

“We go on saying ‘God’”: Rowan Williams and the program of modern secularism

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“In spite of everything, we go on saying ‘God.’”

So wrote Rowan Williams, then Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford, in 1986.¹ Williams was referring in that piece to apophatic theology, and making the case for the integral role of mysticism and the contemplative tradition for theology, an interest he’s held for his whole career. In spite of the fact that no words will ever capture God *in toto*, we go on speaking of God as best we can.

It is a statement that is currently significant for quite another reason: the rising, and occasionally aggressive, secularism of his own Britain and some sections of North America. The “New Atheists” – whose main players Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens are sometimes called, to their delight, the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” – have posed a popular challenge to Christianity that has moved from disdain to an aggressiveness of tone that is a more recent development. Articles on and about the New Atheists have proliferated, including responses by theologians such as John Haught and David Bentley Hart, though their popularity, not to mention their effect, pales in comparison to that of the collective writings of the Four Horsemen. While even other atheists will occasionally decry the superficiality of the New Atheists’ arguments, it is undeniable that they have tapped into a latent popular sentiment. As a way of putting the controversy in a constructive, Christian perspective, I believe it may be worthwhile to examine the work on atheism in particular, and secularism more generally, offered by Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

Why Rowan Williams?

There are several reasons that Williams’ views are of particular interest. First, Williams is widely considered one of the finest theological minds in the Christian world. Imaginative and articulate, when reading him one has the feeling of walking into the ocean: for a while the ground remains flat, even, and predictable, but then it drops off suddenly and precipitously, revealing depths that weren’t visible when viewed from the shore. In his essay on vocation in *Ray of Darkness*, for example, he not only discusses the nature of responding to God’s call for each individual life, but addresses a more fundamental, and unanticipated, question as well: what business does God have telling me what to do?² Where other writers may have limited themselves to the first issue, Williams dives farther down than expected, exploring the deep to see what can be found there. When he takes the reader with him, it is an adventure for both of them. One can expect, then, that when writing about secularism Williams will not limit himself to surveying the foaming waves of the usual conversation, but will explore new dimensions

¹ “Trinity and Revelation,” in *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in contemporary theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 131.

² *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1995), 154-159.

of the questions, identifying the tidal currents, and provoking new ways of thinking for both sides of the debate. That is, indeed, the case, as I hope to show.

Second, his office as Archbishop of Canterbury makes him responsible for the institutional life of the Church in a way unparalleled by any other Anglican theologian. In addition to his academic theological work, therefore, he has two somewhat overlapping constituencies: one public, one parochial. As head of the Anglican Communion, he has a kind of pastoral responsibility on a large scale: he simply does not have the luxury of positing wildly speculative theories in private seminar rooms, or not considering the practical implications for the lives of the faithful. The role may be limiting, in that sense, but it is one that he has embraced, as his many devotional works have shown.

At the same time, however, while being cognizant of his public role, he is explicitly committed to transparent honesty in the work he does. In his brilliant essay “Theological Integrity,” first published in 1991, he decries any discourse, but especially theology, that is less than completely forthcoming in its utterances, any speech the real purpose of which is not its ostensible subject, that is “conceal[ing] its true agenda.”³ Doing so puts theology in the category of the worst political propaganda by eliminating the possibility of reciprocal conversation: “Discourse that conceals is discourse that (consciously or not) sets out to foreclose the possibility of a genuine response.” This is especially tempting when dealing with ultimate things, and therefore theology, more than any other, is always at risk of becoming “the most dramatically empty and power-obsessed discourse imaginable.”⁴ Williams seems to be constantly on the lookout for slipping into such talk, and this sometimes gets him into trouble; his remarks on the idea of integrating some aspects of sharia law into English practice for Muslim citizens famously exploded in the press.⁵ It got to the point that bookmakers were placing bets on when Williams would resign.⁶ While Williams may now be more careful in his speech, given how his every controversial statement seems to reflect on the entire Communion, he cannot be accused of duplicity. For theologians who consider their work to be work on behalf of the Church, therefore, answerable to the academy, the parish, and their own sense of integrity, Williams’ is a view worth studying.

Third, his role as “Primate of All England” – the head of an established Church in a pluralistic country – has placed him squarely at the center of the public debate about the role of religion in a secular society. While this issue may have its genesis in the Enlightenment, it has also come to the fore in a prominent way recently, perhaps especially provoked by the increase in the Muslim presence in that country, and Europe more generally. This was obviously behind his remarks about sharia law, but it is a question also relevant to the role of “Religious Education” in the English school system, as well as what in the United States are called “faith-based initiatives.” Williams has explored the philosophical foundations of the ideas of religion in the public sphere and, as a result, he has become something of a political philosopher. His remarks on public secularism will be an integral part of this essay.

