

## English Evangelicals and the Archbishop's Theology

Brief Summary of paper by Andrew Goddard in Wycliffe Hall Newsletter, Spring 2003

### Rowan Williams on Revelation

Williams seeks to give an account of theology dependent on divine revelation – our talk of God must be based on 'what has been shown to us by God's will and action' – and not autonomous. But revelation is not what he calls 'heteronomous' - 'delivery of non-worldly truth to human beings in pretty well unambiguous terms'. It comes within human history.

Revelation occurs in 'events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life' – a model based on poetry and parable.

'Revelation' includes not only the generative *event* but the new way of life and struggles of *interpretation* in a community created by that event.

The great event of divine revelation is the Incarnation and the community created is the Church. In other words, God reveals himself by Word (event) and Spirit (interpretation).

Revelation both complete – 'the community learns and re-learns to interpret itself by means of Jesus (and nothing else and nothing less)' – and incomplete as we learn to speak of God through the struggle of being the church in mission.– 'revelation is addressed not so much to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to 'open itself'...If there is not one answer to the question which can be established to everyone's satisfaction...that matters far less than...a shared acknowledgement of the worthwhileness of the question and of the mode...in which it is explored'

### Issues raised

*Strengths:* (a) Williams believes God acts and reveals himself and that theology and Christian life is a response to that divine initiative; (b) His approach is Christocentric and Trinitarian; (c) He places the life of the church (not the secular world as in traditional liberalism) at the heart of the theologian's task; (d) He emphasizes mission and speaking of God in a way which relates to the reality of our world.

*Challenges to evangelicals:* (a) Williams raises the dangers in a 'heteronomous' view of revelation; (b) He warns against limiting 'revelation' to a doctrine of Scripture divorced from Christ-centred knowledge of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; (c) He asks how we *learn* the language of theology and are taught to speak truthfully about God

*Questions from evangelicals:* (a) Where is Scripture in this account of revelation? 'Word' is focused on Christ (as event) and 'Spirit' related to the ongoing life of the church in history (as interpretation); (b) What is the Bible's special work and calling in divine revelation and how does the Spirit speak through Scripture today?; (c) Is there no difference between the witness of Scripture and the struggles of the church?

### Rowan Williams, Revelation & Homosexuality

(a) He appears to believe that the existence of 'gay Christians' and 'faithful same-sex partnerships' is a question the Spirit is putting to the church today;(b) He does not believe the response is clearly given in Scripture which he believes does not speak to this specific situation; (c) As 'the constant re-learning of Jesus' significance has to do with an honest awareness of the strain and conflict presently experienced in the Church' he is likely to see ongoing debate here as part of the Spirit's work of revelation/interpretation.

### English Evangelical responses

All have concerns on both his account of revelation and his views on homosexuality. Those emphasizing *sola Scriptura* and a more 'heteronomous' view of revelation most opposed while those influenced by charismatic movement and struggles over biblical hermeneutics less hostile.

## Evangelicals and the Archbishop's Theology

Andrew Goddard

(An earlier version of this article appeared in Wycliffe Hall Newsletter Spring 2003)

The appointment of Rowan Williams as Archbishop of Canterbury in summer 2002 produced a lot of heated debate but sadly little light on the subject of his theology. Although most concern was expressed about his views on homosexuality, it soon became clear that for many evangelicals there was a deeper worry - his doctrine of revelation. In order to help graduate students at Wycliffe Hall grapple with this subject we ran a seminar on this aspect his theology. As I prepared to lead that seminar's discussion I read or re-read a fair amount of Archbishop Rowan's work but the seminar focused on his important but difficult essay, 'Trinity and Revelation' (reprinted as chapter 9 in his *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell, 2000). The more I grappled with this piece the more I realized that many evangelical critics had either ignored it or were in danger of misrepresenting his position on this subject. They were, however, right to see this as a vitally important area because it also sheds light on his views on homosexuality, and understanding his thinking here also clarifies the varied evangelical responses to his appointment.

Williams' thinking on revelation is shaped by the need to avoid two errors. One is to think that human autonomy is at the heart of doing theology. He emphatically rejects this by insisting that all our talk of God must be based on 'what has been shown to us by God's will and action'. In other words theology depends on revelation, 'an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make'. But he also strongly opposes what he calls 'heteronomy'. By this he means the view that revelation is 'delivery of non-worldly truth to human beings in pretty well unambiguous terms'. Instead, revelation must come as part of the reality of our history and not as an interruption of it. He is, however, clearly a realist because at the heart of revelation is the incarnation where God takes human flesh and enters human history to make himself known to us.

