

## **Lectures in Contemporary Anglicanism**

**George Whitefield College, Cape Town, May 2014**

### **Credo: Shadow and Substance in Contemporary Anglicanism**

'They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.'  
Jeremiah 8:11

#### **Lecture 2**

We saw in my first lecture that there is a deeply ingrained pragmatism in the central structures of the Anglican Communion and the corporate response to the threat of institutional division after the 1998 Lambeth Conference was to emphasise process rather than principle. Listening, conversation and dialogue took on an almost constitutive significance, with Canterbury strategically positioned as the middle ground. From an institutional perspective, Rowan Williams was therefore definitely the man for the moment as his theological style (we cannot really call it a system) provided an underlying rationale and intellectual respectability.

#### **The Threat to Truth**

It is a characteristic of Dr William's writing that he will outline what appear to be liberal and conservative alternatives, neither portrayed as particularly inviting, then offer us a third way which seems to avoid the difficulties of both. A typical example is found in his essay 'Is there a Christian Sexual Ethic' where he concludes:

Our main question about how to lead our sexual lives should be neither 'Am I keeping the rules?' nor 'Am I being sincere and non-hurtful?' but 'How much am I prepared for this to signify' <sup>1</sup>

Here we see an instinctive Hegelianism in which the answer rarely lies in an 'either or' choice, but somewhere in a dialectically derived middle. While much of Dr Williams' writing expresses great wariness about systematization, it is in the light of Hegel that we begin to see a shape which might otherwise be lacking. His biographer Rupert Shortt notes the paradox that 'a theologian renowned

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams *Open to Judgement* (London: DLT, 2002) p167

for wariness about intellectual systems has drunk deeply from the well of one of philosophy's supreme systematians'<sup>2</sup> and it is not too difficult to see why.

For such an intellectually minded Archbishop faced with a deeply divided Church and Communion, the attraction of Hegelian dialectic must have been well nigh irresistible; the opposition of concepts in thesis and antithesis to produce a new synthesis, which in turn generates a further antithesis and so on, seems to offer the possibility of a kind of coherence without the need for the institutionally risky consequences of resolution and closure. All that is required is to persuade everyone that our essential identity as a church lies in staying at the table, in pursuing a process rather than having to agree on propositions. In other words, ecclesial identity is found in being conversational rather than confessional.<sup>3</sup>

The need to deploy this dialectical approach became pressing during 2003. First there was a major crisis in the Church of England when Rowan Williams gave in to pressure and forced his long term friend, Canon Jeffery John, a partnered homosexual activist, but who claimed to be celibate, to withdraw from his appointment as Bishop of Reading following strong protests from within the Church of England and overseas. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Gene Robinson had been elected as the next bishop of New Hampshire despite being in an open and non-celibate homosexual relationship. This action was in direct contravention of Lambeth Resolution 1.10 which had not only declared homosexual practice to be incompatible with Scripture, but also specifically advised against 'ordaining those involved in same gender' unions' (Clause e). Here was a point at which the Anglican Communion could break apart and Williams therefore called an emergency Primates meeting at Lambeth Palace for October. It is instructive to look in some detail at how he and the London bureaucracy responded at this critical point.

At the close of the meeting on 16 October, the Primates issued a unanimously agreed communiqué which stated that if the consecration of Gene Robinson went ahead, it would 'tear the fabric of the Communion at its deepest level, and may lead to further division' and affirmed their 'deeper commitment to work together'. But immediately afterwards, Frank Griswold, the Presiding Bishop, showed no sign of sticking to the agreement he had signed, saying 'The second coming could occur but I'm scheduled to be in New Hampshire on 2 November'.<sup>4</sup> He duly proceeded with the consecration along with 47 other bishops before a congregation of some 3,000 people.

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<sup>2</sup> Rupert Shortt, *Rowan Williams: An Introduction* (London: DLT, 2003), p 76.

<sup>3</sup> To be precise, orthodox Anglicanism should be described as 'confessing' rather than 'confessional'. Although having authority, the Thirty-nine Articles were intended to deal with specific areas for clarification in a Reformed Catholic Church, not to be a summary restatement of the whole of biblical faith akin to the Westminster Confession.