For all of these reasons, his views on the topic are of particular interest. However, he has written no definitive systematic theology that could provide a final reflection of his views. Instead, there are dozens of occasional pieces that have appeared over the years, many collected in various volumes. Further, a review of his recent bibliography reveals that he offers substantive lectures on a variety of topics nearly monthly; one imagines him sleeping like a shark, his writing hand always moving. Since the

³ “Theological Integrity,” in *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in contemporary theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ See, for example, “Williams under fire in Sharia row,” *BBC News*, February 8, 2008, sec. UK Politics, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7233335.stm> (accessed November 27, 2009).

⁶ Rupert Shortt, *Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 399.

rise of New Atheism has occurred mostly during his time as Archbishop of Canterbury, this essay will draw especially on the lectures, sermons, and speeches he has given since that time.

A note on terminology: while “atheism” is the popular term for a philosophy that opposes theism, as in the “New Atheists,” I’ve used the term “secularism” throughout the essay, though atheism and secularism are not identical concepts. Atheism is a truth claim about the ontological status of God or gods. Secularism could be described as the cultural practices that result from an atheist worldview or metaphysic; the cultural practices described in this essay are politics, art, and science. It is possible to imagine situations where the two are not mutually implicated; some religious believers could prefer that religious considerations are not included in socio-cultural practices, and some atheists may prefer that they are. In the dominant social practice that goes by the name of modern atheism, however, the two are linked, and this essay will consider them together, using the term “secularism.”

Politics: programmatic and procedural secularism

The relationship between atheism and secularism is especially obvious in the political sphere. In politics, Williams differentiates between what he calls “programmatic” and “procedural” secularism.⁷ “Procedural” secularism involves the way decisions are made in public matters, in which no one interest group (whether religious, secular, ideological, or professional) is privileged over any other. In this scheme, the *polis* as a whole is open to hearing arguments from all sides, evaluating them, and making decisions, regardless of by whom the case is made. It is a process that is noisy, untidy, and laudably democratic. While most likely any one interest group, especially a minority group, won’t have every decision resolved in its favor, its sense of being heard would hopefully keep each one from feeling isolated from the political process. The hope is that integration into the system would decrease violence; procedural secularism is a way of “brokering harmony.”⁸ Williams is optimistic that this type of secularism – an “interactive pluralism”⁹ – could be the peaceful future of a pluralistic society.

“Programmatic” secularism, on the other hand, is the ideological conviction that religious viewpoints should never be heard in the public square, that these viewpoints are inadmissible in public debate. Instead, political conversation must be cleansed of any teleological understandings of the human person or society.¹⁰ Those ideas, and therefore those people for whom some teleology is foundational, are excluded. Obviously, in any pluralistic society there will be differing assumptions about foundational issues. In a procedural model, however, those assumptions are up for debate, and that is the point of inviting religious communities into the discussion. While noisy and untidy, and never to be finally completed, it is also not sequestered into an isolated context, consigned to private conversation. This is, after all, the purpose of a *polis*: “In the actual historical world of existing societies, the good is something that gets argued about.”¹¹ Not so in a world of programmatic secularism.

The language of exclusion and a “cleansed” public square is intentional: Williams references John Milbank’s critique of the “innate violence” of programmatic secularism.¹² In excluding teleological views, the political process is reduced to a naked attempt to obtain power; it assumes that a struggle for power is the fundamental state of human relationship, and the default mode of a society’s operation. In

⁷ “Secularism, Faith and Freedom” (Lecture, Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Rome, Italy, November 23, 2006), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/654> (accessed November 5, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Law, Power and Peace: Christian Perspectives on Sovereignty” (David Nicholls Memorial Lecture, The University Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford, England, September 25, 2005), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/959> (accessed November 5, 2009).

¹⁰ “Raymond Williams Lecture” (Lecture presented at the Hay Festival, Wales, June 1, 2002), <http://www.churchinwales.org.uk/structure/bishops/sermons/r13.html> (accessed November 5, 2009).

¹¹ “Law, Power and Peace.”