But if revelation is part of history then what marks revelation out from other events? For Williams it is that revelation is generative of something new in human life. To speak of 'revelation' is therefore to speak of 'events or transactions in our language that break existing frames of reference and initiate new possibilities of life'. Revelation thus functions much like poetry or parable in opening up our world for us in new ways. However, in a crucially important part of his argument, Williams extends 'revelation' further to include the resulting community and its new way of life and struggles of interpretation. To speak of revelation is to speak of *both* that which starts a new community (the generative event) *and* the community's ongoing learning about that initiative from outside itself (the interpretation of the event).

With these pieces in place, Williams looks at how the early church experienced revelation in such a way that she learned to speak of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus are revelatory because new ways of being human arise in the community he founded and heads. Those new ways marked the church out from Israel and the nations. Among them was her universal mission and belief that, 'The Christian "community" is potentially the whole world: Jesus...sketches a new and comprehensive vocation for human beings.' This universal radical newness generated by Christ the incarnate Son amounts to nothing less than 'new creation'.

Jesus therefore comes to be spoken of in terms previously only used for God. Williams' line of reasoning here is important—'if new humanity, then a new God'.

The struggle of how to speak of this 'new God' in the light of this 'new humanity' is found in the early church debates about the divinity of Christ. That which previously referred to God and could not be contained in human language has now been experienced as embodied in Jesus, in history, in worldly language. And so, believing that within human history Jesus 'shares the creativity of God ... he is God as dependent', the church speaks of God the Word, God the Son. But the church also has another experience of revelation—the agency which perpetually renews the experience of grace and re-creation in the believing community'. This is neither the absolute creativity of God nor the past creative event of Jesus. Rather, as 'that mode of creative presence and action which cannot simply be identified with "the Father" and "the Son" this comes to be spoken of as "Spirit" '. This, in Williams' view, is our continued participation in the founding revelatory event or 'the forming of Christ in believers'.

We can now see that the structure of revelation (as event and interpretation) corresponds to God's own being (Son and Spirit) and revelation is both completed and not completed. It is completed in that the story of Jesus is a completed historical narrative that generates new questions for all human life. It is not completed in that in new situations we need to discern the significance of that story and there 'the community learns and re-learns to interpret itself by means of Jesus (and nothing else and nothing less)'. As in the early church's discovery of God as Father, Son and Spirit, this learning takes place through the church being puzzled by its own pattern of life. We therefore learn to speak of God through the strains and struggles of being the church, especially the church in mission.

In this light, we must see problems and challenges within the life of the church as stages in the hermeneutical spiral through which the Spirit illumines the significance of Jesus. They provoke us to ask what being committed to Christ involves us in and so we are led by the experience of the church back to the foundational event of Jesus—a fresh engagement with the events which have in the first place created a community *in which such questions are worth asking*'. Williams sums up this key understanding in the claim that puzzlement over what the church is meant to be '*is the revelatory operation of God as 'Spirit' insofar as it keeps the Church engaged in the exploration of what its foundational events signify*'.

This account of God's self-revelation is certainly not an affirmation of human autonomy but neither is it 'heteronomous'. It is instead a participative and transformative understanding of revelation grounded in the Christ-event. Theology rooted in revelation is therefore not a matter of 'falling into line with an authoritative communication' but a movement between Word and Spirit, confession and debate. We learn to speak of God by being rooted in the new world constituted by God's self-revelation in Christ as both event and process and by asking why the community of Jesus is the kind of community that it is. As Williams writes, 'We speak because we are called, invited and authorised to speak, we speak what we have been *given*, out of our new "belonging", and this is a "dependent" kind of utterance, a responsive speech. But it is not a dictated or determined utterance: revelation is addressed not so much to a will called upon to submit as to an imagination called upon to "open itself".'

## **How should evangelicals respond to such an account?**

There are many things here evangelicals can and should welcome:

- Williams' starting point that God is a God who acts and reveals himself and that theology and Christian life is a response to that divine initiative
- His strong and fully orthodox Christocentricism and Trinitarian confession
- His placing of personal Christian faith and the life of the church (and not the secular world as in traditional liberalism) at the heart of the theologian's task
- His emphasis on mission and the need to speak of God in a way which relates to the reality of our world.

