

# TIME AND TRANSFORMATION: A CONVERSATION WITH ROWAN WILLIAMS

By: Breyfogle, Todd, Cross Currents, Fall 1995, Vol. 45, Issue 3

*A leading Anglican theologian advocates a theology infused by the aesthetic – music, poetry, the visual arts – and marked by skill in religious practice.*

The Rt. Rev. Rowan Williams is widely respected as one of Britain's leading theologians, scholars, and ecclesiastical figures. Born in 1950 and educated at Cambridge, he received his doctorate in 1975 and was later lecturer in theology at that university. From 1986 to 1992 he served as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, a position which he relinquished to become Bishop of Monmouth in his native Wales. In addition to his considerable duties as bishop, he continues to write and lecture in academic theology and remains in great demand as a preacher.

In the finest tradition of the Anglican scholar-priest, Rowan Williams combines, both in theory and practice, the highest scholarly erudition with a profound commitment to the theologian's responsibility to the church and the world, a combination well exhibited in his lucid and insightful prose. For him, scholarship is no mere academic exercise, while life in the church engenders not just practical but serious theoretical reflection. In moving between the ecclesiastical and academic worlds with unusual ease, Rowan Williams stands as a significant example of how a late twentieth-century Christian can understand the relationship between religion and the intellectual life. Those who mourned his loss to the university could rejoice in the church's gain.

He combines a rare sensitivity to the theology and the spirituality of the church fathers and the medieval tradition with a detailed knowledge of contemporary intellectual movements. In addition to scores of scholarly articles and essays on patristics, medieval theology, and contemporary theology and social concerns, Rowan Williams's books include: *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979; Boston: Cowley, 1991); *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982; New York: Pilgrim, 1984); *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987); *The Truce of God* (New York: Pilgrim, 1983); and *Teresa of Avila* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse, 1991). He has recently published a book of poetry, as well as the collection *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994); published in the U.S. as *A Ray of Darkness* (Boston: Cowley, 1995).

The Bishop of Monmouth's residence is situated between the urban port center of Newport and the pastoral mountains which define the Wye valley. Here again Rowan Williams occupies the middle ground between the active and the contemplative life, between the challenges of the modern world and the mystic chords of the Christian tradition. I had the pleasure of visiting the bishop earlier this year at his residence, where he lives with his wife, Jane, and daughter Rhannon. The following is a condensation of our conversation.

**Breyfogle:** You are well known as a theologian, a preacher, and an educator of many of the younger generation of British theologians. Could you say a bit about how you yourself first became interested in theology?

**Williams:** When I was about fourteen or fifteen doing literature for Ordinary Levels, as they were called, I suddenly realized that the sort of thing being discussed, especially in the poetry of Thomas Hardy of all things, focused on the questions of my own faith. I was a bit bored by religious studies, you see, but very fired by English – that was what really gave me a spark about thinking theologically. I thought about studying English when I went to university, and did my scholarship examination for Cambridge in literary studies. But I thought, No, I'd better tackle proper theology. And I didn't regret it.

**B:** What was it about the teaching of religious studies at school that didn't appeal to you?

**W:** It was very heavily biblical, and it didn't seem to engage the imagination at all. It was mostly about St. Paul's missionary journeys, and that sort of thing. Though I do remember being a bit touched by the Hebrew prophets. The rest just seemed history and it didn't capture me.

**B:** Besides Hardy, were there other authors in literature who captured you?

**W:** At that time I was quite overwhelmed by my discovery of John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, and Thomas Traherne. And I still remember an Easter holiday spent reading my way through an anthology of the metaphysical poets. But also King Lear.

**B:** What was it in particular about Lear that interested you?

**W:** It was the uncompromising quality of the tragic vision—the constant refusal to believe in easy answers. It sometimes challenges you by saying, “This is true, isn't it, when you really look at it?” It was that quality – that almost . . . ferocity about the vision of Lear – that held me and challenged me, and worries me still.

**B:** We don't normally think of literary figures as theologians, properly speaking, but would you be willing to call any of these authors – or others – theologians?

**W:** I'd call Donne and Herbert theologians in a big way, and some of the moderns like Eliot and Auden too, in the sense that Eliot defines poetry itself as a way of thinking. The danger, of course, is of a poetry that just becomes a transcription of religious ideas. But for someone like Eliot, it's a way of thinking because it's a way of feeling. When you look at how Herbert, particularly, actually structures his poetry, you see that in the very rhetoric a theological point is being made – the way in which his poems end, sometimes, the way in which he allows the divine voice to interrupt, to subvert or contradict. All that seems to me to be a real doing of theology. And Donne, certainly, is as much a theologian in his poetry as in his preaching.

**B:** Are there elements in the rhetoric of modern theology that have missed this literary quality, and if so, what are the consequences for contemporary theology of ignoring this relationship between form and content?