¹² “Secularism, Faith and Freedom.”

this view, even the role of critical reason is denigrated; instead, it is only self-interest that determines positions on issues. If this is the case, public reasoning is solely instrumental, a means to an end. While this process may come clothed in the language of the good or the just, that is not its “true agenda.” Such a process denigrates the very idea of the *polis*; where formerly there was a conception of shared citizenship, it is lost to a view of other members of a community being either obstructions or facilitators of the individual’s goals. In this way, it is even “anti-humanist.”¹³

Ironically, this programmatic secularism is also the source of fundamentalist religion. Fundamentalism by its nature has bought into the dominant paradigm of public life as means to power. Now privatized, fundamentalist religion seeks to replace secular certainties with religious certainties, both of them having abandoned the self-critical, *semper reformanda* impulse of traditional Christianity (at least in theory). Instead, isolated and defensive, “pursued and cultivated behind locked doors,” the disenfranchised group absorbs the logic of secularism.¹⁴ Though nominally opposed, the twin brothers of secularism and fundamentalism confront each other in “a mixture of mutual incomprehension and mutual reflection.”¹⁵ Fundamentalism represents the intellectual victory of programmatic secularism.

Art and the religious imagination

For Williams, politics and art are intertwined, and the instrumentalism that corrupts politics inevitably corrupts art as well. The literary critic Alfred Kazin once wrote of William Faulkner that, “In the everlasting war against evil by the small amount of good in the world, Faulkner chose not religion but art.”¹⁶ From the looks of it, Williams doesn’t see the choice as quite so stark. A published poet, Williams’ poetry reflects a theological viewpoint, and his theology reflects a poetic temperament. Perhaps because of that temperament, he is especially critical of what he sees as programmatic secularism’s lack of artistic imagination, and, indeed, what he finds to be its unacknowledged intrinsic antipathy to the messiness of art. Art complicates the instrumentalism of programmatic secularism by introducing, even advancing, not only alternative points of view, but ambiguous ones, muddying otherwise straightforward political goals. This resistance is classically reflected in the Platonic expulsion of poets from the Republic, but also in the old Communist Party’s refusal to allow any art that questioned, much less opposed, the message of the Party, a political structure that attempted to squelch real creativity.¹⁷ Williams mentions the Soviet neglect of Dostoevsky, one of Williams’ heroes, whom the Party considered “an unmistakable Russian genius with (nearly) all the wrong ideas.”¹⁸ “Wrong ideas” don’t have a place in world cleansed of ambiguity.

Williams presents two related criticisms of secularism’s relationship to art. First, secularism’s opposition to art is a result of its totalizing worldview. It is a “secularity of imagination,” Williams calls it, that presumes that there is nothing inaccessible or mysterious, no viewpoint of relevance other than that of the individual viewer; not only interpretation, but the thing itself, begins and ends at the level of the individual’s consciousness.¹⁹ The religious imagination, on the other hand, assumes that there has been a viewing of all things prior to the individual’s own viewing, an appreciation by the thing’s creator/Creator, causing the individual to try to see the object as the other does. (Williams quotes T. S.

¹³ “Raymond Williams Lecture.”

¹⁴ “Law, Power and Peace.”

¹⁵ “Raymond Williams Lecture.”

¹⁶ “William Faulkner and Religion: Determinism, Compassion, and the God of Defeat,” in *Faulkner and Religion*, ed. Doreen Fowler and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 4. Kazin continues, “And such is the shallowness, not to mention the expediency, of so much public religion in America, one is tempted to thank God he did not choose religion.”

¹⁷ “Europe, Faith and Culture” (Lecture, Liverpool Cathedral, January 26, 2008), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1547> (accessed November 5, 2009).

¹⁸ *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁹ “Raymond Williams Lecture.”

Eliot's poem "Burnt Norton" about roses that "had the look of flowers that are looked at.")²⁰ It is a practice of empathy with both the creator and other viewers. The secular stance, on the other hand, has the effect of propagating the idea that the culturally dominant judgment exhausts the full evaluation of an object; there is only one possible reading of a text, only one allowable perspective. Secularism's advocacy of this totalizing worldview is another example of its implicit principle that there is "no substantive truth but a series of contests about sustainable control and the balances of power."²¹ That lack of artistic imagination has significant ethical implications.