There are also challenges evangelicals need to hear and respond to:

- Has our theology and practice been guilty of some of the dangers Williams identifies in 'heteronomous' revelation?
- Has our understanding of revelation been limited to a doctrine of Scripture and divorced from Christ-centred knowledge of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit?
- Have we really thought about how we *learn* the language of theology and are taught to speak truthfully about God?

But there also several concerns and in particular one over-riding question which all evangelicals will wish to raise: Where is Scripture in this account of revelation? 'Word' is focused on Christ (as event) and 'Spirit' related to the ongoing life of the church in history (as interpretation). It is far from clear in what senses 'Word of God' can be used for Scripture or what role there is for the special work of the Spirit in Scripture's 'inspiration'. If Williams is right in his implicit challenge to evangelicals that our traditional doctrines of Scripture must be placed in a wider Trinitarian account of divine revelation and the life of the church as the body of Christ (something brilliantly developed by Telford Work in his recent important study *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Eerdmans 2002), we in turn will want to know more about how Scripture functions in his account.

Scripture clearly does have a very important place in Williams' theology. In a number of places he begins to explain and show where it differs from an evangelical view. His 'Reading the Bible' in *Open to Judgement* (DLT, 1994) again starts with the experience of life in the body of Christ—we hear God speak to us personally and powerfully through Scripture and yet also find ourselves incomprehending, even alienated, by its words. This, he says, is because Scripture is 'the record of an encounter and a contest' and 'woven together in scripture are...the giving of God and our inability to receive what God wants to give'. Reading this, many evangelicals will instantly conclude we are being called to have a 'pick-and-choose' relationship to Scripture—find the pieces that are 'the giving of God' and discard those which show 'inability to receive what God wants to give'. But that is to work more with a 'heteronomous' view of revelation, rather than with Williams' own account in which revelation is not opposed to debates, tensions and the struggles to interpret but rather comes through them. There is, however, still a need for more discussion in Williams' theology of how God speaks to us through Scripture. More needs to be said about the Bible's special calling and authority. Further explanation is needed as to how the incarnate Word who authorizes Christian speech about God speaks to us in and through the words of Scripture. In stressing our need to learn to speak of God, the call of God heard through listening to him speak to us through the words of Scripture must be more central.

Williams is right to emphasize that Christ is at the heart of Scripture and that we find 'God's gift perfectly given and perfectly received in Jesus Christ...in whom all texts are finally fulfilled, in the sense that there is in him no misapprehension, no distorting by sin of the gift of God'. Such strong Christ-centredness is vitally necessary. But is it sufficient

for a Christian account of Scripture? Is Williams (by emphasizing the life of the community and the ongoing revelatory power of the Spirit) in danger of seeing no qualitative difference between the witness of the canon of Scripture and the witness of the Christian church? Are both for him simply part of the same struggle we all have as fallen human beings to interpret and bear witness in our situation to the universal significance of the revelatory event of Jesus Christ? Is there any place for distinguishing the work of the Spirit in Scripture's inspiration from the work of the Spirit in our illumination of the meaning and significance of Christ?

Faced with concerns raised by some evangelicals, Williams' final address to his Monmouth Diocese helpfully sketched his understanding of Scripture in a way that signals possible answers to such questions and will reassure many. He spoke there of the Bible telling us 'what we could not otherwise know'. He outlined this powerfully in terms of the sweep of God's redemptive work and purpose in human history. Importantly, he still stressed that God's work was primary and limited the language of revelation to 'the acts of God in history' seemingly distinct from Scripture. Nevertheless, he added that 'it is once and for all set out in the Bible. There is no going round this or behind it'.

The implications of this were then clearly stated: 'This is the world of the Bible into which the Church has to be brought again and again. Christians have to be in the habit of looking into Scripture to find where they are failing to understand and trust the God of the Bible and living in such a way that no-one outside the Church would guess what kind of God they served. Nowhere else do we find the questions of God put to us so authoritatively and directly. To say that the Bible is inspired is to say at least that God's Spirit comes to us through the text to call us to repent and be converted...I can say with complete conviction that a Church that does not listen for God in the Bible, and treat the Bible as the unique touchstone of truth about God and about us is losing its identity, its *raison d'être*.'

Again there is much here that evangelicals must welcome and rejoice in, not least the affirmation that a distinctive feature of the Christian community under the Lordship of Jesus must be its attentiveness to Scripture and its belief that it hears God in the Bible. What remains unclear is how this present speaking of the Spirit through the text is related to the givenness of the text and the work of the Spirit in its production and transmission. The account Williams gives of what we could not otherwise know is the story of God's work of salvation but the weight given to other biblical teaching, not least about how we are to live in Christ, is less clear. We are promised we will hear God's questions put authoritatively and directly to us but it remains unclear how much our responses must conform to the concrete responses found in, say, the apostolic injunctions to the early Christian communities.

