

Sunday Theology Talks

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 (September 20)**
- 2. Violence, Retaliation, and the Recovery of Agency (September 27)**
- 3. Recognition and the Humanity of the Other (October 4)**
- 4. Solidarity and the Building of Community (October 11)**

Thursday Reading Group

Rowan Williams's *Discovering Christianity: A Guide for the Curious* (SPCK, 2025)

- 1. What Is Christianity? (October 1)**
- 2. What Is Faith? (October 15)**
- 3. Why Church? (October 22)**
- 4. Why Scripture? (October 29)**
- 5. Why Tradition? (November 5)**
- 6. Why Reason? (November 12)**

ROWAN WILLIAMS

7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. The British Academy describes his interests as spanning theology, poetry, philosophy, languages, and literature.

A selective bibliography

12. Major theological works:
 - 12.1. *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (1987);
 - 12.2. *On Christian Theology* (2000);
 - 12.3. *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (2014);
 - 12.4. *On Augustine* (2016);
 - 12.5. *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018);
 - 12.6. *Looking East in Winter: Contemporary Thought and the Eastern Christian Tradition* (2021).
13. Christian faith and discipleship:
 - 13.1. *Tokens of Trust* (2007);
 - 13.2. *Being Christian* (2014);
 - 13.3. *Being Disciples* (2016);
 - 13.4. *Being Human* (2018);
 - 13.5. *Discovering Christianity* (2025).
14. Spirituality and the Christian tradition:
 - 14.1. *Teresa of Avila* (1991);
 - 14.2. *Silence and Honey Cakes* (2003);
 - 14.3. *Where God Happens* (2007);

- 14.4. *Holy Living* (2017);
- 14.5. *The Way of St Benedict* (2020);
- 14.6. *Passions of the Soul* (2024).
- 15. Literature and imagination:
 - 15.1. *Grace and Necessity* (2005);
 - 15.2. *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (2008);
 - 15.3. *The Lion's World: A Journey into the Heart of Narnia* (2012).
- 16. Church, society, violence, and solidarity:
 - 16.1. *Writing in the Dust: Reflections on 11 September and Its Aftermath* (2002);
 - 16.2. *Faith in the Public Square* (2012);
 - 16.3. *Solidarity: The Work of Recognition* (2026).
- 17. An accessible and reliable monograph of Rowan Williams :
 - 17.1. 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.”

2. VIOLENCE, RETALIATION, AND THE RECOVERY OF AGENCY

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

17.2. John 8:3-11

3The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst 4they said to him, “Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. 5Now in the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” 6This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. 7And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, “Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her.” 8And once more **he bent down and wrote on the ground.** 9But when they heard it, they went away one by one, beginning with the older ones, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. 10Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” 11She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and from now on sin no more.”

18. [Jesus] allows a moment, a slow moment, in which people are given room to see themselves differently precisely because he refuses to make the sense they expect.

18.1. When he lifts his head, there is judgement and release.

18.2. So this is writing in the dust.

18.3. It tries to hold that moment open for long enough for some new possibility to emerge before it is washed away. (81)

19. 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)

20. Choice of war/violence after 9/11

20.1. From the first, it was not at all clear what would count as victory in this engagement. The abolition of terrorism? (32)

i. terrorism is not a place, not even a person or a group of persons; it is a form of behaviour. ‘

ii. “War against terrorism” is as much a metaphor as “war against drug abuse” (38)

20.2. A good deal of the moral capital accumulated during the first days and weeks was soon squandered. (37)

21. Violence is a language

21.1. it is communication, after all, of hatred, fear or contempt, and I have a choice about the language I am going to use to respond.

