

Luminaries: Twenty Lives that Illuminate the Christian Way

by Rowan Williams

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Reviewed by *Harry Oldmeadow*

‘The Christian Way’? A large and slippery subject. The ways in which it is understood will vary, sometimes wildly, depending on the vantage point from which it is considered. Imagine we ask the following to articulate their understanding of ‘the Christian way’: an Orthodox monk, a Ugandan farmer, a Mississippi fundamentalist, a Scandinavian Calvinist, a Latin American exponent of ‘liberation theology’, an Ethiopian Copt, a Mormon, a Samoan nun. The divergences will widen if we roam through time as well as space. Beyond the centrality of Christ there’s not a lot we can take for granted as common ground. What’s on offer here is a series of ruminations on the question by Rowan Williams, Welshman, scholar, poet, theologian, Archbishop of Canterbury, Master of Magdalene College, and life peer (‘Baron Williams of Oystermouth’ no less!).

Twenty short pieces, many of them starting life as sermons, addresses, commemorations, or literary musings. Each focuses on a particular figure but none offer a rounded portrait or even so much as a biographical sketch. Just jottings which prompt Williams to isolate some aspect of the subject’s life or thought in order to tease out a particular theme or motif which bears on his larger subject. An example. One of Williams’ exemplars of ‘the Christian Way’ is William Wilberforce, the tireless political campaigner who did so much to end the hideous British slave trade. Williams’ short essay tells us nothing we don’t already know about Wilberforce’s biography. Rather, he singles out for further reflection Wilberforce’s conception of the relation between public life

and Christian morality, and his understanding of both the imperatives and the limits of the state's moral accountability, if one may put it that way. After carefully pointing out that Wilberforce was never in favour of imposing moral codes by way of statute, he goes on to identify the motive force of Wilberforce's campaign:

... if the state enacts or perpetuates in the corporate life of the nation what is directly contrary to Christian understanding of God's purpose for humanity – if it endorses slavery, for instance – the Christian is bound to protest and to argue in the public sphere for change... This is something that implicates every citizen, irrespective of his or her personal choices. There is a difference between matters of personal choice and those other matters which, because they help to determine the economy of a whole society, involve everyone who benefits from that economy. So Christian activism is justified primarily when the state is responsible for... compromising the morality of all its citizens (p.85).

Wilberforce's campaign is fuelled not only by a compassionate concern for the suffering and humiliation of the slaves, but by a sense that the whole of British society is soiled by its collusion in the evil trade. I highlight this passage for a couple of reasons: it gives a fair sample of Williams' plain and accessible style, and it foregrounds one of his abiding concerns not only in this compilation but throughout his own life, an on-going inquiry into the role of Christian institutions and individuals in the public life of the nation. For many Australian readers the passage above will resonate in respect to such issues as climate change, the treatment of refugees or responses to the current pandemic, issues which confront us with questions about the shadowy

boundaries between ‘personal choices’, the ‘determination of the economy’ and the obligations of the Christian citizen.

The range of Williams’ interests and sympathies can be gauged by his choice of subjects who flit across the stage in chronological order: St. Paul the Apostle, St. Alban, the two St. Augustines (of Hippo and Canterbury), two martyrs of the English Reformation (Cranmer and Tyndale), John Milton, three mystics (Meister Eckhart, St. Teresa of Avila, Sergei Bulgakov), three 19th century social reformers (Wilberforce, Dickens, Florence Nightingale), and four 20th century figures whose Christian commitments led to an early and sacrificial death (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Edith Stein, Etty Hillesum, Oscar Romero — to whom we might add Simone Weil). It is only meet and right that the Archbishop should have a particular interest in his predecessors at Canterbury, four of whom appear in the book: Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Cranmer and Michael Ramsey (the last the very model of what I imagine a good Anglican Churchman to be, as is Williams himself). Any alert reader will not fail to notice that this constellation of ‘luminaries’ includes three Jewish women who converted to Christianity though Simone Weil was never formally baptized, feeling that she needed to ‘stay out in the cold’ in solidarity with the majority of humankind who were not enfolded in the Church. Williams himself has been strenuously engaged in efforts to cleanse English public life of the deep-rooted scourge of anti-Semitism.

