

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.”

4. SOLIDARITY AND THE BUILDING OF COMMUNITY

John Rawls¹

- 18. *Political Liberalism* (1993): exclusion of religious arguments from public reasoning.
- 19. **Priority of *right* over *good*** – within a framework of law (entrusted to procedures)
 - 19.1. Because we cannot agree on good, better to determine universally recognizable rights.
 - 19.2. In the end this is a model based on compulsion: because it is detached from the perception of something as genuine good (the right is good but on the basis of a universal rationality whether or not perceived as good immediately).
- 20. The reasons we offer in political discourse ought to be ones that will be *compelling* to citizens *regardless of their convictions* and their *conceptions of good* (59)

Quotations from Rowan Williams, *Solidarity*

- 21. The development of modern human rights language is inseparably bound up with the modern notion of sovereignty in the nation state:
 - 21.1. the sovereign state is what defends ‘natural right’ [...]
 - 21.2. and so is the authority that determines what counts as natural right. (75f)
- 22. The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*
 - 22.1. by casting all this in terms of what an individual may rightfully expect, the UDHR gives the impression that an individual ought to have the choice to be part of a nation or family or faith community in a way that does indeed imply that *the default human identity is something above and beyond such forms of belonging*. (85)
 - 22.2. Belief in human rights has become the last politically acceptable form of uncritical confessional faith within Western modernity, [...] but with
 - i. a distinctly shaky metaphysical basis and (consequently)
 - ii. an embarrassing history of co-option in the interests of geopolitical hegemony and stable market systems. (86)
- 23. I hold on to my rights because the aggressive wills of others (persons and institutions) always menace my liberties (87f)
- 24. If [a] substantive common moral goals disappear, what is left is the bare contest of wills, mine and the other’s. (88)
- 25. The roots of the language of right [should] lie in a strong commitment to cosmological order, so that
 - 25.1. any affirmation of or defence of a right is ipso facto

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¹ John Rawls (1921–2002) was a highly influential American political philosopher and ethicist who revitalized the tradition of liberal egalitarianism. Spending much of his academic career as a professor at Harvard University, he is widely considered one of the most important political philosophers of the 20th century.

25.2. a commitment to a good that is not just ours (98)

Quotations from Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*

1. As the American theologian William Cavanaugh has persuasively argued²,
 - 1.1. the Wars of Religion arose from the use of religious controversy by political agents to justify military adventures aimed at national consolidation or expansion,
 - 1.2. which in turn consolidated the new centralized sovereign authorities within nation states.
 - 1.3. “Liberal theorists’, he writes, ‘would have us believe that the state stepped in like a scolding schoolteacher on the playground of doctrinal dispute to put fanatical religionists in their proper place’. But in fact,
 - i. the development of the belief that the state enjoyed a monopoly of legitimate coercion meant that defining the exclusive boundaries of sovereign territory was far more important than before:
 - ii. the state needs to know whom it can confidently command, whose allegiance it can safely enforce, whom it can mobilize in its defence.
 - iii. Thus the modern state is not in origin a pacific force; it is a system committed to violence as ‘the primary mechanism for achieving social integration in a society with no shared ends’. (pp. 38-39).
2. The modern state assumes
 - 2.1. a direct relation with its citizens,
 - 2.2. not mediated through other communities –
 - 2.3. a relation whose contractual quality is already in evidence early on, though it becomes far more evident in the market societies of late modernity (p. 39).
3. This means accepting, among other things, the view that
 - 3.1. the rights conferred by the modern state are essentially rights accorded to individuals in respect of their private consciences.
 - 3.2. And here is where one of the major conflicts in modern legal thinking comes into focus.
 - 3.3. The liberal state has repeatedly had to make accommodation with minority communities, not simply with individuals – ethnic minorities whose identities have been damaged by state centralism, religious groups, even those making a specific choice of lifestyle (the fiercely controverted politics of gender and sexual orientation is commonly cast in terms drawn from the struggles of ethnic and religious minorities) (p. 40).
4. Thus Cavanaugh goes on to say that the activity of the Church in the public sphere should not, and indeed cannot, be confined to ‘lobbying’. Helpful as this is in some circumstances,

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² W. Cavanaugh: *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian practices of space and time* (London, 2003), 43. 5

- 4.1. the main task is to create 'spaces' for an alternative story – to challenge the self-evidence of the narrative of secular modernity (p. 43).
- 4.2. the Church as a political agent has to be a community capable of telling its own story and its own stories,
- 4.3. visible as a social body and thus making claims upon human loyalty.
- 4.4. While not a simple rival to the secular state, it will inevitably raise questions about how the secular state thinks of loyalty and indeed of social unity or cohesion. (p. 44).

