Comment: *Shortt on Canterbury*

Rupert Shortt, religious books editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, has written a book for the general reader on the theology of Rowan Williams, his former tutor at Oxford (Rupert Shortt, *Rowan Williams: An Introduction*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2003, £7.95 pbk.)

It should be emphasized —'a book on Rowan Williams' *theology*'. At home among 'liberal Anglo-Catholics', Shortt says, how he would, or could, engage, as Archbishop of Canterbury, with the 'continuities in conflict' (Alasdair MacIntyre's phrase), embodied in any vital tradition, does not come out. Shortt does not deal with the internal politics of the Anglican Communion.

Much may nevertheless be gleaned from the biographical chapter about the Archbishop's stance. He has supported the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, for example, since the 1970s. This issued in much venomous hate mail. At the Lambeth Conference in 1998 he was intensely depressed by the hard line against homosexuality taken by many African and Asian bishops (he abstained in the vote). His first year at Canterbury seems to have been dominated by what is turning out to be this church-dividing controversy, first having to persuade one (chaste) homosexual in England to refuse the call to become a bishop, then having to put up with the episcopal consecration in New England of another, whose partner, reportedly, also had to wear a bullet-proof vest during the ceremony.

How the Anglican Communion, or the Church of England, will weather this internal conflict, time alone will tell; it is a difficult moment to be at Canterbury.

As Archbishop of Wales, Dr Williams replied to Pope John Paul II's historic request for ecumenical advice on reforming the papacy (*Ut Unum Sint*, 1995, if you remember). Scripture is 'suggestive as regards a Petrine charism — the gift of pointing to the Church's one foundation in the power of God manifest in Jesus' resurrection'. 'Later claims by and for the Roman see', however, 'are destructive of the whole ecological balance of order and sacrament and doctrine in the Church'. True, 'the fragility and potential fragmentation of Anglicanism internationally' may be regarded as only showing 'the importance of giving proper executive authority to a chief pastor'. Against this, however, 'the difficulties of this office' — the papacy — show that 'centralising authority increasingly doesn't work, except by doing some violence to local church life (and often not even then)'.

Tactfully put. One wonders who heard what he was saying. Even

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06316.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

prelates perplexed by outbreaks of 'dissent' in the Catholic Church might be struck by that parenthesis.

'The Anglican situation, about which I have no illusions of grandeur or success', Dr Williams went on, 'means that the Communion's focus has no option but to acknowledge the weakness of the unifying gospel in the face of cultural and political diversity, and to let the hope of the gospel speak from, not against, that acknowledged weakness'.

Perhaps letting the hope of the gospel speak from weakness, acknowledged and no longer denied, is a possibility now being revealed, painfully, in many dioceses in the Catholic Church.

However that may be, the new Archbishop of Canterbury has a deeper understanding than any of his predecessors of the realities of Catholic sensibility and theology. Enchanted by Quarr, he seriously considered a contemplative Benedictine vocation, coming to revere Dom Joseph Warrilow as his mentor. Obviously, his family background in Welsh Nonconformity, his work on modern Russian Orthodox theology, as well as his knowledge of patristic and medieval theology, would always qualify and relativize his Roman Catholic interests and sympathies. He has written illuminatingly about the quarrel between Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, but could surely not imagine the neoscholasticism in which they were trained as young Jesuits. Reviewing Anthony Kenny's fine autobiography, *A Path from Rome*, he was shocked at discovering how intellectually null the theology courses in the Roman universities were in the 1950s. Significantly, Williams was one of the team who first translated Balthasar into English. He has been at the forefront of the rediscovery of St Augustine — 'probably Williams' greatest intellectual influence of all', Shortt says. His teaching at Cambridge helped to inspire the Radical Orthodoxy movement in Anglican theology. Above all, in *The Wound of Knowledge* (1979) and *Teresa of Avila* (1991), Williams is among the finest guides to classical Catholic Christian spirituality.

His most academic work is devoted to the Arian controversy (*Arius: Heresy and Tradition* 1987; reissued 2001), highlighting the innovative philosophical vocabulary introduced by the orthodox. The subtext, as Shortt says, would remind conservatives today that tradition is organic — indeed, 'traditions, when vital, embody continuities in conflict' (MacIntyre). Not a bad motto for Canterbury.

F.K.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2003.tb06316.x Published online by Cambridge University Press