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian 19.10.03 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2003/oct/19/gayrights.religion>

Notwithstanding a letter to the Primates of the previous year which had warned that any province which officially rejected Lambeth Resolution 1.10 would pose 'a substantial problem for the sacramental unity of the Communion',<sup>5</sup> Williams made no move to discipline Griswold or any of the other bishops involved in the consecration. Instead, attention moved to the communiqué's proposal of a Lambeth Commission on Communion to chart a united way forward out of the emerging crisis and report back within twelve months.

Although the communiqué referred to a 'common understanding of the centrality and authority of Scripture in determining the basis of our faith' it is difficult to see how these words could have meant anything of substance and they were certainly no constraint on Griswold who went ahead with Robinson's consecration within little more than a fortnight of adding his signature. The communiqué itself included a classic example of ecclesiastical ambiguity:

'We also re-affirm the resolutions made by the bishops of the Anglican Communion gathered at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 on issues of human sexuality as having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion as its present position on these issues. We commend the report of that Conference in its entirety to all members of the Anglican Communion, valuing especially its emphasis on the need "to listen to the experience of homosexual persons, and...to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ"; and its acknowledgement of the need for ongoing study on questions of human sexuality.'<sup>6</sup>

The Lambeth Resolution was clearly being reshaped, as it had been in the Official Report.<sup>7</sup> It was being downgraded to make it more digestible to liberals and more congenial to Williams' theological programme without antagonising conservatives; 'Having moral force and commanding the respect of the Communion' does not necessarily entail compliance. For Griswold there were evidently more forceful moral imperatives and he defended his decision to proceed by quoting the observation of an unnamed Primate that 'The Holy Spirit can do different things in different places.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the communiqué refers to the Lambeth Resolution as the 'present position' with the clear implication that this could conceivably change. The commitment to 'listen to the experience of homosexual persons' is

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Shadow Gospel, p112

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2003/10/16/ACNS3633>

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter 5

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/novemberweb-only/11-3-11.0.html>

then highlighted and quoted out of context to reinforce a paradoxical reading of the resolution<sup>9</sup> which effectively replaces the original intention of pastoral concern for those of 'homosexual orientation' with a commitment to a process of dialogue with those wanting to promote the very homosexual practice the resolution had declared to be 'incompatible with Scripture.'

The orthodox Primates at the October 2003 Primates Meeting had clearly been outmanoeuvred and the communiqué then set the framework for the Lambeth Commission on Communion from which would come the Windsor Report of October 2004 and the proposal for an Anglican Covenant. Indeed, the first section of the communiqué is specifically quoted in the Windsor Report, section 25.<sup>10</sup> As chairman, Williams appointed Dr Robin Eames, the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland who had earlier shown his hand as a signatory of the 'Pastoral Statement to Lesbian and Gay Anglicans' drafted by Williams in August 1998, effectively a disowning of Lambeth Resolution 1.10.

Under Eames, the Commission produced what became known as the Windsor Report in October 2004. It was a clever exercise in crisis management; it attempted to keep the question of homosexual relationships open by taking the example of how the Anglican Communion had managed to remain reasonably intact despite sharp differences over the ordination of women to the priesthood. In fact the report claimed that the failure to follow the consultative procedures which had been used in that controversy 'lies at the heart of the problems we currently face'<sup>11</sup>. This decision to identify church procedures as the key problem was Williams' deliberate policy as expressed in his personal mandate<sup>12</sup> to the commission. In his foreword to the Report, Eames plainly stated that the Archbishop's mandate 'did not demand judgement by the Commission on sexuality issues'.<sup>13</sup>

So the Windsor Report was committed to a superficial diagnosis. It was limited to institutional shortcomings. It could not address the underlying reality, that the true cause of the Communion's sickness was that the North American Churches had embraced false teaching. And lacking that more

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<sup>9</sup> The full reading of Lambeth 1.10 section (c) is: '[This Conference} recognises that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptised, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full members of the Body of Christ.'

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section\\_a/p4.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section_a/p4.cfm)

<sup>11</sup> The Windsor Report Section 22 [http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section\\_a/p4.cfm](http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/section_a/p4.cfm)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/mandate.cfm>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/windsor2004/index.cfm>

radical diagnosis, the report could not and did not call for repentance. Instead, it prepared the ground for a political strategy of some subtlety. By playing down the core theological issues it created the illusion of a middle ground for Williams and the Lambeth apparatus to inhabit, a strategy continued, as we shall see with renewed energy by his successor, Justin Welby.