Faith Community in a Civil Society

- 5. The Church: not a clamorous interest group but as a community confident of its rootedness in something beyond the merely political (p. 306)
- 6. 'Civil society' is the recognized shorthand description for all those varieties of human association that
 - 6.1. rest on willing co-operation for the sake of social goods that belong to the whole group, not just to any individual or faction,
 - 6.2. and which are not created or wholly controlled by state authority.
 - 6.3. As such, their very existence presupposes persons who are able to take responsibility for themselves and to trust one another in this enterprise.
- 7. The presence of the Christian community puts to civil society the question of where we look for the foundation of such confidence about **responsibility** and **trustworthiness**:
 - i. does this set of assumptions about humanity rest on a fragile human agreement, on the decision of human beings to behave as if they were responsible,
 - ii. or on something deeper and less contingent, something to which any and every human society is finally answerable? (p. 306).
- 8. Ensure that the human search for shared welfare and responsible liberty will not be reduced to a matter of human consensus alone. (p. 307)
- 9. Such a request from Church to society will be heard and responded to, of course, only if the Church genuinely looks as though it were speaking for
 - 9.1. more than a self-protecting set of 'religious' concerns; if it appears as concerned for something
 - 9.2. more than self-defence.
 - 9.3. [The Church] needs to establish its credentials as 'non-violent': that is, as
 - 9.4. not contending against other kinds of human group for a share in ordinary political power.
- 10. To put it in severely condensed form, the Church is most credible when
 - 10.1. least preoccupied with its security and
 - 10.2. most engaged with the human health of its environment;

- 10.3. and to say 'credible' here is not to say 'popular', since engagement with this human health may run sharply against a prevailing consensus. (pp. 307-308).

11. **Secularism** considers beliefs as a threat towards people of other or no convictions and a menace to social harmony.
12. **Liberal individualism** is all we need to promote social growth, equality, wider access to resources, and social stability.
13. Nothing more is required for social cohesion since the ambition of this model is not heartfelt solidarity but the preservation of room for private initiative.
14. Social cohesion is entrusted to a Weberian bureaucratic and managerial framework which churns out increasingly detailed regulations and asserts an ever growing power to enforce them thanks to the capillary (and frightening) control afforded to our modern digital surveillance state.
15. Rowan Williams argues for a **civil society** articulate and brave enough to have arguments about fundamental issues in public without fear of this descending into recrimination, abuse and ultimately violence.
16. The rhetoric of suspicion that has driven racial, sexual, and social advocacy during the past decades is predicated upon a one-dimensional hermeneutics that seeks change through empowering group identity.
 - 16.1. One cannot but understand the urgency felt by oppressed minorities to claim recognition, visibility, and equality.
 - 16.2. What this rhetoric is structurally unable to provide, however, is space, distance, time for the patient, and indispensable quest for shared values and the common objects of love which are necessary to restore not a simple truce but **true solidarity** around a communal project.

Simone Weil, The Need for Roots

17. The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former.
 - 17.1. A right is not effectual by itself, but only in relation to the obligation to which it corresponds,
 - 17.2. the effective exercise of a right springing not from the individual who possesses it, but from other men who consider themselves as being under a certain obligation towards him.
 - 17.3. Recognition of an obligation makes it effectual.
 - 17.4. An obligation which goes unrecognized by anybody loses none of the full force of its existence.
 - 17.5. A right which goes unrecognized by anybody is not worth very much. (3)

- 18. There exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she is a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such obligation on the part of the individual concerned. (5)
- 19. This obligation is not based upon any convention (5)
- 20. This obligation is an unconditional one. (5)