

Rowan Williams, Faith in the Public Square, (Bloomsbury: London, 2013)

Rowan Williams' tenure as Archbishop of Canterbury is now at an end. However, each Archbishop, as he notes in opening this collection, "whether he likes it or not, faces the expectation that he will be some kind of commentator on the public issues of the day" (p. 1). This collection is not a collection of political theological discourses in any abstract sense. Rather it is something more akin to a record of sustained engagement and commentary in public life, a set of lectures and writings accumulated during his tenure as Archbishop which go about the business of doing theology in public. As such, the texts are as diverse as the issues that have emerged over the past decade—sustainability, ecology, social justice, human rights, the debate over 'big society', the very nature of political space itself, and more.

In his introduction, Williams offers us several clues as to how he understands the collection holding together, perhaps even offering "the elements of something more like a broader theory about faith and the social order" (p. 2). It is this that I want to chase in this review rather than simply outlining the issues he tackles. First is the distinction he makes consistently between a 'programmatic' and a 'procedural' secularity. Rehearsing the standard narrative of the emergence of the modern nation state in the wake of the so-called Wars of Religion, properly complicated by William Cavanaugh's insistence that the closer one looks the less these wars seem to have much to do at all with 'religion' in any straightforward sense, Williams identifies a programmatic secularity as a secularity which excludes religious commitment from the public space (chap. 3). As such programmatic secularism "is something more like what is often seen... as the French paradigm, in which any and every public manifestation of any particular religious allegiance is to be ironed out so that everyone may share a clear public loyalty to the state..." Such a secularity is problematic in that it claims particular kinds of loyalties from the political subject to the state in a way that invariably comes into conflict with the claims of faith upon a life. 'Religion' in this scheme has to do with a set of essentially 'private' commitments, which are to be excluded from the process of public decision making which employs an essentially instrumental rationality and managerialism. This is always the danger Williams sees as the nation-state in late-modernity becomes something more like the market-state.

A 'procedural' secularity, by contrast, offers a commitment to "a public policy which declines to give advantage or preference to any one religious body over others" (p. 2). The state thereby is not invoked in order to clear public space of religious ideology so as to open a supposed neutral space for decision-making grounded in an instrumental rationality; rather, the state functions to host a set of public conversations between various religious communities—to keep the conversation going. This kind of secularity Williams sees as having great potential and he sets out to defend it at some length, fearing that a programmatic secularity is always threatening in late-modern societies. This kind of procedural secularity has the potential to host a variety of religious communities in that it lends itself to a public awareness of difference, and so a space for a respectful engagement. The danger the state is always in then is to speak as if "the only kind of human solidarity that really matters is the state" (p. 32).

It is only in this way that we can come to make sense of the ways in which Williams goes about engaging the various issues throughout the text. In theologically opening this kind of space Williams allows for a dialogue, an 'argumentative democracy'. This provides for a public space which allows for

conflict, in that it offers a space wherein difference can be represented and debated. The state becomes programmatic at the point at which it closes down these conversations. But a vibrant public space provided by a 'procedural' secularity gives space for a respectful disagreement and debate. Of course, extreme or violent behaviour must be regulated by the state, but it is the state's role to open up this space, and to keep it open by not allowing violence to take root. The influence of the late Gillian Rose is felt deeply here in the kind of argumentative honesty Williams calls for. Democracies, when they are at their most vibrant, are deeply challenging environments to inhabit.

For instance, in engaging public rights discourse Williams is able to inhabit a discourse that many theologians have found themselves rather uncomfortable sitting in. An ethic grounded in 'rights' language all too easily lapses into an isolated subjectivity, determining itself 'over-and-against' another in the exercise of 'right'. However, Williams is able to inhabit this discourse and give the language some theological credibility from within as conditions for respectful public discourse and engagement, as a way of thinking otherness.

In a telling set of essays toward the end of the collection, Williams turns his attention to the multifarious issues surrounding our engagement with issues surrounding climate change and respect for the earth. Masterfully, Williams brings an orthodox doctrine of creation to bear on one of the most intense public issues of the time his tenure as Archbishop spanned. Williams offers a compelling case for religious belief's capacity to enrich the ways in which we speak of, and show respect for, the very material realities we inhabit as gifts of divine grace. This inevitably then has a bearing on the ways Williams approaches the relationship between economics and global justice. The economy of the divine gift offers resistance to a crude late-capitalist market economy, which would serve to commodify our relationship with the very earth in which we are placed.

This is all theologically given in that there is no competition between the state's claim and the claim of the church. The Christian claim that no political order can claim the authority due God alone keeps the public space vibrant in that there can be no programmatic assertion of a singular political vision. There is something irreducibly complex in the task of moral decision-making itself, which keeps the public space from programmatic hijacking. So long then as the cacophony of voices continue to be heard, debated and thrashed out, no one voice should become programmatic.

Williams manages to speak into all manner of arenas of public life with a distinctively historically orthodox voice. His comments on ecology, social justice, human rights, etc., all bear the scars of deep engagement with Christian traditions of rational-theological inquiry. It would be a hopeless task to attempt to summarise these positions in a review of this sort. What, however, is significant are the ways in which Williams envisions and *enacts* this kind of 'argumentative democracy', which I have given but a taste of above. This collection is a collection of pieces written by Williams during his tenure as Archbishop, however they are bound together by a deeply theological vision of what a political community can continue to strive to become. Careful reading is then required. Williams' subtlety with language, his constant engagement with sources and issues not self-evidently 'Christian', continue to serve to enrich his vision which is after all, the vision of a renewed humanity, not simply one 'religious' corner thereof.

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