So in his foreword to the Windsor Report, Eames was able to portray the bolder Global South leaders who were willing to take action by intervening in North America as being just as much extremists as the liberals of the American and Canadian Churches who had precipitated the problem. According to the Windsor logic, The American Episcopal Church's consent to the election of Gene Robinson as Bishop of New Hampshire, the Canadian diocese of New Westminster's authorisation of a public Rite of Blessing for same sex unions and the boundary crossings authorised by some Global South Primates to support and protect orthodox Anglicans under threat from these innovations were essentially regrettable and insensitive breaches of procedure. So conscientious irregular action on the part of the orthodox was counted as morally equivalent to the introduction of false teaching and the consecration of immorality.

The Windsor Report therefore called for a moratorium on both the revisionist innovations and boundary crossing by the orthodox.<sup>14</sup> This false middle was also evident in Eames assertion that 'During its work the Lambeth Commission has recognised the existence within the Anglican Communion of a large constituency of faithful members who are bemused and bewildered by the intensity of the opposing views on issues of sexuality' and 'At times they have felt their voices eclipsed by the intensity of sounds on opposing sides of the debate.'<sup>15</sup> Even if this statement is accurate, the response on the basis of a straightforward reading of Lambeth 1.10 should be to help those who are confused to understand why the issues matter so much, not to imply that those who feel strongly are extremists.

The report does acknowledge that 'Within Anglicanism, scripture has always been recognised as the Church's supreme authority' (Section 53), but then reveals its alignment with Williams' understanding of Scripture<sup>16</sup> and revelation with the claim that:

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<sup>14</sup> Global South disquiet about this linkage was later evident in the Primates' Communiqué of 19<sup>th</sup> February 2007 after their Dar es Salaam meeting which states in section 10 'The Windsor Report did not see a "moral equivalence" between these events, since the cross-boundary interventions arose from a deep concern for the welfare of Anglicans in the face of innovation'.

<sup>15</sup> idem

<sup>16</sup> See chapter 2 above

‘When Jesus speaks of “all authority in heaven and earth” (Matthew 28.18), he declares that this authority is given, not to the books that his followers will write, but to himself. Jesus, the living Word, is the one to whom the written Word bears witness as God's ultimate and personal self-expression’. We are told that it is more accurate therefore to speak not of the ‘authority of Scripture’, but “the authority of the triune God, *exercised through scripture*” (Section 54, italics as original).

This is not just to make the obvious point that Scripture needs interpretation. By driving a wedge between the authority of Christ and the authority of Scripture, the Bible is no longer seen as ‘God’s Word Written’, as verbally inspired and authoritative. Without that objective anchor point, a much greater degree of subjectivity can be introduced to the extent that, as we shall see in Williams’ treatment of sexuality, acting according to ‘the gospel’ can mean acting against the specific propositions of Scripture. The practical effect of all this is to reinforce the illusion that Christian truth emerges primarily through human experience and dialogue, blunting that fundamental antithesis which runs through the whole of Scripture between the truth and the lie (Romans 1:25).

To liberal opinion in the Church and Government, Williams must have looked like someone who could provide leadership for what they would regard as ‘positive and morally desirable change’, but the office of Archbishop of Canterbury requires the holder to live with an intensifying contradiction. He is the Primate of All England at a time when the liberal English establishment is become ever more secularised and yet he is also expected to act as a focus of unity for an Anglican Communion that increasingly finds its numerical centre of gravity in the theologically conservative and rapidly growing Churches of the global south, notably Africa.

In Hegelian terms, we could say that Williams adapted to these contradictory pressures by withdrawing from the role of advocate for the ‘antithesis’ focussed on opposition to Lambeth Resolution 1.10 (but not withdrawing his views) and instead took upon himself the orchestration of ‘synthesis’. But such a ‘synthesis’ can only emerge if the various parties are willing to treat their positions as provisional. If they are willing to do so, as conservatives should not and the radical liberals of TEC and their friends clearly will not, then however dialogue is dressed up, such as the ‘Continuing Indaba’ project launched at Lambeth 2008 or the ‘listening’ commended by the Anglican Covenant, it becomes a language game of the darker kind. Its underlying ‘grammar’ is actually that of manipulation. The longer the orthodox remain in this kind of negotiation, the more it looks like what they claim about the clear teaching of Scripture may really be nothing more than a provisional interpretation.

