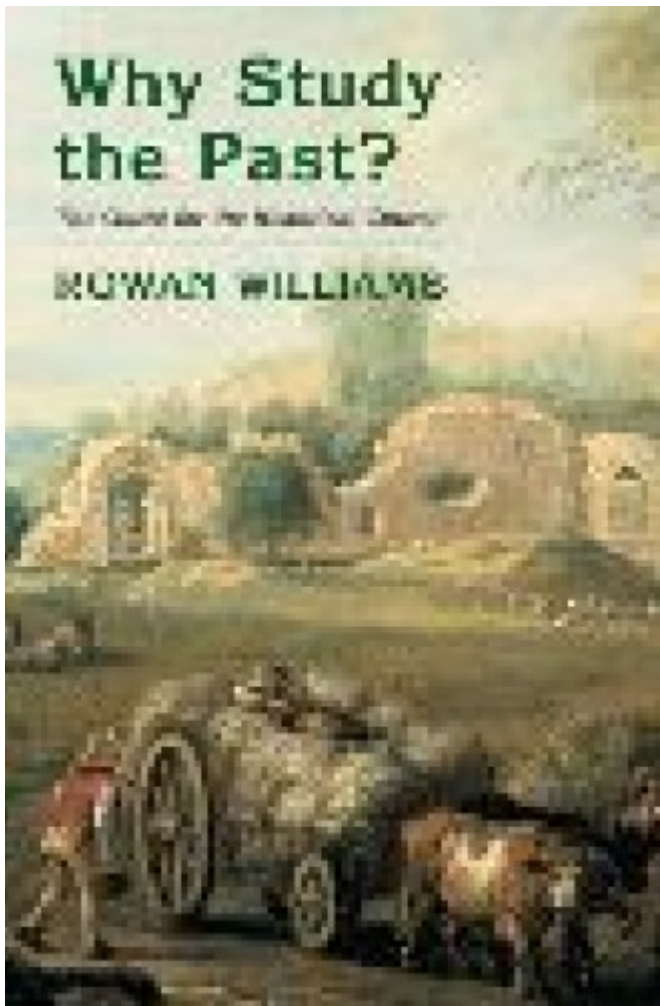
Rowan Williams

Eerdmans



Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another

Rowan Williams
New Seeds



Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church

Rowan Williams
Eerdmans

It is a happy coincidence that the most important Protestant theologian in the world is also the best.

That description will immediately be met by disavowal and protest, not least from Rowan Williams himself, since theology is not, for Williams, the sort of activity in which we can pronounce winners and losers. His conservative opponents within the Church of England will also demur because they are steamed that he has not sufficiently disciplined North American churches for their moves to accept homosexuals. Williams and others will also object to his being called the most important Protestant theologian, because the archbishop of Canterbury is not some sort of Protestant pope but a first among equals of Anglican primates around the

world.

These replies add weight to my claim. Since conservatives and liberals both want to win the Anglican debate on homosexual practice, they're both frustrated with Williams. His lack of power to impose his will, even if he wished, points to the need for patient discernment in place of power politics on this issue. Williams is ideally suited to lead such painstaking listening for God and to each other. We have other theologians, but they tend to shy away from such thankless and messy work as church administration, especially when the church is in crisis, preferring to squirrel themselves away in academic institutions. There are other important bishops, but they tend to lack the academic rigor of the former holder of the Lady Margaret Chair in Divinity at Oxford. Other significant figures are writing about peace, sex and childrearing, but who among them can match Williams's literary elegance or wisdom? These talents meet in a man who embodies Evagrius's dictum, "A theologian is one who prays."

When I was designated to chauffeur Williams during one of his visits to the U.S. some years ago, he got in the car, gazed intently at me, and said, "Tell me about your work." He wasn't just being courteous. He saw me as a gift, a chance to discern more of the living Christ, who calls all of us to judgment and grace.

These characteristics are why Williams is so important in the Anglicans' current upheavals and for other churches primed for similar fights. For Williams is not a mere referee or church bureaucrat trying to keep the bishops of both New Hampshire and Nigeria in communion with each other, if not happy. He is a priest, charged with offering to the church the demanding Lord Jesus, who calls people to peace rather than ease. That there are bitter fights within the church is no surprise to Williams, who has written highly praised monographs on the early church's battles over heresy. His passion is to see that the church fights in ways that enhance its faithfulness. That is, that each of its various sides will seek not merely to win, as in ordinary power politics, but to work to discern the face of Christ in its opponents, and so be converted to more genuine and rigorous discipleship.

If sheer productivity can bring about this result, Williams is doing more than his part. The volumes reviewed here are only a sampling of Williams's recent published work. The results of more quotidian episcopal responsibilities such as preparing sermons and addresses wind up on his Web site, inviting wonder at how on earth he does all he does. Even more laudable is the unified voice with which the archbishop writes on

a diversity of topics. As Mike Higton makes clear in *Difficult Gospel*, there is a christological center to Williams's work, whether he is writing about fourth-century heresy, war and peace in the Middle Ages, or the present-day educational system in Britain. Perhaps this is because, as Higton notes, there is something "*preliminary* about much of it," as though Williams wants to set the terms for debates rather weigh in on one side or the other. Higton's book succeeds because he manages to give a feeling for Williams's larger vision.