**W:** It's an interesting question. I've described poetry as a way of thinking but of course theology, you can say, is a way of talking. I mean that theology is a language used by a specific group of people to make sense of their world – not so much to explain it as to find words that will hold or reflect what in the environment is sensed to be solid, authoritative, and creative of where we stand. Thus theology is always involved with doing new or odd things with speech. When Gregory of Nazianzen addresses the question of theological method in his Second Theological Oration, he begins by saying we've got to consider who does this, and with whom. And that's saying that theology is a way of talking, and a way of transforming and negotiating with or in language. It's not just a report or a set of arguments. Scholasticism represents a very strong alternative tradition – the impulse to get things sorted out. By the time you get to someone like Occam, the literary element is, well, pretty negligible. Even more than in Thomas, this is an “algebra,” which has its place, but it shifts you more and more away from the tradition that theology ought to think of itself as a literary endeavor, as a way of talking, as a way of transforming language. Theology is not poetry, exactly, but it's close.

In the contemporary intellectual world, theology has got to operate in all sorts of different ways, on all sorts of different levels. And it feels as though it's got to maintain its respectability alongside other intellectual discourses, even while it's uneasily conscious that that's not where its own territory lies. I feel we lose out here, and that the effectiveness of some of the very great theologians of the twentieth century – Barth and von Balthasar above all – is their willingness to think about the way form and content go together.

Of course, in some kinds of recent intellectual discourse – postmodernism being one – part of what I'm alluding to is returning in the sense of philosophy as the performing of a rhetoric. Gillian Rose, whose political thought has been immensely important for me, writes in such a way that you have to work with her, and almost “perform” with her when reading: you have to sense with her the pressures that shift her language this way and that.

**B:** It's precisely this performative aspect that patristic and medieval theology always evokes. One has to be transformed, in a sense, to understand what's going in the *Confessions* or the *De Trinitate*, for instance; Augustine tries to bring you along with him.

**W:** Yes. And to give a modern example that has powerfully touched me – Bonhoeffer's prison letters, and above all, the letter to his godson. He's saying there that theology as a way of dealing with peculiar concepts is dead, not because it's untrue or even because it's irrelevant, but because somehow the kind of language it represents is no longer a language of transformation. God knows, says Bonhoeffer, how you'll get back to that condition; it will be gift, not planning, that brings it about. For me that remains a kind of writing on the wall for all contemporary theology.

**B:** One important issue for contemporary theology, in connection with postmodernism, is the question of truth. As you know, there's a side of postmodernism that is very unhappy with making any kind of assertion of truth, and there's another side that's a bit more sanguine. What do you see as the liabilities and advantages of postmodernism for contemporary theology?

**W:** Right – and in not more than twenty-five words!

My unease with that strand of postmodernism which simply withdraws from the question of truth is partly literary and partly political. On the literary side – I’m using literary in a very loose sense – I think it’s in danger of stepping back from the difficulty of speech. Why is it hard to talk interestingly, honestly – why? Because it is. To find there are things you can only say with difficulty shows that language has to do with engagements – there’s a level beyond play. A good friend and respected colleague, Dewi Phillips, likes to say, “If I say to you I can’t tell you how grateful I am, I tell you how grateful I am.” Now it’s that kind of difficulty or fracture in what one can say that seems to me of enormous philosophical interest. One of the reasons I love Hegel is that he appreciates this difficulty. I worry at the way in certain kinds of postmodernist discourse that that sort of difficulty is being replaced by the artificial difficulty of self-contained, self-reflexive jargon. So that’s my literary, linguistic worry.

My political worry is that there must be some sort of discourse about common interest. We’ve got to face the question of how we prevent the postmodern turn from simply descending into a new tribalism. This tribalism is tolerable perhaps if you live in a university, but not so much fun if you live in Sarajevo. In some sense it’s a banal question, but what exactly has postmodernity to say to the people of Sarajevo? You know, what exactly did Jean Baudrillard mean by arguing, in effect, that the Gulf War never happened? It’s very clever, but I’m not sure that it gets you very far. So my political worry is that postmodernism can actually be the ultimate self-absolving from political responsibility – that is, from another kind of difficulty, the difficulty of someone else’s discourse, representing someone else’s location. The work of politics is always getting to the point of acknowledging that it is possible, somehow, to arrive at a definition of interest that’s neither mine nor yours. What’s especially worrying now is that the tribalism of postmodernity is married up with what is sometimes called “the Balkanization of interest groups.” In politics both in America and over here, we have to find a way to help different interest groups and pressure groups move from the language of victimage to an examination of the common good.

