

# Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury: An Appreciation

On Friday, 16 March, Archbishop Rowan Williams announced that he would step down as leader of the 70 million strong worldwide Anglican Communion after being at the helm for a decade. In January 2013, he will be returning to Cambridge to take up the post of Master of Magdalene College. Reflecting on his tenure as Archbishop in a media interview to mark this announcement, Williams said: 'The worst aspects of the job, I think, have been the sense that there are some conflicts that won't go away, however long you struggle with them, and that not everybody in the Anglican Communion or even the Church of England is eager to avoid schism or separation'.

When Rowan Williams was enthroned as the 104<sup>th</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, whose lineage could be traced to St Augustine who first set foot on British soil in 597, he was only 52, the youngest person to occupy this office for nearly 200 years. Even before he became the spiritual leader of the Anglican Communion, Williams has had a brilliant career in both academia and the Church. At just 36, he was appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, after serving as an ordained priest in Cambridge and lecturer in Divinity in the city's university. In 1989, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity, and a year later became a fellow of the prestigious British Academy. Williams was elected and consecrated as bishop of Monmouth in 1992, and in 2002 as the Archbishop of Wales.

As theologian, linguist, poet, religious leader and activist, Williams is obviously a man of many gifts. His 1975 doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Canon A.M. Allchin at Oxford, examines the theology of one of the most important Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century: Vladimir Lossky. Williams' erudition as a scholar and theologian is seen in the amazing breadth of his published works where he discusses writers as diverse as Hegel and Wittgenstein, Barth and von Balthasar, Merton and Teresa of Avila. His love for things Russian, especially its literature and music, continues to grow and is no doubt the inspiration that led to the publication of his highly acclaimed book, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (2011), for which he was awarded the Order of Friendship, an award decreed in 2010 by the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev.

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams worked tirelessly to heal the schisms brought about by two longstanding and controversial issues: gay clergy and women bishops. On the gay issue, Williams tried to bring the diverse and highly polarised groups together by introducing the so-called covenant. It is unfortunate, although not entirely unexpected, that his efforts have not enjoyed much success. On the issue of women ordination, Williams tried but did not quite succeed to encourage both sides to continue the conversation with genuine openness and generosity. But apart from trying to arrive at concrete solutions, Williams was perhaps attempting to point to deeper concerns. Perhaps he was trying to show that the theology, ministry and mission of the Church should not be held hostage by these issues, important though they may be. And perhaps he was trying to impress the people on both sides of the divide that there are broader concerns that the Church must never neglect, and that Christian unity has to do with a more fundamental theological reality: the Church's union with Christ.

As the leader of the Anglican Church, Williams is often and inadvertently thrust into the limelight as his opinions on a whole host of issues were being sought, not least by the media. Critics have sometimes mocked Williams for being opaque and too abstruse to understand. Others have said that Williams has made very little attempt to understand the media, not to mention speak its language. But by refusing to bend to the demands of the media, perhaps Williams is attempting show that some issues are so complex that they can never be reduced to digestible sound bites. And perhaps there is some truth to the Bishop of Buckingham's suggestion that those who claim they don't understand Williams really meant that they didn't like what he was saying.

Be that as it may, the fact remains that Williams has been misunderstood on several occasions. A classic example is his 2008 lecture in which he argues that the introduction of certain aspects of sharia law in Britain would contribute to social cohesion. Responses of this speech have been diverse, with some even bothering to the hysterical. Some critics have called for his resignation. Even Lord George Carey, Williams' predecessor, entered the fray and categorically stated that he cannot share Williams' view on this subject. 'Acceptance of some Muslim laws within British law would be disastrous for the nation', he added. But Williams was simply proposing that sharia could play a role 'in aspects of marital law, the regulation of financial transactions and authorised structures of mediation and conflict resolution'. The proposal itself is neither radical nor new. It is in fact already practiced successfully in some countries, including Singapore.

Detractors notwithstanding, Williams has many admirers. The retired archbishop Desmond Tutu said that Williams is 'the best gift God could have given to the Anglican Communion'. Lord Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of the UK praised Williams for serving with 'great distinction, integrity, courage and grace'. And the archbishop of Wales said that Williams is a 'deeply Christian man, both humble and holy, always approachable and never standing on ceremony'. I count myself as one of his admirers. Having read his writings intermittently for more than twenty years, I've come to respect Williams as a serious and thoughtful theologian, even though I don't agree with some of the things he says. But it was when I met him for the first time at the Building Bridges Seminar in 2007, held in Singapore, that I became deeply impressed by his humility and graciousness.

I do not know how history will judge the work of Rowan Williams as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Perhaps he will be seen as a leader who, in his ten-year tenure, has failed to bring about any significant resolution to those issues that deeply divide the Communion. Perhaps he will be seen as an earnest intellectual, but someone sorely lacking in the requisite savviness to navigate the treacherous waters of church politics and heal the rift. Or perhaps Rowan Williams will be seen as the archbishop who in the midst of the fiercest and bitterest ecclesiastical conflicts has led his flock with patience, dignity and integrity. Perhaps he will be seen as the man of God who has shown in his quiet leadership and authentic humanity that humility, graciousness and openness is a better way to achieve understanding and reconciliation than brute politics.

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