

***Writing in the Dust:* Rowan Williams on Solidarity and the Rebuilding of Community**

Twenty-five years after 9/11, Rowan Williams's reflections in "Writing in the Dust" remain a compelling invitation to ask what violence reveals about us. Rather than seeking explanations or assigning blame, this series explores the practices through which human beings learn to respond to loss, recognize one another more truthfully, and rebuild the bonds that make solidarity and community possible.

1. Loss, Grief, and the Search for Meaning

Some events resist explanation and permanently alter the way we see the world. Rather than rushing to fill the resulting void with certainty or ideology, faith asks a more difficult question: what are we prepared to learn from loss, vulnerability, and uncertainty?

2. Violence, Retaliation, and the Recovery of Agency

Violence always incites to more violence. Christian tradition challenges the assumption that agency consists in retaliation and invites to search for ways of breaking the cycle of violence.

3. Recognition and the Humanity of the Other

The stranger can become a symbol onto which we project our anxieties and fears. Recognition requires us to encounter others in their irreducible particularity rather than through our projections.

4. Solidarity and the Building of Community

Communities are rebuilt through ordinary practices of participation, service, and care that often go unnoticed until moments of crisis reveal how much our common life depends on them.

ROWAN WILLIAMS

1. Born in Swansea, Wales, in 1950, he studied theology at Cambridge and completed his doctorate at Oxford. Before becoming a bishop, he had a distinguished academic career, teaching theology at Cambridge and serving from 1986 to 1992 as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford, one of the university's historic chairs of theology.
2. He became Bishop of Monmouth in 1992, Archbishop of Wales in 2000, and in 2002 the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, a position he held for ten years.
3. After leaving Canterbury, he became Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, serving until 2020. He was made a life peer in 2013 as Baron Williams of Oystermouth and has been a Fellow of the British Academy since 1990.
4. He combines serious academic theology with pastoral writing, spirituality, literature, poetry, philosophy, and sustained engagement with contemporary society. His intellectual world ranges from the Church Fathers and Eastern Christianity to Augustine, Teresa of Ávila and Benedictine spirituality; from Dostoevsky and C. S. Lewis to Wittgenstein; and from classical Christology to questions of violence, politics, economics, human identity, solidarity, and the nature of community.
5. The British Academy describes his interests as spanning theology, poetry, philosophy, languages, and literature.

A selective bibliography

6. Major theological works:
 - 6.1. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (1987);
 - 6.2. *On Christian Theology* (2000);
 - 6.3. *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (2014);
 - 6.4. *On Augustine* (2016);
 - 6.5. *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018);
 - 6.6. *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (2021).
7. Christian faith and discipleship:
 - 7.1. *Tokens of Trust* (2007);
 - 7.2. *Being Christian* (2014);
 - 7.3. *Being Disciples* (2016);
 - 7.4. *Being Human* (2018);
 - 7.5. *Discovering Christianity* (2025).
8. Spirituality and the Christian tradition:
 - 8.1. *Teresa of Avila* (1991);
 - 8.2. *Silence and Honey Cakes* (2003);
 - 8.3. *Where God Happens* (2007);

- 8.4. *Holy Living* (2017);
- 8.5. *The Way of St Benedict* (2020);
- 8.6. *Passions of the Soul* (2024).
- 9. Literature and imagination:
 - 9.1. *Grace and Necessity* (2005);
 - 9.2. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (2008);
 - 9.3. *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (2012).
- 10. Church, society, violence, and solidarity:
 - 10.1. *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11 September and Its Aftermath* (2002);
 - 10.2. *Faith in the Public Square* (2012);
 - 10.3. *Solidarity: The Work of Recognition* (2026).
- 11. An accessible and reliable monograph of Rowan Williams :
 - 11.1. Benjamin A. Myers, *Christ The Stranger: The Theology Of Rowan Williams*, T&T Clark (2012)

“Social life is not about collapsing differences or artificial unity. Instead differences should be accentuated as sharply as possible, so that what you experience in another person is not fantasy, not another deceptive projection of yourself, but the real intractable mystery of another self.”