There’s been some interesting work done on how postmodernity leaves us with no recommendations about, for example, how you might generate a common discourse for diverse marginal groups – one that speaks for women and people of color and abused children and underpaid workers in the Third World. If there is only a generalized discourse of victimage, there is always continuing competition to “trump” other groups in terms of intensity or absoluteness of suffering. You need something more for an ethics or politics, not only of emancipation but of common work.

**B:** I have a great deal of sympathy with both of your worries, and they are not unrelated to the question of truth and reality. The postmoderns I admire almost always strike me as being essentially pre-modern, in the sense that they emphasize there is indeed a reality – the difficulty being in articulating that reality adequately without closing it off, without putting it in a box. Whereas the more problematic side of postmodernity, to my mind, alleges that the difficulty is so great that we cannot say anything meaningful at all.

**W:** Yes. It’s a hairline between saying with someone like Mark Taylor, “the meaning is in the gaps,” and saying that the meaning is in the fact that the gaps are between something. One person who is very interesting on this is Walker Percy whom I’ve been reading again recently. He makes the point that once language becomes aware of itself, absence or negativity becomes a

problem in language, not outside it. “Absence” isn’t a primordial abyss: it takes its shape from what it lies between, and you can’t think absence or negation apart from what “frames” it – at least you can’t do that without stopping thinking altogether. Which can’t be done; Hegel again, I suppose.

**B:** Isn’t Aristotle, in his discussion of *ousia* in the *Metaphysics*, trying to articulate exactly what you were getting at with Walker Percy? *Ousia* is the name he gives to the gap, as it were, between the two pillars.

**W:** Yes, I warm to that greatly – that the way in which certain things are talked about is by indicating an edge, if you like. You’re not pushing into the abyss; that’s not what it’s about because then you’d stop talking, stop thinking or acting. And you’re not saying that the edge can be clearly mapped, but you try to delineate where that edge is, and why it’s important neither to jump over it nor to stay within it. To see Aristotle on *ousia* in that way is very illuminating.

**B:** Following up on this difficulty of articulating that which falls in the gaps or that which lies behind things we can speak of, I was struck by your essay in *Open to Judgment* (published in the U.S. as *A Ray of Darkness*) on the relationship between music and theology. I’ll read the paragraph that struck me most and ask you to comment: “The authority of music, what silences and holds us, is, then, one of the fullest parables we have of the authority of God, not in commanding and imposing from outside, but in asking for our time, so that it can become a time of mending and building. In that double gift – time given away, time given back – we are taken more deeply into the wisdom of God, and freed from the destructive illusion that we are supposed to be God. There is no wisdom for us if we cannot receive it as gift. . . .” I thought that was wonderful, partly because I remember a lecture on Christology you gave in which you discussed the question of Christ’s will and intellect in terms of one of the late string quartets of Beethoven.

**W:** Of course it’s a venerable cliché that all art aspires to the condition of music – I doubt very much whether it’s really true. However, music is quintessentially about duration, and that has some implications for all human creation, I suspect. There’s no way of thinking about or responding intelligently to music that isn’t about taking time; the meaning is in the taking of time. That speaks to me very forcefully because certainly one dimension of theology is about the time, the history of relationship with God. There are things that cannot be said without the taking of time.

Now, what does that mean? It means, for example, that in the life of the church – whatever kind of church you belong to – the time taken in liturgy becomes essential to the business of liturgy. You don’t tell the Passion story all at once, you “walk it through.” (I’ve just come back from Jerusalem, where I “walked through” the ceremonies of Greek Orthodox Easter – and so this is at the very top of my mind.) It means, too, that the business of doing theology itself should have about it a quality that is never quite reducible to arguments that are packaged and passed on, but should be visible in a quality of speech and argument that takes time, and waits.

The language of music appeals to me as an analogy when I’m trying to deal with issues in theology, as in the Christological question. It’s a way, for instance, of talking about concepts like

formation and obedience. We get into an appalling tangle when we start thinking about will and freedom in Christ, and what obedience and sinlessness are. And it helps occasionally just to come around from a completely different angle and ask, Well, what is the obedience of a performer to the composer? It is in one sense in a fine performance – not perfect obedience, but no performer worth his or her salt would say it's an extinguishing awe. Building on that, of course – and here I think above all of Torteliev performing Bach on the cello – it's a relation of joy. And it's the liberation of will and self into something else. This is just one way in which music can be put into theological service as an analogy that springs us from logic traps.

**B:** On this question of taking time, and performance and practice – the musician has to practice before engaging in a performance – how do you see the relationship between spirituality and theology?

**W:** I've become more and more interested in the practicalities of what we so inadequately call spirituality. Several meanings run through the history of Christianity, some of them very eccentric but also very suggestive. Your question is partly about the way in which modern Christianity – Protestant mainly – ignores what we might call the acquisition of skills. We think we can alter things by taking thought, by information. We don't have much patience for the acquisition of skill. Any Buddhist will tell you that you can't begin to think in a Buddhist way without the acquiring of skills, even if it is simply the skill of sitting in uncomfortable positions on unyielding floors, or getting up very early in the morning to blow nine-foot brass horns in the Himalayas. I think our language about spirituality these days had better give a little thought to the question of skills, as had our language about theology.