### **Canterbury Contrasts**

So what is the underlying theological issue we are dealing with here? The heart of the matter is the nature of Scripture as revelation. The Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, draws an

important distinction that is seriously blurred in Rowan Williams' methodology. He reminds the Thessalonians that 'when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you' (1 Thess. 2:13). Unless this vital distinction between the word of man and the Word of God is brought to light, the Anglican Communion as an institution will not be a safe place for the gospel.

The essential problem can be brought out by a contrast with Thomas Cranmer. The idea that there can be a middle way between the secularised religion of TEC and confessing Anglicanism is an illusion. When we probe more deeply we find that the real and ultimately inevitable choice is represented by these two Archbishops of Canterbury with their radically distinct methodologies. The difference may be summed up quite simply by saying that whereas in Thomas Cranmer we find hermeneutic confidence and ecclesiological pessimism, in Rowan Williams we find the reverse - hermeneutic pessimism and ecclesiological optimism. While the former, as developed by his successors such as Jewel and Hooker, offers a stable paradigm of what it is to be both Catholic and Reformed, the latter is neither Catholic nor Reformed and is irretrievably unstable.

Briefly, and to establish the contrast, Cranmer's hermeneutic confidence lay in his conviction about the perspicuity of Scripture, that the Bible is not only inspired and authoritative, but also essentially clear. In his preface of 1540 to the first English Bible to be authorised in churches 'The Great Bible' of 1539, he writes:

'For the Holy Ghost hath so ordered and tempered the scriptures, that in them as well publicans, fishers [sic], and shepherds may find their edification, as great doctors their erudition.'<sup>17</sup>

This confidence in the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture is presupposed in Article XIX which places Scripture, as God's Word written, at the heart of Anglican ecclesiology when it states:

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<sup>17</sup> *Preface to the Bible of 1540*, in J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p 120. It is interesting to note in passing that both Archbishops habitually think in terms of a 'middle way', but the resemblance is only superficial. For Williams it is dialectic, for Cranmer it is a matter of wisdom in the service of the gospel. So his Preface begins '*For two sundry sorts of people, it seemeth much necessary that something be said in the entry of this book by the way of a preface or prologue, whereby hereafter it may be both the better accepted of them which hitherto could not well bear it, and also the better used of them which heretofore have misused it. For truly some there are that be too slow and need the spur, some other seem too quick, and need more of the bridle; some lose their game by short shooting, some by overshooting; some walk too much on the left hand, some too much on the right.*'

‘The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.’

and Article XX assumes the same confidence when it states that:

‘it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything contrary to God’s Word written’.

This hermeneutic optimism goes hand in hand with a certain ecclesiological pessimism. A logical order can be seen in the Articles here – if the preaching of the pure word of God is a defining mark of the Church (XIX) and the Church’s authority is subservient to that of Scripture (XX) then Article (XXI) states the corollary, that the Church, even when gathered in General Council, ‘may err’ because ‘all be not governed by the Spirit and Word of God’. Cranmer’s biblical realism about human sin and frailty is clear in his famous opening sentence of the Preface to his first Book of Common Prayer preserved in the 1662 version in ‘Concerning the Service of the Church’, where he observes:

‘There was never any thing by the wit of man so well devised, or so sure established, which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted’<sup>18</sup>

and this interpretation is consistent with J I Packer’s conclusion about Cranmer’s theological method when he helpfully clarifies:

Cranmer did not (as did later High Churchmen) accept as an axiom that the tradition of the patristic centuries makes explicit what Scripture assumes or implies. He simply held that, in point of fact, what the most ancient doctors said co-incided for substance with what the Scriptures said on each point dealt with.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cranmer’s lively awareness of the possibility of spiritual shipwreck is clear when he writes ‘*If there were any word of God beside the Scripture, we could never be certain of God’s Word; and if we be uncertain of God’s Word, the devil might bring in among us a new word, a new doctrine, a new faith, a new Church, a new god, yea himself to be a god. If the Church and the Christian faith did not stay itself upon the Word of God certain, as upon a sure and strong foundation, no man could know whether he had a right faith, and whether he were in the true Church of Christ, or in the synagogue of Satan*’ in J E Cox ed *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: CUP 1846) p 53.

<sup>19</sup> J I Packer ‘Introducing Thomas Cranmer’s Theology,’ in G E Duffield (ed) *The Work of Thomas Cranmer* (Appleford, Berks: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1964), p xii.