1. LOSS, GRIEF, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Quotations from *Writing in the Dust*, by Rowan Williams

12. We'd better acknowledge the sheer danger of religiousness. Yes, it can be a tool to reinforce diseased perceptions of reality. Muslim or not, it can be a way of teaching ourselves not to see the particular human agony in front of us; or worse, of teaching ourselves not to see ourselves, our violence, our actual guilt as opposed to our abstract 'religious' sinfulness. Our religious talking, seeing, knowing, needs a kind of cleansing. (4)
13. Non religious language (messages to families)
 - 13.1. The non-religious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about — the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged. (2)
 - 13.2. It offers a breathing space that religious language doesn't often manage to create by or for itself. (5)
 - 13.3. All I can say is that, for someone who does believe, or tries to, the 'breathing space' is something that allows the words of religious faith for a moment not to be as formal or flat or self-serving as they usually are. (6)
14. Inability of religious language to explain
 - 14.1. God doesn't intervene, which sounds like a lame apology for some kind of 'policy' on God's part,
 - 14.2. God is there in the sacrificial work of the rescuers
 - 14.3. Any really outrageous human action tests to the limit our careful theological principles about God's refusal to interfere with created freedom. (7)
 - 14.4. [Evil human choices] have to be confronted, suffered, taken forward, healed in the complex process of human history, always in collaboration with what we do and say and pray. I do believe that; but I don't think you can say it with much conviction outside the context of people actually doing the action and the prayer. (8)
 - 14.5. Perhaps it's when we try to make God useful in crises, though, that we take the first steps towards the great lie of religion: the god who fits our agenda. (9)
15. Simone Weil said that the danger of imagination was that it filled up the void when what we need is to learn how to live in the presence of the void. (11)
16. It becomes very important to know how to use the language of belief; which is why the terrible simplicity of those last messages matters so intensely. (11)

17. Ultimately, the importance of these ‘secular’ words is that they stand as a challenge to anything comfortably religious that we might be tempted to say. (12)

Quotations from *Solidarity. The Work of Recognition*, by Rowan Williams

18. Bonhoeffer [describes] the experience of accompanying someone in a ‘serious’ situation like bereavement, where we may respond in ‘helpless solidarity’ rather than by a confident declaration of the triumph of the resurrection or whatever.
- 18.1. ‘Why is my mouth often closed when it should give voice to the ultimate, and why do I opt for a thoroughly penultimate human solidarity?’
 - 18.2. Perhaps, he suggests, this silent and inexplicit standing alongside
 - i. may be a more faithful witness to the ‘ultimate’ in that
 - ii. it leaves God to ‘speak in God’s own time’,
 - 18.3. rather than insisting on my own capacity here and now to transmit the Word of God directly and unambiguously. (191)
19. If we are silent, and so accept the ‘penultimate’, it is because we are trusting that God’s solidarity precedes and undergirds our efforts to stand in solidarity.
- 19.1. Pushing to articulate the ultimate in all circumstances might imply a confidence that we are so perfectly aligned with God’s sovereign will that our words or acts will automatically be vehicles of that will.
 - 19.2. Accepting life in what seems to be the ‘penultimate’ frame of reference – in which the manifest presence of God is not insisted upon moment by moment
 - 19.3. – but accepting it in genuine faith that we are making a path for the divine solidarity to be more effective in the world,
 - 19.4. is an appropriate embodiment of responsibility and vicarious representation and humility before God’s sovereign presence. (191f)
20. We are summoned to let go of our attachment to our own clearly demarcated moral or ideological territory. And this, for Bonhoeffer, meant inhabiting the difficult space of being
- 20.1. willing to hold back from what could be prematurely explicit use of Christian language
 - 20.2. for the sake of a fully transforming identification, an appropriate solidarity, with the stranger. (207)