We North Atlantic modern Christians construct religiousness so much in terms of ideas that we get ourselves into a terrible tangle over dialogue with other religious traditions which simply don't. We want to say, "Let's sit down and talk about the ideas we have in common," and the Muslim, the Buddhist, the Orthodox Jew reply – very reasonably, I think – "Well, we don't want to talk about those things because a great deal of what we're about has to do with the skills of doing things." This can lead us into the very uncomfortable position of constructing a religious reconciliation between traditions by reading out of others what corresponds to the way modern North Atlantic Christians speak or write. Which, as far as I'm concerned, is a completely un-Christian form of interreligious dialogue. The other thing about acquiring skills is that it doesn't give you much possibility of constructing a solution, or achieving reconciliation around the table, but it can lead to some interesting mutual learning.

One of the most useful and impressive interfaith documents I know is the collection *Speaking in Silences*, the record of a Christian-Buddhist dialogue that was largely between practitioners – monastics and contemplatives, people interested in skills.

**B:** What are the resources in Christianity – texts or traditions – which you see as being helpful in giving rebirth to this emphasis on skills or practices?

**W:** I think it really is possible to make liturgy work. That's a big claim, but I've seen it done very well. And making liturgy work means using the imagination about perceptions of time altered, about time taken, about the disposition of space, about the rhythms of words. I'm very

struck by the impact that Taize has had on the North Atlantic Christian mind – Catholic and Protestant – because the North Atlantic Christian mind has fallen on Taize like a thirsty person in the desert on water: “Ah yes, I remember, we used to be able to do this.” Something of the importance of skill or wisdom comes over people in a very simple context like that. There’s the whole Eastern Christian tradition of watching, working with and stilling your bodily and intellectual rhythms--matching words to breath and heartbeat, and so on, and learning in this way to redirect or reshape emotions and wear down the impulse to fantasy. There’s much on this from Evagrius and Nilus in the fourth and fifth centuries to the Russian writers of the nineteenth century – Inno-kent Brianchaninov, the anonymous author of *The Way of a Pilgrim*, and so on. And then there’s liturgy. It’s the same thing with the techniques for stilling the mind. So we’ve got some starting point to work from, which we ignore at our peril. It would be a pity if spirituality simply meant reading more books. When it really comes down to it, at some point people will ask, “Well, what do I do?” Not “what ideas should I have?,” but “what should I do?”

**B:** How does being a bishop encourage such a union of practice and thought?

**W:** One reason I accepted this rather surprising invitation to become bishop of Monmouth was that I had an idea of what a bishop might be, and I wondered whether it could be done. I’m not sure yet. Musical analogies come to mind again – to see what can be done by creatively conducting a Christian community, trying to adjust the balances, trying to make the voices that aren’t heard hearable, and to see if they can be woven into what is said overall.

**B:** What to your mind is the biggest problem facing the Welsh church at the moment?

**W:** There are two big problems. First, we are short of material resources, and therefore the management of what we have is difficult. What happens to historic properties which require enormous investments in upkeep? And if we’re going to maintain the level of pastoral care we currently have, we need to find money for clergy and other pastoral workers. The second is the fact that we in Wales are still in the middle of our debates about the ordination of women. If, as seems likely, the proposal fails again in the next vote, we are likely to face several years of bitterness and frustration.

**B:** What changes has the ordination of women brought to the Anglican Church? Where is the debate heading?

**W:** People on both sides of the debate sometimes talk as if the ordination of women to the priesthood or the episcopate would change everything. But in those churches that have done it, the structures remain remarkably like what they used to be. I’ve sometimes said, not without irony, to people worried about the ordination of women, “Don’t panic. When women are ordained, the church will be just as dull as it’s always been.” Sometimes that needs to be heard, not to diminish either the hurt or the urgency of the issue, but just to remind us that women’s ordination by itself is not the messianic issue. It is – or should be – part of a serious witness to the requirements of the kingdom of God, which the church has taken a long time living up to.

This is very hard to say without sounding censorious, but I worry a bit at the highly secularized and politicized language of the debate on both sides, as well as the tactics of pressure groups. I’m

worried about an eroding of the church's sense of a common task. We are on a long, long journey to fulfill the requirements of the kingdom, facing up to what I believe to be the implications of an orthodox classical Christology: that priestly ministry is something concentrated in the person and act of Jesus, communicated in baptism, and then focused and made public in certain people, who are there to speak and represent to the baptized what their common calling is. Opposition to the ordination of women sometimes produces strange theologies, which to my mind tend to erode the bases of classical Christology. That makes me rather anxious. Sometimes people think they're defending the tradition when in fact they go against the grain of much patristic orthodoxy. Look at some of what's written about the symbolic complementarity of "the" male and "the" female as active and passive, or "ek-static" and receptive. I can't see Augustine making much of that. Or the way some – especially some conservative U.S. Episcopalians – treat the epithet of "Father" for the first person of the Trinity as not only an absolute and exclusive "given" of revelation, but as really confirming a privilege for masculine terms for God. Athanasius and Nazianzen would, I think, be very startled.