Perhaps the weakness in Williams' account of revelation is that in incorporating the hermeneutical struggles of the church as part of the Spirit's revelatory work he focused this on the church's understanding of Jesus with little reference to the biblical text as a whole which offers an entirely trustworthy witness to Jesus. In other writings he has explained the role of the biblical text as primarily providing us with models of relating the truth of the event of Jesus to new situations. It appears that Scripture may therefore be a powerful means of revelation in generating new ways of approaching the challenge of relating Jesus to new situations. Its role appears less significant when it comes to concrete guidance. This perhaps reflects Williams's wider view in relation to the Spirit's revelatory work in the church that 'if there is not one answer to the question which can be established to everyone's satisfaction...that matters far less than...a shared

acknowledgement of the worthwhileness of the question and of the mode...in which it is explored'.

### **Revelation and homosexuality**

This account of revelation and some of the concerns evangelicals must raise about it also sheds light on Rowan Williams position on homosexuality. It would appear that the modern phenomenon of 'gay Christians' and 'faithful Christian same-sex partnerships' is to be considered as a possible case of 'discerning and naming the Christ-like events of liberation and humanization in the world as Christ-like'. This is in part because the revelatory power and redemptive work of Jesus was understood by the early church to be universal in scope and her puzzlement over boundaries and issues of purity reflects the memory of Jesus 'who, in his words and actions, generated immense confusion on this subject, sharply challenging the available models of distinctiveness and "cleanliness" '. If we now understand some people to be inherently homosexual (a much debated premise) *and* acknowledge that such people are often excluded from the church which should be 'a community which is open to all' *then* it is not surprising if the question of the church's attitude to gay people is understood as a question the Spirit is putting to the church today in our culture in the light of the story of Jesus.

Williams wants us to grapple with the question of what Jesus offers as new possibilities for gay people and their relationships. Does Jesus and the community he creates not reveal that divine grace 'is seen to be exercised in terms of compassionate acceptance, the refusal of condemnation, the assurance of an abiding relationship of healing love'? If so, can Christians not look at covenantal same-sex relationships which display this and legitimately answer in the affirmative what Williams sees as the fundamental question of revelation – 'if we live like this, has revelation occurred?'

In contrast to evangelical approaches, Williams (perhaps because of his different view of biblical authority) gives relatively little attention to the specific biblical texts on homosexuality. When he does, he suggests they all (including Romans 1) relate to situations not analogous to ours. He therefore does not see himself as rejecting scriptural teaching as such but rather saying that these texts cannot determine the results for us as we discern the meaning of the story of Jesus for gay people today.

Williams knows this understanding is a minority viewpoint and has agreed to uphold the Lambeth resolution on the subject but he also says he hopes the discussion will continue. This has been interpreted by some as a sign he will campaign to change church teaching and discipline. However his account of revelation (and his understanding of the role of the bishop) suggests a more charitable reading of such statements and this is confirmed by his actions in this area as Archbishop of Canterbury both in the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion. His account of how we learn to speak rightly of God is based on an understanding of revelation in which 'the constant re-learning of Jesus' significance has to do with an honest awareness of the strain and conflict presently experienced in the Church'. From this perspective, current disagreements over homosexuality can be viewed as 'essential stages in the 'hermeneutical spiral' whereby the significance of Jesus...is recovered'. In other words, the very fact we debate the church's proper response to the modern homosexual movement and gay people – if we do so by means of 'trustful interrogation' – is a sign that God's Spirit is at work as the Church engages in the exploration of what its foundational events signify. It is ultimately because Williams is serious about Christian mission in today's society and about the church's 'claim to be able to speak with authority to an experience of conflict and fragmentation, to the historical aspiration and work of men and women' that he believes that debate here should not be silenced. The

challenge to evangelicals now, as under George Carey, is to engage in it constructively and persuasively.

### **Why have evangelicals differed in their response ?**

All evangelicals will, then, have some questions about Rowan Williams' theology of revelation and concerns about the place of Scripture within it. These concerns in turn have a bearing on the widespread evangelical opposition to his personal views on homosexuality. The strength and modes of expressing these evangelical concerns has, however, been quite varied. Why is that? Clearly a variety of explanations need to be given – historical, sociological, psychological, political – but Rowan Williams' account of revelation perhaps shows the major theological difference and highlights a significant potential fault-line within contemporary evangelicalism.