The second criticism also ties together the political and the aesthetic, in comparing the secular interpretation of art with the social and political understandings of the earliest Christians. In a lecture from Liverpool Cathedral in 2008, Williams outlined the fundamental Christian skepticism of any human society, due to its not being the Kingdom of God. This leads to a Christian's permanent sense of "homelessness" as a result of being in, but not of, the world.²² As the Church operates in a sphere separate from the state, its very presence is an implicit questioning of the state's legitimacy, a rejection of any state's claim to being sacred.²³ In a certain fundamental sense, being a Christian is about not belonging: not to a state, nor a nation, nor even a family.²⁴ Even when Christianity was the assumed and dominant social and political system of Western Europe in the Middle Ages, there remained a deep suspicion of the existing state of affairs, a suspicion visible in, for example, the Thomistic questioning of the divine right of kings. The Reformation was an outburst of that suspicion, a reassertion of the ironic distance between what Augustine termed the City of God and the City of Man.

Williams concludes that it was out of this Reformation environment, more fully aware of the distance between the two than at any time in the last thousand years, that the genre of the novel appeared. These narratives of selves over time addressed (and partially revealed) the essence of the human experience, the moral ambiguity of life, and the quest to identify what it would mean to have a flourishing and dynamic human life. It is a distinctly Christian genre, in the sense that it is intrinsically restless in its narrativity and always open to conversion, to fundamental shifts in states of affairs both external and, more importantly, internal. It is a genre that, at its best, is inherently ambiguous, questioning, and skeptical. It reflects the Christian distance between individual and culture that allows for an investigation of both.

That distancing could be done securely, however, only when the City of God was the stable force that, though not currently present in full, provided the ultimate foundation for the exploration; it was the eternal authority on which the questioning of temporal authority could take place. As the Enlightenment suspicion of the idea of God eventually became widespread among philosophers, however, this left the human person "homeless" in a much more fundamental sense. When the natural restlessness of the human person was divorced from its foundation in God, then what had previously provided the security for irony, questioning, and hope disappeared, and the turn to the individual became absolute: politics becomes identified with assertions of personal rights; culture with consumer choice; religion with individual spirituality outside of community, *extra ecclesiam*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Europe, Faith and Culture."

²³ "Is Europe at its end?" (Forum debate presented at the Sant'Egidio International Meeting of Prayer for Peace, Palais de Congress, Lyons, France, September 12, 2005), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/958> (accessed November 5, 2009).

²⁴ "Incarnation and the renewal of community," in *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in contemporary theology (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 228.

This has serious implications for social justice, because it leads directly, Williams asserts, to the dominance of the “market state.”²⁵ Isolated from questions of the good, the legitimacy of the market state is founded upon its ability to provide choices for individual consumer demands. This market state is fully secular; the fulfillment of those consumer demands is the extent of its responsibility, quite outside of human teleology, which must remain in the realm of private preference. Two social and religious movements in modern times have countered this purported consensus: Marxism and Islam. But all three – Marxism, a particular strand of modern Islam, and global free market capitalism – assume that all the important questions about the nature of human existence and its foundations have been answered; now all that is left is to establish that perfect society on earth. Ongoing interpretation and debate about the good, the true, and the beautiful can, and must, now come to an end as the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a global caliphate, or free trade, will establish peace on earth. In the West, where Marxism has essentially failed both morally and practically, global market capitalism has, usually implicitly, but sometimes explicitly (as in Francis Fukuyama’s “The end of history”), been seen as the answer to the secular West’s soteriological prayers, the author of its salvation. With the important questions answered, and the rest proscribed to private considerations, all that’s left is to lower taxes.

Williams notes that this reductive functionalism has effects throughout a culture, as the culture’s dominant, secular logic of capital accumulation, when privileged over the good and its pursuit, affects even education; the logic of the market becomes the driving force in what would otherwise be considered moral questions. He references theologian William Cavanaugh on how proponents of providing free school lunches to poor children in England made the case in terms of how the school lunches would, by increasing success in school, eventually increase the country’s economic productivity.²⁶ In that environment, art, like everything else, is reduced to its economic implications. An evaluation of art as multivalent and ultimately inaccessible, or a teleological sense of the human person that would maintain that free school lunches for poor children is a moral imperative, is expelled in a programmatic secularism that doesn’t allow for discussions about foundational issues, instead limiting those decisions to private preferences. There is a severe ethical dimension to this secularity of the imagination.