**B:** To switch gears a bit, the Anglican Church in England has always had a strong tradition of a link between the church and the university, particularly in theology, where most if not all of the distinguished professorships are open only to ordained clergy. How essential is this overlap between church and university, and ought one, ideally, be ordained in order to do theology?

**W:** Yes, I think the link is good for both church and university. The academy does need reminding from time to time that theology as an academic discipline is parasitic on people saying their rosaries or whatever the equivalent is, that it is in some sense phenomenologically biased toward the practices of communities. And it doesn't do too much harm for a practitioner to be involved in the teaching of theology. I don't think that's necessarily an inherent compromising of academic rigor. After all, to use my favorite musical analogy again, you don't encourage tone-deaf people to teach those starting to study music in the university. But it's also important for the health of the church to keep alive the self-critical element within the discourse of the community, so that I couldn't say ordination was "ideal" or normative, to the extent that ordination inevitably carries an element of pastoral and constructive responsibility as a priority.

I've sometimes suggested that theology breaks down into a kind of threefold movement, which could be described as celebratory, communicative, and critical. The church is always a bit prone to hang on to the "celebratory" mode – where we concentrate on rehearsing and articulating what's been received – and forget that by itself this becomes self-indulgent. The academy, on the other hand, hangs on to the "critical" mode and can forget why there's a discourse there to be analyzed in the first place. And a lot of attempts at evangelism, and some "theologies of" secular reality – many of the "emancipatory" styles, liberation and feminist theologies, and so on – stick with the communicative model – how do we speak of God so as to meet these contemporary needs, how do we make sense in this or that group language? – and so drift away from both celebration or contemplation and authentic criticism. Ideally, theology is always a three-way conversation between these elements; each is damaged when it's out of touch with the others.

**B:** There's been a lot of interest over the last four or five years in von Balthasar. To what do you attribute this revival or explosion of interest?

**W:** I think it has something to do with a recognition that theology has got to tackle the aesthetic, and Balthasar's work is nothing if not a response to that. My own interest goes back to my undergraduate work in the sixties when Donald MacKinnon introduced a number of us to Balthasar in the days when hardly anything was translated and there was a sense of swimming against the tide. Some had read in translation his great book on Barth, others his book on prayer or his *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*. It was from MacKinnon's students that there came the group that translated *Herrlichkeit* into English. Recent interest has surely been helped by the availability of translations; today there's an awful lot of Balthasar to get through, though I still claim that two shorter works, *Engagement with God* and *Man in History*, give you an excellent purchase on the essence of his thought, on the mixture of struggle with God and eros toward God that, for him, constitutes the heart of all human culture.

One of the problems has been that he's had a particular kind of political profile within the Roman Catholic Church, which has made it a lot harder for Roman Catholics than non-Roman Catholics to appreciate him. Some Roman Catholics feel, understandably, that this is the man who is the ideologue of the present pope's apparent rolling back of the Vatican II legacy. He is cited as an apologist for a strong doctrine of papal authority and priestly celibacy and a male ministry – and so he is. But these aren't the first things to notice. If you had read Balthasar in the sixties as part of a great movement of revival and retrieval of a constructive traditionalism that begins with the *nouvelle theologie* in the fifties – I read him along with de Lubac and Danielou, where I think he'd like to be read – it strikes you as very odd to see him picked up now by a far less cultivated and literate style of theology than he himself would be at home with.

**B:** He seems a rather odd sort of hero for that reason, especially among Anglicans.

**W:** Anglicans read him, I think, neither as a villain nor a messiah – in much the way as Anglicans, or some Anglicans, have learned to read Barth. I think that's right and proper. If you don't regard him as the ideologue of a particular position but as a great theologian, you're allowed to disagree. After all, great writers make great mistakes. That doesn't in the least diminish the fact that there is here an astonishingly bold, venturesome way of reading a whole range of European culture around the focal images of Christian Catholic faith, and nothing can take away the strength and resourcefulness of that.

**B:** With Balthasar we return to the esthetic quality which we were talking about before – the contribution of things like literature, music, and here visual arts.

