New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01525.x

Comment: *Faith in the Public Square*

As his decade as Archbishop of Canterbury ended, Rowan Williams gathered lectures on issues of economics, the environment, multi-faith society, the place of religion in government, human rights and secularism, delivered since 2002, under the title of *Faith in the Public Square* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012, pp. vi+344, £20.00 hbk): 'a series of worked out examples of trying to find the connecting points between various urgent public questions and the fundamental beliefs about creation and salvation from which Christians begin in thinking about anything at all'.

'Every archbishop, whether he likes it or not, faces the expectation that he will be some kind of commentator on the public issues of the day'. As Dr Williams allows, he was always 'doomed to fail in the eyes of most people' — they would regard him as lacking the expertise to comment on social and political issues even with obvious moral implications. Many Catholics, after all, think expressing views about nuclear weapons, capital punishment, military adventures, contraception, and much else, exceeds episcopal and even papal competence so far as to be not worth taking seriously. On the other hand, as Dr Williams notes, church leaders should beware of having nothing to say outside the domain of sexual ethics and family issues.

Neither sexual ethics nor family issues receive special attention in this book, readers may be surprised and even relieved to hear. The exception, an address to Friends of the Elderly at Church House, Westminster, develops candid and demanding reflections about a society in which 'age is often made to look pathetic and marginal'. Again and again, in these lectures, it turns out that what is truly human is most valued in the light of Christian beliefs. Speaking for the elderly means speaking for people whose lives are now lived outside the domains of 'getting and spending' — but then no one's humanity at any stage of life should be governed by the imperatives of the market. Far from being irrelevant to the secular, faith can often protect it best: nature preserved by grace, as you might say.

The collection opens with a lecture at the Hay-on-Wye book festival in memory of Raymond Williams, the Welsh novelist and Cambridge scholar who died at Saffron Walden in 1988 (aged 66). It concludes with the Romanes Lecture at the University of Oxford in memory of Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jewish woman who was gassed in Auschwitz in 1943 (aged 29). These details signal the diversity

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https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2012.01525.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the occasions on which the Archbishop was invited to lecture, and indicate something of the originality and depth of reading and reflection behind what he says. The first deals with the question of secularism; the last with the nature of religion.

Did Raymond Williams manage to reconcile the tragic vision of humanity, which he explored as a literary critic, with his Marxist hope for social self-redemption? Here the Archbishop builds on 'Humanism and Tragic Redemption', a fine essay (as he says) by Walter Stein (d. 1996), which first appeared in this journal (February 1967) before being taken up in Stein's sadly neglected book *Criticism as Dialogue* (1969). (What has Rowan Williams not read?) 'A secularist set of protocols for public life', Dr Wiiliams suggests, 'would rest upon the assumption that our attitudes to one another in the public realm have to be determined by factors that do not include any reference to agencies or presences beyond the tangible' (page 12). This opens up the possibility of the deepest critique of Raymond Williams's humanism: the non-secular outlook is 'a willingness to see things or other persons as the objects of another sensibility than my own, perhaps also another sensibility than *our* own, whoever 'we' are, even if the 'we' is humanity itself' (page 13). Thus the Christian understanding of creation and salvation comes into play.

Drawing on Etty Hillesum's journal Dr Williams insists, against what even Christians as well as their adversaries often suppose, that living religiously 'has to do with gesture, place, sound, habit' — that is to say, not just with having beliefs, understood as a mental event (page 313). Living religiously 'would be taking on the task of ensuring a habitation for God' — 'when a human life gives place, offers hospitality to God, so that this place, this identity, becomes a testimony' (page 319).

Thus, in this splendid book, Rowan Williams opens a conversation about what it might mean to live religiously in a secular culture.

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