In this essentially eschatological worldview, there is little room for the ambiguity of art, because it is politically and economically (insofar as the two can be separated), “unstable and unhelpful.”²⁷ As great art is inherently multivalent, ambiguous, and challenging to any received state of affairs, it has no place in a society where debates about fundamental questions of human flourishing are assumed to be over. The benefit of great art – the *Aeneid*, for example – is that it can be read for thousands of years and re-discovered in every generation, each one finding new meaning where it lay undiscovered before. New revelations about the nature of human life are revealed; new thinking about the nature of the just city is generated. When ultimate meaning is seen as finalized, however, and all revelations about human life exhausted, there is no need for an *Aeneid*, and where there is no need for an *Aeneid*, there is no room for Virgil. History has ended and the future is finally realized, delayed only by the working out of a few details – a working out that doesn’t allow for art in any but the most superficial ways. For this reason, art is intrinsically and necessarily un-secular.²⁸ Hence Williams’ profound conclusion: when a totalizing worldview is presumed to have won all the arguments, “What is lost is ultimately not only the culture of Europe and its cultural family but also the idea of culture itself.”²⁹

²⁵ “Convictions, Loyalties and the Secular State” (The Chatham Lecture, Trinity College, Oxford, October 29, 2004), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1478> (accessed November 5, 2009).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Raymond Williams Lecture.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “Europe, Faith and Culture.”

While totalizing, even oppressive, worldviews are tragically far from unknown in Christian history, there exists an ancient strand of the tradition – negative theology – which undermines attempts to contain and clearly demarcate truth claims. Negative theology works from the assumption that “no human form of words can capture what God is,”³⁰ or, as Augustine put it, “Si comprehendis, non est Deus”: if you understand, what you understand is not God. This awareness of the ultimate inadequacy of human expression doesn’t lead to the cessation of all dialogue, as might be expected given the ultimate futility of the exercise: we “go on saying ‘God.’” However, precisely because no form of expression – linguistic, artistic, philosophical – will ever comprehend God fully, there are always more explorations to set out on, more epics to be written, more music to be composed; it is a state of mind that believes that “this is not yet all that could be,” a quest for the “further depths of understanding of both the comedy and the tragedy of human existence.”³¹ It is a fundamental openness to the uncertainty of the future. Williams’ remarks about openness to revelation apply to the effect of this religious mindset in art: it “decisively advances or extends debate, extends rather than limits the range of ambiguity and conflict in language. It poses fresh questions rather than answering old ones.”³² From a religious point of view, the present doesn’t exhaust all ultimate possibilities; all statements are analogies, and all analogies are partial, and can be improved upon. When that mindset disappears, when the potential for additional “revelation” is no longer part of an artistic understanding, the consequence is “an atrophying of the sense of belonging in a *new* world... It is the withering of anything that might be called an experience of grace.”³³ An openness to fundamental uncertainty is only possible, however, because the exploration is grounded in a divine acceptance both present and absent.

It should be clear that the art of which Williams speaks need not be thematically Christian; most of the literature he refers to in his writings and lectures is not. For example, and most controversially, Williams has expressed his admiration for the fiction of Philip Pullman, author of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy for young adults. Pullman represents himself as an atheist critical of all forms of religion, and the mendacity of the Church (called “The Authority”) structures the series’ plot.³⁴ Williams has been assailed for advocating that Pullman’s fiction be included in the Religious Education curriculum in English schools. He admires Pullman, however, because, like Dostoevsky and Camus, his writing is the kind of literature that “make[s] belief difficult.”³⁵ Williams’ contention is that any art that resists that “soft totalitarianism” of closed conversation is de facto resisting secularism. It is in the artistic realm that Williams seems to be most optimistic about the fate of the religious mindset. As art refuses to be ultimately repressed, sneaking through even the propaganda machine of Soviet communism, pure secularism is finally a “doomed enterprise.”³⁶

Williams’ assumption that it is art, broadly defined, that spells the defeat of secularism is interesting for a number of reasons, chief among them that art is seen as the secular alternative to religion by at least one of the New Atheist writers, Christopher Hitchens. In his recent book *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Hitchens states that, instead of any religion’s scriptures, he finds the most meaningful discussions of the fundamental questions of human life elsewhere. Speaking of his fellow atheists, he says,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Trinity and Revelation,” 134.

³³ Ibid. Italics in original.

³⁴ *The Golden Compass*, His dark materials Bk. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); *The Subtle Knife*, His dark materials Bk. 2 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); *The Amber Spyglass*, His dark materials Bk. 3 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

³⁵ Ruth Gledhill, “Archbishop wants pupils to be taught tale of wicked priests and a dying God,” <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1041656.ece> (accessed November 1, 2009).