**W:** Visual arts, yes. Balthasar has a very strongly visual imagination, that's one of the interesting things about the way he writes. And again, the way he writes is important. I think sometimes this can lead him into a kind of confusion between what is rhetorically effective and what is theologically defensible; there are passages – on aspects of the doctrine of Mary, or on the papacy – which make me scratch my head sometimes. But overall, it is that fusion of style and substance which helps again to make it fascinating and resourceful.

**B:** One American Catholic essayist who manages an extraordinary fusion of style and substance is Richard Rodriguez. His essays are not unlike Percy's, and his esthetic appreciation frequently

discloses some remarkable reflections on the religious elements of American life and thought. I recommend him to you.

**W:** Thanks. And I'll tell you someone I've enjoyed among essayists – and also as a novelist: Mary Gordon. There were some very shrewd observations in her collection *Bad Girls and Good Boys* several years ago, not only about literary matters but also about American Catholicism as she experienced it. There are a couple of pieces there on abortion which, although I've got a lot of reservations about what she says, do seem to avoid the worst rhetorical excesses of the pro-choice and pro-life conflict, and have some fresh things to say.

**B:** I think there's a lot of room for a revival of the Christian essay as a sort of counterpoint to the monograph style of theology.

**W:** Yes, I think so. I hope I think so not just because I'm too lazy to write monographs.

**B:** But that was one of the things I liked so much about *Open to Judgment*. Your addresses and sermons had a sort of immediacy to them and were expressed in thoughtful but nontechnical language. Which reminds me that I wanted to ask what you think of the sermon as a genre at the moment, and what for you is a good sermon.

**W:** As you realize, I do think the sermon is properly a resource for doing theology. I tried to spell out in the introduction to *Open to Judgment* some of what I thought of the sermon as the moment when reflection on Scripture and tradition meets a contemporary need; out of that resource different things are drawn and stimulated – activated – by the question particular to the occasion. Written sermons, literary sermons, I also said, were now difficult to do, if not a mistake. There are still occasions where they are possible, though. But 95 percent of my preaching is of course quite different – it's standing in front of a smallish congregation and speaking directly. Ultimately, a good sermon is one that makes you love God more and trust God more. But in the process of helping you love God more and trust God more, it should make that possible love and trust come alive in relation to particular questions or particular crises that an individual or a group may be facing. There's a lot to be said for it really. I actually like preaching – it's a bit unfashionable to say it but I do; it's stretching.

**B:** One of your books I like best is *Resurrection*, a series of relatively informal addresses. Your style there admirably avoids so much of what weighs down academic theology, with its footnotes and so forth, while emerging to my mind as one of the best books on liberation theology.

**W:** One reviewer who wasn't completely sympathetic described it as a "loosely disciplined stream of consciousness," so don't have too many illusions about its qualities!

**B:** Your emphasis on the resurrection – and as you mentioned before, the ability to ascertain that there's a point that is not just my interest, and not just your interest, but our common interest – makes plain that the gospel requires both judgment and forgiveness.

**W:** Yes, forgiveness is something that's much on my mind at the moment – I'm trying to write a short piece on it. Forgiveness is another of those subjects where we're very unwilling to think

about the time it takes for certain things to be achieved. And where we're prone to believe that the only options are forgetfulness or resentment. To drive between those poles is a very long task.

**B:** And a painful one.

**W:** Yes. My favorite Welsh-language poet, Waldo Williams – he was a Quaker school teacher in West Wales – says in one of his poems that forgiveness is “cutting a path through the thorns to stand alongside your old enemy.” You see, the thorns actually hurt, and you have to keep cutting.

**B:** I'd like to talk a bit about your longstanding interest in the Orthodox tradition. Your dissertation was on Vladimir Lossky; how did you come across him in the first place?

**W:** When I was an undergraduate, I met the great Nicholas Zernov, one of the greatest and most lovable emigre characters in Britain. He helped to stimulate an interest in Russian Orthodox history at the turn of the century when there was a brief renaissance of religious thought, largely among people disillusioned with Russian Marxism; they had sort of burrowed their way back into the tradition.

**B:** Solovyov?

**W:** Later than Solovyov – Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Semyon Frank, and others. I thought at first I'd like to work on some of these people, but they're all in very difficult Russian indeed. But I had come across Lossky's book, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, as a student and used it a bit in reading patristics – rather to the horror of some of my tutors, I think. So, in my first year of research when I was casting around for a way of narrowing my field, my supervisor, Donald Allchin, presented me with an enormous bundle of unpublished material by Lossky, transcripts of tape recordings of his lectures.

**B:** In English?

**W:** In French, praise be, though I continued, with limited success, to struggle with Russian. I remember he plonked these down on my desk and said, “There's your thesis.” And so it was. Because what I was able to do then was to work from this material from his last years, representing his most mature reflection, testing that against his earlier writings – *The Mystical Theology* and other books – and looking at his very complex and rather dialectical relationship with the Russian philosophical tradition that I'd originally been interested in. My argument was that while he thinks he's using the Fathers in the ecclesiastical tradition against the Russian philosophical world, he's very often reading the Fathers through the eyes of the very people he's disagreeing with. Which doesn't mean that his work lacks integrity; on the contrary, it gives it an extra interest, and an extra edge.