## Two Hermeneutic Integrities?

Now it may be objected that the comparison between the to Archbishops needs to take account of the elapse of four and half centuries – as modern post-enlightenment readers are we not bound to have a diminished confidence in the perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture? Clearly, modern scholarship cannot simply be ignored, but it is helpful to distinguish between two kinds of epistemological modesty. That of Thomas Cranmer follows the Reformed recognition that, as he has it in the general confession ‘there is no health in us’ - human reason is as distorted by the Fall as any other human faculty, as reflected in the great ‘solas’<sup>20</sup> of the Reformation which underline the sheer gratuity of the gospel. In contrast, that of Rowan Williams is more to do with the post-modern anxiety about ideology as power which extends to any propositional systematization.

The difference comes into sharp contrast when we consider that it is a fundamental principle for the evangelical preacher that exegesis as a virtue and eisegesis as a vice. This distinction between a humble seeking out of what we might call ‘God’s point of view’ and wariness about substituting ‘our point of view’ is highly problematic for Rowan Williams. In his essay ‘Theological Integrity’ he identifies what he calls the paradox of religious language – how can the claims of religion, which by their nature deal with overarching claims of truth and moral definition be anything other than assertive claims to power? Does this then make it impossible to talk about God? ‘Religious and theological integrity is possible’ we are told ‘as and when discourse about God declines the attempt to take God’s point of view (i.e. a ‘total perspective’).’<sup>21</sup>

Theological honesty cannot therefore be about drawing out a supposed inherent meaning of Scripture because exegesis is precisely the attempt to take ‘God’s point of view’. That confidence in the essential clarity of Scripture (and therefore the need for right interpretation) which is axiomatic for Cranmer is toxic for Williams. Theological integrity is no longer based on faithfulness to what Cranmer is pleased to call ‘God’s most certain word’<sup>22</sup> but instead it is found in discovering in the biblical narratives an underlying theological ‘grammar,’ a way of thinking and living in which we subjectively conform our lives in our particular circumstances to what we perceive to be God’s loving purpose.

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<sup>20</sup> Sola Scriptura (by Scripture Alone) Solus Christus (Christ Alone) Sola Gratia(Grace Alone) Sola Fide ( Faith Alone) Soli Deo Gloria (The Glory of God Alone)

<sup>21</sup> On Christian Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p 6.

<sup>22</sup> A Defence of the true and catholick Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ p. 34 ed. C.H.H. Wright 1907

The tentativeness which arises from the very contemporary concern that our thinking about God can be all too easily subverted as a means of power over others is reinforced by the pervasive sense of the apophatic in Williams' writing. Suspicious of systems with their potential to bring God, as it were, under our control, he characteristically weaves together theology and spirituality to evoke a vision and draw the reader into paradoxes. In his essay 'A Ray of Darkness' he traces the phrase back to the anonymous Greek monk of the fifth century, Pseudo-Dionysius. This 'ray' may be mystical or it may arise from an intense experience of breakdown and loss, but whatever the case it is:

'not a comfortable clearing up of problems or smoothing out of difficulties and upsets. On the contrary, it brings on a kind of vertigo; it may make me a stranger to myself, to everything I have ever taken for granted'<sup>23</sup>,

But how then are we to say anything sufficiently coherent and objective to sustain the existence of a Christian community? The answer is bound up with the nature of God as Trinity. Through the Eastern Orthodox tradition, especially through the writings of Vladimir Lossky, Williams sees the Trinity as the key to Christian apophaticism because it crucifies our intellects, paradoxically revealing God in his unknowability, and is therefore the matrix within which the mystical knowledge of God beyond the reach of intellect is located. The 'ray' may be 'dark,' yet it is still a form of knowledge of the Triune God who is 'there' and it is anchored historically in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The risen Christ 'returns from death to gather his friends' and 'He leaves himself – his nature, his calling, his mission – as the great and fundamental question in the new language his disciples slowly learn to speak.'<sup>24</sup>

So it seems that the Church's identity is not to rest upon its ability to forge a coherent theological system, but in learning a new language. The distinction is crucial to understanding Williams' theological method; the focus is not so much on God as he objectively exists (although it is axiomatic that he does), but upon how the Christian community speaks about God, what he describes as 'the grammar of obedience' in deliberate contrast to a systematic and settled body of knowledge.

This is at the heart of what gives the 'official Anglicanism' of Canterbury its shadow quality - the downgrading and marginalisation of Scripture, in particular the shift away from affirming the

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<sup>23</sup> Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cowley Publications 1995), p 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* p 104

plenary inspiration of Scripture and therefore the weakening of its authority. Let us take another look at the Windsor Report of 2004 as an example.