The most vehement reaction to his appointment has come from some conservative evangelicals. They have highlighted this question of revelation as of great importance. Two reasons explain this response. First, much conservative evangelicalism is strongly committed to the 'heteronomous' and 'propositionalist' account of revelation that Williams is seeking to reconfigure. The dangers Williams sees in it are evident in some conservative evangelical theologies and churches. From Williams' perspective, this form of evangelicalism is in danger of creating and imposing an idolatrous and ideological theology. It is therefore unsurprising if these conservative evangelicals feel threatened by his appointment and view his teaching on this central area as gravely in error. Second, this stream of evangelicalism gives Scripture as God's Word such a central place that at times it risks losing sight of the primacy of Jesus as God's incarnate Word and restricting God's means of revelation to the text of Scripture. In some churches, God seems to be experienced solely through the exposition (much more than the reading!) of Scripture and theological development and innovation can be treated with great suspicion. In such contexts, to have as Archbishop a highly intelligent theologian whose account of revelation and learning how to speak of God puts God-in-Christ at the centre and seems to move Scripture from centre-stage (while highlighting the ongoing life of the church—especially its disputes—as a source of revelation) represents a fundamental threat.

While all categorizations within evangelicalism are disputed and must be fluid, many speak of two other groupings – 'charismatic' and what is often (unhelpfully) labeled 'open'. These have been much less critical of Rowan Williams or even welcomed his appointment. Again his account of revelation sheds light on this different response.

Many charismatics have known the struggle of challenging established practices and beliefs within evangelicalism in the light of an experience of God's Spirit. They therefore recognize in Williams' account something which rings true to their own experience of God and learning how to speak of him. Furthermore, unlike many in conservative evangelicalism, Williams' description of 'the agency which perpetually renews the experience of grace and re-creation in the believing community' speaks to charismatics of concrete, regular experiences both personally and corporately. An account of revelation giving due recognition to this work of the Spirit is therefore one which charismatic evangelicals will warm to rather than feel threatened by. Similarly, Williams' emphasis on discerning and speaking of God at work in new and surprising ways in the real and often messy lives of believers, and his development of a theology able to cope with such real-life generative encounters with God will attract those whose evangelical identity is shaped by the presence and power of the Spirit as well as Scripture.

The 'open' group of evangelicals has similar experiences of the dynamic and sometimes disturbing questions God puts to our theologies and established practices. This group is in part marked out by the discovery of hermeneutics and the struggles faithfully to hear and live out God's word in our changing world. For many this first focused on struggles over the ordination of women. It is true that they would give a much stronger place to exegesis of the text of Scripture than Williams does in such struggles. Nevertheless, his account of the need to discern by the Spirit how the given revelation relates to new situations echoes their own experience of God questioning their theological convictions and leading them to learn afresh what language they should use to speak truthfully of him.

Whether in the academy or the wider church, this stream of evangelicals has also opened itself to engagement with non-evangelical traditions in the church and the reality of mission in a postmodern world sceptical of systems and power-games masquerading as authoritative God-talk. A non-heteronomous account of revelation with a place for debate, struggle and questions within the diverse body of Christ as it discerns how to bring the story of Jesus into the world of normal language and contemporary culture is not so much a threat as an aid and encouragement to current practice and further theological reflection. When that account is not only critical of theological liberalism and secular autonomy but is also Christocentric and Trinitarian in its structure and emphasizes the need for personal faith and for commitment to the church and its mission, then (even though its lack of some important elements from a committed evangelical perspective causes concern) its author can be viewed as a real gift from God to his church.

### **Future evangelical witness**

At times in the past eighteen months it has looked as if the different responses to Rowan Williams threatened to create a major split among evangelical Anglicans. It is, however, vital that all three of these evangelical groupings engage with each other, working as closely together as they can and respecting each other when they differ. The recent development of ICE where papers on our mission in Britain today were given by representatives of the three groupings (published in *Anvil* 20.3) and discussion took place in small groups, is a sign that differences of emphasis in their response to Rowan Williams need not lead to further evangelical fragmentation and division. What is needed is a renewal of evangelicalism in which we show ourselves willing to listen to each other and take time together to understand one another and our new Archbishop better. Only then can we engage sympathetically, humbly and critically with his theology and developing vision of the Church of England's mission.