So, what did I get from that? The theme that came to the forefront in reading Lossky was his increasing concern with the ineffability of the human person. To sum up his position, talking about the person is as difficult as talking about God. If you want to talk about human beings in the image of God, it may be in that difficulty and elusiveness that the centrally human is to be

located, not in any quality that we and God have in common. It turned out that Lossky's great concern with negative theology and apophatic theology applied to humanity as well as divinity. I found that – and still find it – extremely interesting. When we're talking about the human, we occupy the same edge of difficulty that we occupy when talking about God. And we face the same danger of falling over into rather banal generalities. We might say that human beings are what they are in virtue of having such-and-such qualities in common; or we might reject this and refuse to address the question of the human as such. I think Lossky pushes beyond that to say that the personal in us is not an item among others: it is the strangeness and difficulty, the irreducibility, within any relation.

So Lossky is fascinating, and his construction of what it means to call human beings the image of God – specifically, the image of the Trinity – in the context of a very chastened apophatic theology – that went quite deep and stuck with me. It was Lossky who rubbed my nose in the whole idea of the theology of negation and what it did and didn't mean. I've continued to read not only Lossky but other writings from that world. Bulgakov continues to be a major interest; I'm hoping to translate some of his essays and commentaries. Lossky and Bulgakov had a terrific public row in 1935-36, and yet to me they seem to be brothers under the skin.

**B:** What about Berdyaev?

**W:** I loved Berdyaev when I was seventeen and haven't been able to read him seriously since. He has the same effect on me as Tillich, I'm afraid to say. That is, it's all very exciting, but I haven't a clue what you're supposed to do about it. I suspect that with both Tillich and Berdyaev you're dealing with people – I have to state this carefully – who are essentially rhetoricians, so much involved in the process of the rhetoric that other dimensions of the discourse just seem to fade away. That is to say, the experience of reading them is what the text is about; I'm afraid there's an emptiness behind it. It's a pity that for many people Berdyaev represents the Russian Orthodox mindset, and most Russians tear their hair out at that suggestion.

**B:** Speaking of your interest in Russian thought and literature, where do you come down on the famous question, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky?

**W:** It depends on which day of the week. Dostoevsky at the end of the day, as you might guess. And yet.. when all is said and done, there is nothing like War and Peace. And the stories, Hadji Murad, The Death of Ivan Ilyich, The Kreutzer Sonata – Dostoevsky never wrote anything that has the formal perfection of those late stories. Nor did he write anything that has the sheer human range of War and Peace. To me this is actually a very interesting general question about evaluation and esthetic judgment. Take Victorian novelists in Britain like Trollope and Dickens. Dickens can do what Trollope can never do; Dickens can touch places that Trollope never reaches. On the other hand, Trollope can do some things Dickens can't – he can, for instance, depict plausible women, which Dickens just cannot do.

I've sometimes applied this, rather mischievously, as an analogy to interfaith dialogue. You may be completely committed to Dostoevsky or Dickens, but you may have to say, "And yet there are things they can't do that other writers can do." You may say, "At the end of the day it's Dickens or Dostoevsky who makes you inhabit an imaginative world adequate to the world we

experience. They have the breadth – yet. . . . “And I’d say something like that about Christianity and Buddhism, for example. There are things Buddhists can do that Christians can’t do. This doesn’t mean that I don’t hold to the Christian creed or believe that it has in some ways a universal pertinence; I just know that there are some things Buddhists are better at. They have a massive skill and experience in the systematic remaking of our consciousness, both by ritual and by meditation, and in the Mahayana at least, a huge philosophical sophistication. This doesn’t mean we ought to be doing all that, but should recognize that we have clumsier tools in some areas.

Going back to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy – I said that Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* has a human range that’s missing in Dostoevsky. Yes, but Tolstoy does that at a price. The human range of *War and Peace* is in a strange way somehow less than the “range,” in some other sense – the depth, I suppose – of *The Idiot* or *The Possessed*. One of the great paradoxes is that Tolstoy’s life is so much like a novel by Dostoevsky; the incidents of Tolstoy’s last days could have come from book three of some unwritten novel by Dostoevsky.

**B:** In a way I’ve often thought of Tolstoy as a horizontal thinker – he gets the breadth whereas Dostoevsky takes you to the very depths of the human soul. You mentioned there is an analogy here to be applied to understanding, say, Christianity and Buddhism. Might there not also be an analogy to different modes of doing Christian theology?