³⁶ “Raymond Williams Lecture.”

We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and – since there is no other metaphor – also the soul.³⁷

While Williams might object to the wholesale casting-aside of scripture, he would certainly agree that literature is life-changing and, he would say, revelatory: Williams is famous for his use of literature in theological discussions, whether it's Iris Murdoch,³⁸ Fulton Wilder,³⁹ Robertson Davies,⁴⁰ or any number of others. In his essay "The Body's Grace," for example, his most extensive discussion of sexual ethics to date, the entire argument revolves around reflections on a story from Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* and what it reveals about love, grace, and embodiment, even in a sexual relationship that is far from ideal.⁴¹

As the above has shown, however, Williams would say that there is no understanding or appreciation of literature – or even motivation to write literature – without a kind of foundational teleology that pure secularism excludes in principle. The problem of injustice, for example, is only a "problem" when one identifies a gap between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be; that is a fundamentally religious question, or at least a fundamentally non-secular one. One can't get from "is" to "ought" without an assumption, beyond personal preference, about how the world should be. No one doubts that Hitchens is committed to justice; his polemics in *Vanity Fair*, *Slate*, and elsewhere against the use of torture by the United States, for example, were excellent.⁴² The literary works written by the authors Hitchens names above, however, precisely reveal the contradictions, difficulties, and tragedies involved in either determining or fulfilling in practice those commitments; they make belief, of whatever kind, difficult. Further, while they may encourage one's commitment to justice, they do not generate the content of the commitments themselves. Insofar as they are great works of art, it is because they refer beyond themselves to these existential questions; to use Jean-Luc Marion's distinction, they are icons, pointing to the ineffable, not idols, simply reflecting back the image of the individual.⁴³ Williams' treatment of Dostoevsky in his recent book takes the author seriously as a prophet, philosopher, and artist; regardless of Dostoevsky's own religious convictions (a contested matter), Williams would say that Dostoevsky's wrestling with these existential questions marks him as an anti-secular writer. Hitchens' claim, then, that "religion poisons everything," that "the study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts,"⁴⁴ can consequently be read as a fundamentally religious critique of religion, its texts and its practitioners. It can be read as a version of the damning prophetic strand of Biblical history that threatens the destruction of every temple. It was Amos' critique; it is Jesus' critique. But it is not a secular critique.

³⁷ *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 5.

³⁸ "Theological Integrity," 15.

³⁹ "Centre for Anglican Communion Studies (CEFACS) Lecture" (Birmingham, England, November 3, 2004), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1048> (accessed November 5, 2009).

⁴⁰ "Redeeming sorrows: Marilyn McCord Adams and the defeat of evil," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higon (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 258-259.

⁴¹ "The Body's Grace," in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene Rogers, Jr., Blackwell readings in modern theology (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 309-321.

⁴² For example, "Believe Me, It's Torture," *Vanity Fair*, August 2008, <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2008/08/hitchens200808>.

⁴³ *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas Carlson, Religion and postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

⁴⁴ *God Is Not Great*, 283.

Scientific practice and cultural evolution

It is science, however, especially biological evolution, that is usually seen as the steadfast enemy of religion, and it is science that has been advanced by most of the other New Atheists as the discipline that renders religion superfluous. Richard Dawkins is the standard-bearer for this view. Briefly, Dawkins believes that all cultural changes are the result of the natural selection of cultural ideas; ideas evolve or become extinct much the same way that species do. As the mechanism of biological evolution is genes, Dawkins asserts the existence of cultural genes, which he termed “memes.”⁴⁵ Memes are selected much the same way that genes are; memes are transmitted from person to person through imitation, like a “mind virus.”⁴⁶ Because religion is a product of culture, it is a meme of long-standing, perhaps because it fulfilled a human survival function at some point by mitigating fear or promoting altruism.

As evolution through natural selection is a purely genetic mechanism for a change in species over time, without any teleology, so also do the memes of cultural evolution lack any teleology beyond reproduction. The status of any truth claims a meme makes, therefore, is moot, simply a survival strategy; their truth or falsity is arbitrary. Now that humanity has science, however, which is able to test the status of these truth claims and better support human flourishing, religion can be evaluated like any other “explanatory hypothesis” (Dawkins’ term). When that is done, religion comes up short; revealed as not only wrong, but dangerous to human flourishing, it can now be cast aside, sitting in the trash bin with hylomorphism, geocentrism, and the flat earth.