21.2. If I decide to answer in the same terms, that is how the conversation will continue.

- 21.3. How many times have you heard someone say, 'It's the only language they understand' to defend a violent reaction to violent acts? (16)
22. The truth is that if we respond violently our violence is going to be a rather different sort of thing.
- 22.1. The response of at least some people in the face of deep injury, once feeling has returned, is a passionate striking out;
- i. there is something recognisable about the language of Psalm 137 — 'let their children die horribly, let them know what humiliation and exile are like'.
 - ii. This is an honest moment; but for those of us who are not totally helpless in terms of internal or external resources it is only a moment.
- 22.2. We feel very uneasy when it looks as though there is a sustained effort to keep that level of murderous or revengeful feeling alive. (19f)
- 22.3. There may be something like a dreadful innocence about the first surge of anger; there is no innocence about the deployment of images to try and revive it. (20)
- 22.4. We (collectively) have space to calculate gains and losses. There is some space between our feelings and our choices. (21)
23. There is sentimentality in ascribing what we don't understand to 'evil';
- 23.1. it lets us off the hook, it allows us to avoid the question of whether there is anything we can recognise in the dreadful act of another.
- 23.2. If we react without **self-questioning**, we change nothing. It is not true to say, 'We are all the same'; perhaps it is true to say, 'We can understand something as we look at ourselves.' (23f)
24. We have [...] the freedom to consider whether or not we turn to violence. (24)
25. We have the freedom to think what we actually want, to probe our desires for some kind of outcome that is more than just mirroring what we have experienced. (25)
- 25.1. It means being very suspicious of any action that brings a sense of relief irrespective of what it achieves;
- 25.2. very wary of doing something so that it looks as if something is getting done.
- 25.3. It means acknowledging and using the breathing space; [...]
- 25.4. It is about trying to act so that something might possibly change, as opposed to acting so as to persuade ourselves that we're not powerless. (26)
26. Sermon on the Mountain – other cheek and extra mile
- 26.1. The world of the aggressor, the master, is questioned because the person who is not supposed to take initiatives suddenly does. As Gandhi discovered, this is very frightening for those who exercise power.
- 26.2. It is action that changes the terms of the relationship, or at the very least says to the master that the world might be otherwise.
- 26.3. It requires courage and imagination:
- i. it is essentially the decision not to be passive, not to be a victim,

- ii. but equally not to avoid passivity by simply reproducing what's been done to you. It is always something of a miracle. (28)

Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*

- 27. Three alternatives lie before [the person who has been subjected to a wrong].
 - 27.1. Either she goes down what may be called the road of status, seeing the event as all about her and her rank,
 - 27.2. or she takes the road of payback and imagines that the offender's suffering would actually make things better, a thought that doesn't make sense.
 - 27.3. Or, if she is rational, after exploring and rejecting these two roads, she will notice that a third road is open to her, which is the best of all: she can focus on doing whatever would make sense, in the situation, and be really helpful going forward. This may well include the punishment of the wrongdoer, but in a spirit that is ameliorative and/or deterrent rather than retaliatory.
- 28. The road of status.
 - 28.1. If the victim sees the injury as about relative status and only about that—seeing it as a “down-ranking” of the victim's self, as Aristotle put it—
 - 28.2. then indeed it does turn out to be the case that payback of some sort can be really efficacious.
- 29. The road of payback,
 - 29.1. makes the mistake of thinking that the suffering of the wrongdoer somehow restores, or contributes to restoring, the important thing that was damaged.
 - 29.2. They derive from deep-rooted but misleading ideas of cosmic balance, and from people's attempt to recover control in situations of helplessness
- 30. *Wrong ideas about anger:*
 - 30.1. Anger is necessary (when one is wronged) to the protection of dignity and self-respect.
 - 30.2. Anger at wrongdoing is essential to taking the wrongdoer seriously (rather than treating him or her like a child or a person of diminished responsibility).
 - 30.3. Anger is an essential part of combatting injustice.
- 31. Anger may still have some limited usefulness
 - 31.1. as a signal to self and/or others that wrongdoing has taken place,
 - 31.2. as a source of motivations to address it, and
 - 31.3. as a deterrent to others, discouraging their aggression.
- 32. The transition:
 - 32.1. a reasonable person shifts off the terrain of anger toward more productive forward-looking thoughts,
 - 32.2. asking what can actually be done to increase either personal or social welfare.
- 33. Anger is never justified (because the payback is always part of it). But it can be “well-grounded”.
 - i. Anger can often be well-grounded, by which term I mean that

- ii. all of its elements are correct
 - iii. apart from the wish for payback.
- 33.2. There are many cases in which one gets standardly angry first, thinking about some type of payback, and then, in a cooler moment, heads for the Transition.
- 33.3. But there are at least a few cases in which one is there already: the entire content of one's emotion is, "How outrageous! Something must be done about this." Let us call this emotion Transition-Anger.
- 33.4. Transition-Anger does
 - i. not focus on status;
 - ii. nor does it, even briefly, want the suffering of the offender as a type of payback for the injury. It never gets involved at all in that type of magical thinking.
 - iii. It focuses on social welfare from the start.
- 33.5. It's certainly an emotion: the person is really upset. And it appears distinct, though subtly, from compassionate hope, since the focus is on outrage.
- 33.6. Such presence of mind typically requires long self-discipline.
- 33.7. Transition-Anger will be very important in thinking about political institutions. But it is not totally absent in daily interactions. One place it often flourishes is in parents' relationships with their young.