**W:** Yes, I’m sure that’s right. I think that quite often the theologians I turn to, the ones who move me, are those who drill a well rather than those who are system-builders. Much as I love Barth, Bonhoeffer is, I think, a well-driller. Bonhoeffer speaks, and nearly every time you hit water. Balthasar seems to me like someone who drills wells all over the place, an obsessive well-driller, and certainly not a system-builder. A writer like Sebastian Moore speaks to me because of that well-drilling quality, too.

**B:** To mention another twentieth-century thinker, you said that Austin Farrer was the greatest Anglican theologian of this century – I think you then bracketed it and said, “Not that he’s had much competition.” Could you speak about why you have found Farrer so compelling over the years, and whether he still seems so?

**W:** I still find him compelling. Again, I began to read him as an undergraduate, and actually worked my way through *Finite and Infinite* over a long summer vacation. Farrer to me is exemplary not so much because of a work like *Finite and Infinite*, which is a great systematic essay, but because of his willingness to start again. After he’d finished it, it’s almost as if he said, “It’s a good idea, but it’s not quite the way to do it,” and increasingly he wrote in a sort of essayist style. His short pieces, collected posthumously, are often of the greatest possible value. I find that in six pages on the Incarnation he can say a great deal more than anybody else in a book on the subject. The same applies to his sermons; he’s another person who theologizes through his sermons. And he’s a man who cares intensely how things are said. People have often remarked that, unusually among academics, he has digested his sources so completely that they become his own, and you won’t find any footnotes, which is very frustrating for the research student but quite a relief in some ways for other readers. So in all these ways I think he’s got the edge on most of his competitors.

Now the thing I find uncomfortable with him is a real tone-deafness about political and social issues. He was a political conservative, and I think a very unimaginative one. And I think too that sometimes for him the elegant formula evades an argument. That being said, he seems to me to stand alone as an Anglican intellect. Does one call him a theologian? Obviously, but not a systematician – perhaps a Christian intellectual is the best description.

**B:** Are there others you recommend in contemporary British theology – young and old – to an American audience?

**W:** Not an easy question. But I continue to be fascinated, provoked and instructed by John Milbank. He's more and more doing constructive work on theology of a very interesting, fresh kind. Another person who won't be well known in the States is Andrew Shanks. His book on Hegel's political theology is excellent, and his new work on political theology, which will be out quite soon, is almost diametrically opposite in its concerns to Milbank's. It's fascinating, graceful in expression, clear, and extremely original. I also continue to learn a great deal from Frances Young, a well-driller whose work seems to me to have grown and deepened in the most extraordinary way in the last ten years, and whose willingness to introduce the experiential is particularly moving. In addition, my long friendship with Nicholas Lash is still a very important intellectual relationship.

**B:** Of the four you mention, Lash is probably the best known in America. I asked the question partly because, in spite of the common language, there are almost two different theological communities.

**W:** It's important that we make efforts to bridge the gap. It works both ways – we are very ignorant here of some of the interesting work on the other side of the Atlantic. Again there are familiar names like David Tracy, and George Lindbeck has been discussed quite a bit, though Hans Frei has never made the impact he might have, and the tensions between the different styles of Yale and Chicago (post-liberal and residually liberal) are still not much discussed or understood.

But I sense that the newer generation here is more and more interesting. They come to their theology as – to use a potentially misleading term – humanists, that is, people with a sense of the real intellectual vitality and difficulty and resourcefulness in theology, as an “arts” discipline. While the people I have in mind have very strong explicit confessional commitments, none of them is a confessional theologian in the regular sense. They're concerned with theology in the intellectual marketplace – that's what I mean by humanist. They're prepared to think and reflect on the imaginative and social-political environment, but they're not just “religious studies” liberals. That seems to be a very interesting place to be; I think it promises very well for the future.

**B:** A lighthearted question in closing – if you could take a handful of books, music recordings and visual art to your exile on a desert island, what would you choose?

**W:** Books? The Spiritual Letters of Abbot Chapman. Bleak House. Certainly the St. Matthew Passion, not the St. John Passion – Dostoevsky versus Tolstoy again! Probably the Monteverdi

Vespers – it’s hugely exuberant, lovely. For the visual arts: Rublev’s Trinity. It’s one of the relatively few pictures of God that looks as if it’s drawn from real life. It’s an achieved whole. It’s in the chapel here, it’s on my desk, it’s meant a great deal to me for thirty years. Finally, probably one of Rembrandt’s pictures of his mother. I’ve talked about taking time. One of the glories to me of Rembrandt’s pictures is that they show time and patience taken, faces lived in, faces formed over time. Rembrandt’s pictures of his mother are about that patience of living, the patience of taking time.

~~~~~

By Todd Breyfogle

TODD BREYFOGLE, a doctoral candidate in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago, also conducted – with Thomas Levergood – “A Conversation with David Tracy” in Cross Currents, Fall 1994.