Many writers, both religious and secular, have criticized Dawkins’ concept of “memes.”⁴⁷ What ontologically, they ask, is a meme? What is the mechanism by which it passes from one human being to another? How do they reproduce? Are memes able to be measured, or physically located in the brain? Can they be observed directly? Finding answers to these questions either not forthcoming or inadequate, Williams, in uncharacteristically strong language, refers to the move from biological transmission (genetics) to cultural transmission (memetics) as “philosophically crass, undeveloped at best, simply contradictory and empty at worst.”⁴⁸ For Dawkins, he says, Darwinism is a “theory of everything”: “It’s not just a theory about biology; it’s a theory about history and culture. It’s a theory which explains the history of ideas. Every feature of culture, like every feature of biology, requires an explanation in Darwinian terms: that is in terms of survival strategies.” In terms of explanation, Dawkins holds, Darwinism is not only a better resource than religion, it is the final and definitive interpretation of all human culture, full stop – a position that Darwin himself certainly never held.

Williams’ response is that Dawkins’ approach to evaluating religion makes erroneous assumptions about the function of religion. Rather than being an “explanatory hypothesis,” Williams says, God is the reason that people seek explanations in the first place; God is the assumption that human beings can make sense of anything at all. God is “where the whole notion of explanation, regularity and intelligibility comes from,” what “grounds the fact that we assume we can make sense.” It reflects a “fundamental trust” that people have in the universe.

In addition, Dawkins’ appeal to non-teleological cultural evolution does not undermine only religion, but reduces all products and practices of culture, including all personal beliefs, to survival strategies. These would include the revulsion Dawkins feels at the crimes perpetuated by religion, certainly, but also the practice of science, and even reason itself. If evolution is a “theory of everything,”

⁴⁵ First introduced in *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁴⁶ Dawkins’ term from *A Devil’s Chaplain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), 137-138.

⁴⁷ For example, Dan Sperber, “An objection to the memetic approach to culture,” in *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Memetics as a Science*, ed. Robert Aunger (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163-174; Scott Atran, “The trouble with memes,” *Human Nature* 12, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 351-381.

⁴⁸ “How Religion is Misunderstood” (Lecture, Swansea University, October 13, 2007), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1533> (accessed November 5, 2009).

then “the systematic critic of religion, moral integrity, self-inspection, fundamental trust must either be reduced to a personal option (I do this because I choose to do this) or it must be reduced to another form of survival strategy.” On the other hand, “The religious believer says in contrast, that moral integrity, self-inspection, honesty, openness and trust are styles of living which communicate the character of an eternal and free agency, the agency that most religions call God.” God is the stance from which explanations are sought, not (necessarily) the explanation itself.

From Williams’ point of view, then, Dawkins misunderstands the purpose and content of a life of faith. Williams quotes Prince Mishkin from Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* to this effect, saying that, when talking about religion, “Atheists always seem to be talking about something else,” not about what it is that believers actually believe, or practitioners actually practice.⁴⁹ To quote Williams at length, Christians are not saying that God is how one explains things, even very complicated things such as the origin of the universe, but

we are saying that the nature of our relationship with the universe, a relation of understanding, thinking and exploring, rational expectation, that that very structure requires some comprehensive energy at another level that sustains it as what it is. And because that comprehensive energy at another level is not the product of other things, doesn't have a history, isn't the result of processes going on, it's perhaps an appropriate object for contemplation, given that we are not going to find successful or comprehensive words for it, but can only gaze into what is undoubtedly mysterious, but not mysterious in a way which simply says this is a puzzle somebody one day might solve.⁵⁰

In theorizing about approaching God as a thing to be studied among other things, one hypothesis among many, a being to choose or not to choose, the New Atheists are missing that that is not the experience or practice of religious communities. Rather, at their best, those communities approach God with the practices appropriate to the attempt to draw near to the inherently mysterious and incomprehensible ground of all being: awe, contemplation, silence, worship and even love.