Well, what is ‘the Christian way’? Williams never offers us a capsule answer to this question but it is implicit throughout. The key to the Christian way, a perpetual journey rather than a destination, is love. But this love, far from being simply an emotional disposition, a certain arrangement, as it were, of one’s feelings, stems from an *awareness* of Divine Love which in turn informs and governs our dealings with the whole created order, most immediately the rest of humankind. Although he nowhere says so we can assume that the author would insist on the *indivisibility* of Christ’s two Great Commandments,

thus averting the pitfall of imagining that we can fully love our fellow humans without loving God or, more absurdly, of asserting that the Christian love of God might somehow short-change or defraud our neighbours. There are good reasons, adumbrated in *Luminaries*, as to why the first commandment must take precedence. Divine Love is dramatized and embodied in the life and Passion of Christ who was and is ‘the face of God turned towards man, and the face of Man turned towards God’. (This felicitous formulation comes from the French Benedictine monk, Father Henri Le Saux, who spent the last twenty-five years of his life in India where he became known as Swami Abhishiktananda.) In their various ways all of the wayfarers within Williams’ purview testify to these fundamental Christian verities to which the author himself has devoted his own life.

Rowan Williams, particularly during his tenure as leader of the Anglican Communion, has been a controversial figure, and has frequently been attacked both for being too ‘liberal’ and ‘modern’, and too ‘conservative’ and ‘traditional’. Always a good sign when you’re under attack from several different directions simultaneously! It would be ill-considered to hazard any assessment of Williams on the basis of this modest and slender book alone which comprises a series of sermons and occasional addresses, not a genre which allows his many talents free rein. More often than not Williams adheres to the admirable principle that a good sermon is a short sermon (from which it does not follow that a short sermon is a good sermon ... but most of these are). Williams is a person of immense erudition, of deep but lightly-worn learning; he is a formidable theologian with a sensibility and cast of mind both literary and philosophical. His outlook might be characterized as a mystically-inflected and socially engaged Christian humanism. A casual reader of the present volume might easily sell him short. We need to understand the provenance of these pieces which are necessarily pitched at a level which makes them accessible to all and sundry. If we want to discover Williams as a

high-octane intellectual we must turn elsewhere; his book on Dostoevsky, one of the most profound of Christian thinkers, might be a good place to start (*Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction*, 2008). Like Dostoevsky, Williams is deeply concerned with a Christian conception of freedom and suffering, with the existential implications of the Beatitudes, and with Christ's message about 'the insulted and the injured'.

For Williams religion is not an end in itself but a means, an indispensable guide on the journey to the deepest understanding of our condition and of the human vocation which, properly understood, cannot be divorced from our relationship with God. He never falls prey to sentimental religiosity and would no doubt endorse Martin Buber's dictum that 'It is far more comfortable to have to do with religion than with God.' Williams also steers clear of two degradations which have disfigured Christianity in modern times: the vaporous compromises and corrosive 'demythologizing' of a religious 'liberalism' in which 'anything goes', and the barren ossifications and censorious moralism of a rearguard religious fundamentalism, today on unattractive display in many quarters. Williams' vision of Christianity is both sterner and more supple.

Whilst sometimes frustrated by the inevitable limitations of a compilation of pieces written at different times for a variety of purposes, but always constrained by the author's need to speak briefly to a 'general audience', I am glad to have been given some glimpses into the spiritual personalities of a cross-section of Christians across the centuries, and to share the insights of one of the more engaging and thoughtful Christian leaders of recent times. As Williams is best known as a Churchman it is perhaps appropriate to end with a passage which signals something of his vision of the 'body of Christ':

The deepest unity of the body is created by Christ's own embrace without reservation of the appalling suffering, the helplessness and

voicelessness, the guilt, the frustration, the self-doubt of human beings, so as to infuse into it his own divine compassion... It is an embrace offered to all, including those who are trapped in their own violence and inhumanity... (p.141).

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