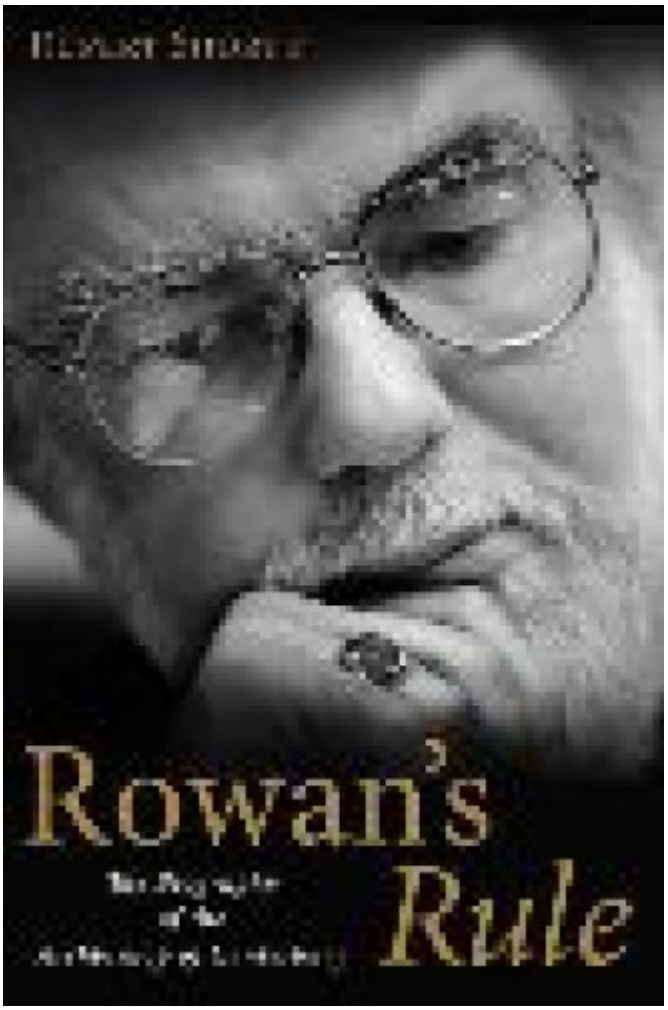
# Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury

reviewed by Samuel Wells in the August 11, 2009 issue

## In Review




### Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury

Rupert Shortt
Eerdmans

The wise Anglican priest who instructed me in how to go about hearing confessions closed his lesson with some memorable words: “I’ve never thought less of someone after hearing their confession.”

If only it were generally the same for biographies. Some people’s lives have a priestly dimension. That is to say, their struggles have an elevated quality—they are struggles on behalf of us all; their example inspires far beyond the circle of people who directly identify with their circumstances. In short, when the bell tolls for them it tolls for us too—somehow even more than when it tolls for us alone. Rowan Williams is such a person. And the astonishing thing about this biography—this confession, if you like—is that Williams emerges from it with a reputation that is, if anything, more positive than it already was.

It’s a commonplace that Williams’s job is one you wouldn’t wish on your most antagonistic blogger. What is the archbishop of Canterbury for? He’s there to represent the life of faith, more specifically the historic catholic and reformed Christian faith, at the heart of the English nation; to be a figurehead guiding the Church of England, its bishops, its institutions and its people; and to be a unifying influence on the worldwide Anglican Communion. When Williams was ap pointed, there was widespread joy that here was a man who could do these three things like no one else imaginable—a person who epitomized the grace, wisdom, faith and generosity to which Anglicanism aspires. And yet his first seven years in office have seen him beleaguered by controversial events, a constant demand for him to exercise executive power, and a standoff of mutual incomprehension between his office and the secular press.

Williams has an awesome range of interests and fields of expertise, carries a prodigious weight of projections, and has produced a formidable shelf of published writings and speeches. Many people in the Church of England and a great number of others around the world have oft-polished opinions on his sanctity, naïveté, duplicity or tragedy, depending on their point of view. As a former undergraduate student of Williams, a seasoned religion journalist and a highly competent theological communicator, Rupert Shortt is perhaps the ideal person to set about the task of translating public record and private judgment regarding Williams into an ordered narrative.

Shortt’s story is absorbing, well paced, even-handed and acute. His account is true to the man and interesting to the reader throughout. Occasionally he defers too much to the retrospective judgments of talking heads who lack their subject’s depth and stature; sometimes he simply rehearses conventional criticisms of Williams’s views (on economics or war and peace) without acknowledging that being unpopular, unconventional and even impractical doesn’t necessarily make you wrong; more forgivably he slips into the common assumption that Williams’s statements prior to 2002 can be judged as those of a future archbishop, even though they were of course made by someone who did not regard himself as such. But these are minor criticisms. Shortt maintains a steady hand and a throbbing plot, while mastering a dizzying subject. His treatments of the selection and then rejection of Jeffrey John as bishop of Reading, the election of V. Gene Robin son as bishop of New Hampshire, and the shari‘a law speech are all marvelously done.

What emerges is a portrait of a man of scintillating intelligence, engaging humility and a profound, even lonely, self-confidence, who has truly achieved what many despise, few understand and even fewer thought possible: the embodiment of a truly theological form of leadership. The despisers include those who believe it is Williams’s job to cling to the church’s historical social role and theological certainty for as long as possible, and those who believe he’s supposed to be a dynamic CEO who barks snappy messages, issues motivational videos, knocks heads together and generally streamlines the church’s image. Those who don’t understand include those who cannot disentangle authority from abusive power, and those who assume that the point of being in charge is to drive through your own pet agenda until you’re kicked out.

But here we have the story of a man who deeply believes in Jesus and deeply believes in the church. The Lambeth Conference of 2008—largely devoid of divisive resolutions and designed instead to be a genuine meeting of souls, minds and hearts—is the prime exhibit of his political philosophy. It is all about the exercise of authority. Williams exercises authority by speaking to God on behalf of the Anglican Communion and, as best he understands it (which is better than almost anyone else), speaking to the communion and the listening world on behalf of God. Prayer is the center of his politics. His roles in guiding his flock are to seek the common mind of his people and to model a form of attentive but courageous dialogue with the issues and people in whom Christ is made flesh and the Spirit is speaking today.

What Williams stubbornly, persistently and relentlessly refuses to do is to become an executive leader who charges forward fueled by nothing but the strength of his own intuition and armed only with his own self-righteousness. The result is, from those who seek such leadership, scorn and misunderstanding. But having read this book—a detailed and sympathetic review of an extended experiment in theologically considered authority—I cannot think of another figure, in church or world, who ever embarked on such an extraordinary program of servant leadership.