‘When Jesus speaks of “all authority in heaven and earth” (Matthew 28.18), he declares that this authority is given, not to the books that his followers will write, but to himself. Jesus, the living Word, is the one to whom the written Word bears witness as God's ultimate and personal self-expression’.

We are told that it is more accurate therefore to speak not of the ‘authority of Scripture’, but “the authority of the triune God, *exercised through scripture*” (Section 54, italics as original).

Here the Windsor Report is simply reflecting the thought of many Western Anglican theologians, amongst whom Rowan Williams continues to be one of the most influential. What I have called his hermeneutic pessimism does not lead to the kind of reductionist demythologising account of the classic 20<sup>th</sup> century liberals nor does it necessarily marginalise the use of the Bible. In fact the Anglican Communion Office is enthusiastically promoting a project called ‘The Bible in the Life of the Church’. But what matters here is how the bible is read and it is important that we understand that such enthusiasm may not be all it seems on the surface.

In contrast to the Windsor Report, historic Anglican teaching sees a direct correspondence between God as revealer, supremely in Jesus Christ, and the witness of Scripture as authoritative inspired revelation. This is the position reaffirmed in clause 2 of the GAFCON Jerusalem Declaration of 2008 which states:

We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God written and to contain all things necessary for salvation. The Bible is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that the phrase ‘the Word of God’ rarely appears in Williams’ writing. In his Hulsean Sermon of January 2009 he addressed the question ‘What might a defence of the significance and authority of revelation look like today?’ and he acknowledges a debt to Karl Barth who, he claims,

‘insisted ... that the claim about revelation was initially and decisively a claim about the nature of the revealer rather than about the content of revelation.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Being Faithful, p 6.

<sup>26</sup> Hulsean Sermon ‘Seeing the Question: Revelation and Self-Knowledge’ Sunday 25 January 2009, given before the University of Cambridge. <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2133>.

But can the content of revelation – which is of course Scripture itself – be given this subsidiary and secondary role without seriously compromising the objectivity of revelation? Whether or not we agree with Williams’ assessment, the Church Dogmatics includes robust and extensive biblical exegesis, yet in his theology such confidence has been replaced by the much less ambitious claims of post-liberalism. While he is prepared to say that Scripture is ‘the unique touchstone of truth about God,’<sup>27</sup> because at its heart are the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus who is uniquely the revelation of God, the human authors of Scripture were as prone to error as we are and so:

The revelation of God comes to us in the middle of weakness and fallibility ... We read with a sense of our own benighted savagery in receiving God’s gift, and our solidarity with those writers of scripture caught up in the blazing fire of God’s gift who yet struggle with it, misapprehend it, and misread it.<sup>28</sup>

Hermeneutic pessimism is very significantly increased because we are struggling not just with our own fallibility as interpreters, but with that of the biblical authors themselves in apprehending the revelation they were given. We do not want to deny the humanity of the biblical authors and their struggles are sometimes plain to see – one only has to think of Jeremiah’s complaint in chapter 12 for instance – but we also know from Scripture itself that it comes to us exactly as God in his providence has ordained. But this interaction of contingency and divine sovereignty is completely lacking in William’s approach and in fact the apophatic mind-set we noted previously is so strong that the possibility of God’s word being heard at all is called into question. For instance we read of:

‘the solitude of truth, the solitude, finally, of God; God as a spastic child who can communicate nothing but his presence and his inarticulate wanting.’<sup>29</sup>

In context, this is an observation about the experience of loneliness and seems to have as much to do with our inability to understand as God’s to speak; but it reveals something of the cast of Williams’ mind that he is willing to use a metaphor which so easily gets out of hand and reinforces a sense that Scripture is deeply opaque, that truth somehow floats elusively behind a fallible text, rather than being communicated reliably through an inspired text.

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<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Mike Higton *Difficult Gospel: the Theology of Rowan Williams* (London SCM Press 2004) p 62.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Open to Judgement’ p159

<sup>29</sup> Ibid p 145.

We shall go on to see in my next lecture that this hermeneutic pessimism does not rule out a form of revelation, just as Cranmer's ecclesiological pessimism did not rule out the possibility of the church visible having a coherent and stable institutional life, but the impact of Williams' pessimistic understanding of revelation on what it means to be church has serious consequences as we shall see.

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