Even if we grant that religion itself may in fact be “just another” product of cultural evolution, it is a product of culture that refers beyond itself (as icon) to the ground of being, a mystery beyond words, of which there may be better and worse ways to attempt to discuss. It’s certainly possible that mysticism and Dostoevsky may be better suited for the conversation than either science or theology, both of which can become idols in their own right: science and theology are both “things that human beings do,” “a set of practices which may exhibit values and morality but [don’t] generate them.”⁵¹ To the religious believer, the values and morality themselves flow from that approach of God with fear and trembling, the experience of divine acceptance, the sound of an eternal “Yes.” Identical secular ethics may flow from another source – and God knows secular people have often been more successful than religious at being true to them – but, regardless of their source, they are not conclusions proved by scientific practice. For example, there is no scientific experiment that can prove that one of the core tenets of science should be that it focuses on ensuring that “disadvantaged and marginalized groups” have “access to the basic science and technology required to live life with dignity” – a principle adopted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, hardly a collection of fundamentalist Christians.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “Faith & Science” (Archbishop’s Holy Week Lecture, Westminster Abbey, March 17, 2008), <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/1710> (accessed November 5, 2009).

⁵² Jessica Wyndham, “The human right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress,” *AAAS Professional Ethics Report* 12, no. 4 (September 2009): 1-3.

On the contrary, practitioners of science (which Dawkins is not) have always acknowledged the constraints of community ethics which they themselves did not generate. The practice of a purely secular science, of “unfettered scientific inquiry” in Hitchens’ words,⁵³ divorced from morality, is neither ethical nor truly supportive of human flourishing. Luckily, no one truly advocates it, not even the most aggressive of the New Atheists; the “fettters” of the institutional review boards of universities, hospitals, and governments, designed to protect subjects, along with standards like Hippocratic oaths and professional guidelines, are generally regarded as vital and important aspects of culture. The practice of scientific research is, in this sense, inherently un-secular.

Conclusion

I hope this essay has shown why attending to Williams’ recent writings on secularism is helpful for an understanding of not only a religious consciousness, but an imaginative one as well. His unique position as theologian and archbishop, global leader, national intellectual, and local pastor, involves his straddling responsibilities that force him to think carefully about the practical implications of what he proposes.

From the above, I think we can draw a few conclusions about what a favorable future would look like from Williams’ point of view. First, there is a role for “procedural secularism,” a public discourse that engages with all points of view, religious and otherwise, without privileging any one group over another. This is a fundamentally receptive stance that allows for “interactive pluralism.” There is not a role, however, for programmatic secularism, which seeks to exclude all religious voices full stop, and thus all potentially reciprocal interaction. In the latter case, public reasoning becomes a matter of instrumentalism, a will to power, and where programmatic secularism leads, religious fundamentalism is sure to follow. “Brokering harmony” is a way to avoid fundamentalism, regardless of the flavor.

The second point is in regards to art. Rather than a “secularity of imagination” that assumes that there is only one possible interpretation, Williams’ future would restore to the culture an appreciation of ambiguity, ironic distance, and ultimate mystery. This is both an aesthetic and ethical issue, as good art continually questions any received state of affairs – as does good Christianity. (There is another entire essay to be written on Williams’ prescriptions for the Church in order for it to fulfill the admittedly ideal characteristics he has used as descriptors.) In the Western systems of global capitalism and Marxism, there is no room for the ambiguity of artistic expression. Art is un-secular because it is politically and economically unhelpful to those in power; art is an issue of justice.

Third, regarding science, Williams’ future would involve a lively conversation between communities of scientists and theologians that recognize that both of their fields involve personalities with histories and embodied values, and are not just an objective reporting of the facts; in other words, both are narratives. How one structures a scientific project is an implicit valuation of what is important, what is ethical, what is just. Laying bare all of one’s assumptions and values will lead to a more productive relationship between science and society, including religion.

In his book *The Concept of Mind*, philosopher of language Gilbert Ryle wrote that “Whenever a new science achieves its first big success, its enthusiastic acolytes always fancy that all questions are now soluble by extension of its methods of solving its questions.”⁵⁴ The acolytes, however, shouldn’t be quite so enthusiastic; he continues, “Physicists may one day have found the answers to all physical questions, but not all questions are physical questions.” Perhaps this could be a paraphrase of Williams’ position on the program of secularism. Worthy though they may be, secular politics, secular art, and

⁵³ *God Is Not Great*, 283.

⁵⁴ *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 76.

secular science are bankrupt when they come up against the lure of transcendence which history shows to be a desire intrinsic to the human person. Totalizing worldviews may make attempts to eradicate religion (or, in the case of religious fundamentalism, replace a totalizing secularism with a totalizing religiosity), but they are ultimately doomed to failure. The sooner we lay aside the recriminations and get on with conversation about, reflection on, and practice of the good life and the just city, the better we'll be able to face the rest of the 21st century. As a Communion, and as citizens of the world, we could do much worse than to have Rowan Williams leading the way.

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