

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.”

3. RECOGNITION AND THE HUMANITY OF THE OTHER

Quotations from Elizabeth Bruenig, “Why Empathy Is Now ‘Toxic,’ ‘Suicidal,’ and a ‘Sin,’” *The Atlantic* September 27, 2026

1. Gad Saad, *Suicidal Empathy*.
 - 1.1. According to Saad, suicidal empathy is when otherwise positive impulses are “hijacked and used to make policy decisions that are best tackled via a sober analysis”—a phenomenon that will lead to nothing less than “the collective suicide of the West.”
 - 1.2. Like other works in this growing genre, including Paul Bloom’s *Against Empathy*, Allie Beth Stuckey’s *Toxic Empathy*, and Joe Rigney’s *The Sin of Empathy*, Saad’s book contends that a progressive fixation on oppressed groups in the name of compassion and fairness has been not just counterproductive but also destructive, threatening Western values and even civilization itself.
 - 1.3. *Suicidal Empathy* and books like it are aimed not at liberals, but at conservatives who may be struggling with a conflict between their politics and their conscience.
 - 1.4. As a category, suicidal empathy is almost infinitely capacious. Saad’s examples include lax immigration laws; high taxes; mandatory sensitivity training; universal health care; “the diversity, inclusion, and equity cult”; every manifestation of anti-Zionism; “twerving drag queens during kindergarten reading hour”; and “communism, socialism, and the welfare and nanny states.”

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

2. [We constantly risk to let] empathy do the work of solidarity. (218)
3. The core problem we face in this as ‘**the impatient will to feel innocent**’ (220)
 - 3.1. the urge to occupy a place that is beyond question and beyond history,
 - 3.2. a place that has not evolved through conflict, imagination and labour,
 - 3.3. a place where things are obvious, and can only be thought of as true when they are thought of as obvious. (220)
4. Paradoxical as it may sound, the **recognition** of difference and difficulty in our conversations is an essential strand in the understanding of solidarity as a moral phenomenon.
 - 4.1. We do not have unmediated access to others. (48f)
 - 4.2. Emphasizing the **need for labour** in this way is one thing that prevents talk about solidarity dissolving into sentimentality (49)

A criticism of empathy

5. A claim to empathic understanding, even one made with generous and unselfconscious intention, can in practice be a claim to power:
 - 5.1. it can be an appropriation of the experience of another,
 - 5.2. an assimilation of otherness to my own identity,
 - 5.3. and so a denial to the other of the liberty to 'own' and to narrate their own identity (54).
6. I may recognize the suffering of the other for what it is, but my 'identification' with it may be wholly instrumental to my own purposes; my goal is to reinforce the advantage I have. (55)
7. The danger of trying to make empathic identification do the work of solidarity is increasingly clear
 - 7.1. in the prevalence of primarily performative acts of supposed solidarity,
 - 7.2. declarations of common concern that do not change toxic relations and power imbalances but in effect reinforce them. (55)
8. At its most simplistic, this has led to a style of talking about empathy as a sort of enhancement of individual experience:
 - 8.1. the empathic person has a more fulfilled life,
 - 8.2. becomes a more effective agent in the business of social (including economic) interaction.
9. But as in the case of solidarity language more generally, there is a fundamental problem about empathy when it is effectively configured as
 - 9.1. the absorption of another's experience into my narrative,
 - 9.2. a means of challenging someone else's ownership of their distinctive story. (57)
10. Empathy serves the need not of a stranger but of a self that cannot bear the idea of a real stranger, and is compelled to deny the ultimate strangeness, the inaccessibility, of what it encounters and steer attention back to the clamorous self. (57f)
11. What is being claimed when we say that we in some sense know what someone else is experiencing? (60)
12. Empathic identification may be the kind of **sentimentally biased response** that turns out to be a very poor guide to what is actually most **morally urgent**. (68)
13. It has often been said that, in a situation where I am trying to give comfort and support to a suffering person,
 - 13.1. it may be more helpful to say, 'I have no idea how you must be feeling'
 - 13.2. than to say 'I know what it must be like for you';
 - 13.3. the empathic understanding of the seriousness of the other's perspective is one that takes it seriously as other and so as necessarily, crucially, 'opaque' to me. (73)

Real solidarity and the work of recognition

14. The common life of embodied speakers [is] a process of continuously learning how to live with the otherness of the other.
 - 14.1. The other is intrinsically
 - i. neither an impenetrably alien enemy
 - ii. nor a disguised version of the self.
 - 14.2. Indeed, we could say that both of these fictions have the same root.
 - i. If I see the other as always an enemy, I see the other as always competing for the same ground that I occupy; the central, perhaps the single, fact is my definition of that ground.
 - ii. When the other is reduced to the proportions of my selfhood – absorbed, assimilated – I am reassured that there is indeed no other place to stand than where I am. (219f.)
15. [Solidarity with] suffering
 - 15.1. is not primarily a deep internal feeling of **identification** with another's pain
 - 15.2. but a **recognition** that we cannot understand that alien pain unless we recognize it as our issue, our privation or frustration – and
 - 15.3. so as something summoning us to **take up the burden of work**, both the work of listening and the work of shared construction of some new state of affairs.
16. **An unintelligent solidarity** would be the kind of identification that presumes I can stand in the shoes of another or claim that I speak from within their situation without
 - 16.1. any history of probing self and other,
 - 16.2. any practice of attention or self-scrutiny,
 - 16.3. any questioning around the relations of power and advantage that characterize a situation.
17. '**Performative solidarity**' [...] is one expression of this unintelligent identification; it may be relatively harmless, and it is undoubtedly well-meaning, but it helps to give solidarity precisely the bad name that many modern commentators take for granted, labelling it as innately unreflective, sentimental and potentially tribal. (228f)