In Higton's words, Williams sees Jesus' lordship as that of a "riddler." He constantly holds Jesus before our eyes and refuses to let us think we have him figured out. Jesus is "God's way of loving the world," and there is no God other than or behind this One with whom we have to do—as Williams learned from the fourth-century debates. In Jesus, God loves us without condition but not without demands. Namely, we must be called out of our comfortable, self-assuring ways of describing God, the world and ourselves, toward One who is crucified and raised and who is always drawing us closer to himself.

The church, then, is made up of "billions of diverse Son-like, Father-directed lives," and its theological history is nothing other than a "vast living exegesis of the Bible." Therefore, to know all there is to know about God, we must also attend to the astonishing variety of previous responses to God that make up the body of Christ. In *Where God Happens*, Williams comments that he loves to tell wide-eyed confirmands that they are called to do something no one else in the body of Christ can do. He further demonstrates the preciousness of individual lives in his work, for he cannot speak of Jesus without also speaking of the myriad of fascinating responses to Jesus in history and today. Without every personal response the whole vision would be less.

This rigorously trinitarian vision of church history and contemporary theology is not at all ratcheted down for interreligious dialogue or public-policy commentary. Rather, Christians engage in such conversation precisely as those "seeking for the formation of children of God after the likeness of Christ." This is not intellectual imperialism, as it might seem, for in these conversations our vision of Christ will be enlarged and challenged. We know Jesus fully only in relation to all actual or possible reflections of him in the lives of others, so we must be unendingly open to others in all their particularity. Jesus' insistence on openness to others is also the grounds for Williams's political vision. Christians must not kill because we would then be deprived of the one witness to Christ that that person would have offered; Christians

are eager for the reconciliation of enemies because they themselves are being reconciled to God.

Higton's description of Williams's theology and politics is borne out in these important works by the archbishop. In *The Truce of God*, Williams describes the suggestion by the monks at Cluny that the feudal landlords in the area should restrict their warfare against one another to three days a week, Monday through Wednesday! There's a ridiculousness to the suggestion that is "very like the church somehow." The idea was at least a recognition of the absurdity of Christians killing Christians.

For Williams, the very existence of the church suggests the ridiculousness of warfare generally, for the church is a universal (or catholic) society of those who are drawn from across conventional social boundaries to God's peace in Jesus and who, therefore, make peace with others. Williams contrasts this vision with that of the cold war and the "war on terror," in which Western cultures describe themselves as being forced against their will into terrible but unavoidable acts of brutality.

The assumption of one's own innocence and the ascription of all violence to the enemy is a reversal of the truce God enacts with humanity in Jesus, in which we do violence to God on the cross and receive God's peace in return. An assumption of total innocence, Williams contends, and the will to inflict violence when that innocence is challenged, reflects an appalling lack of maturity. Children pretend to be innocent. Adults, especially those who govern nations, know better—or ought to.

In *Where God Happens*, Williams describes the monastic movement in the desert of ancient Christian Egypt as a "laboratory of prayer." The desert fathers' insistence on the importance of laying bare all one's thoughts before a confessor exemplifies the process through which all Christians must pass: a process of learning to give up control over other people by pursuing "quiet personal exposure" of our own failure. The desert fathers can set us free from thinking that "our success is always about someone else's loss." Echoes of contemporary church fights resound loudly when Williams writes that "a church without some quite demanding forms of long-term spiritual discipline . . . is going to be a frustrating place to live."

Learning to pray like the desert fathers can give me "a heart of stone toward myself, a heart of flesh toward others, a heart of flame toward God," in the words of Anglican monastic reformer R. M. Benson. Williams compares his endless succession

of episcopal duties—glamorous as they may seem to some—to the mind-numbingly boring basket weaving the desert ascetics engaged in for hours on end. Such rote work taught the fathers “how to face boredom without terror” and how to discover Christ precisely in “unmagical settings” of desertlike repetition—which are not unlike the settings we find ourselves in, from airport lounges to fast-food restaurants, from inner-city parishes to episcopal palaces. We are to be married to the humdrum work we are engaged in just as Christ is married in his humanity to his church, rather than imagining or trying to engineer a flight to a more pleasant place.

Of this collection of Williams’s works, the most important is *Why Study the Past?* Others would turn such a topic into a bone-dry lecture, but Williams’s christological vision is thrilling. He speaks of twin dangers in historical investigation. One is the enlistment of historical figures as votes for our side, as though they were not at all different from us—a common conservative temptation. The other is a more liberal dismissal of the historical as a series of failed attempts to be like us. Jesus’ earliest followers knew themselves to be called out from their world, and they were questioned by their world to the point of martyrdom. These “resident aliens” insisted that the coming world to which they bore witness is God’s own creation made new, and so is somehow continuous with the old. History must reflect both the disruption and the harmony of God’s action in the world.

Good historical inquiry, then, is not greatly different from the practice of contemplation Williams describes in *Where God Happens*: we must encounter Christians in their strangeness and attend to them “not in a way that removes their difficulty, sometimes their real obnoxiousness, but as enlarging our awareness of Christ.” History is an irreducibly moral affair, for “an attitude of mind that is not capable of engaging in recognition with the past of the Church is also one that is likely to be closed off from what is different or challenging in the present.”

In an age of tired labels, Williams’s theological vision manages to be orthodox without being conservative. That is, his Christology is grounded in historical inquiry that does not elide strangeness but attends to it in all its particularity. Insistence on the centrality of Jesus does not bring deafness to other voices but enhances attention to them. A claim about Christ as Lord of history is not a rallying cry to defeat enemies but a call to imitate Jesus by engaging in difficult listening to enemies and costly love of them. This is precisely what our churches need. If only we have ears to hear.