



Faith in the Public Square

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■ by Rowan Williams

reviewed by Eve Poole

My first night off since I had the twins 2 years ago. So how did I spend it? Reading this book, speeding north from King's Cross in the evening sunshine, Morpeth-bound. Ah! The trolley, that'll help. Tea, and a G&T please. Mmmm. Great combo. I wonder what's happening on twitter? Such amazing views out of the window. Now, back to the book. Bloomsbury. Good – they're doing my next book. Nice index. And the notes look good... Come on Poole, read it!

Sound familiar? I had to get through quite a lot of Williams for my PhD, and I always found that my eyes slid off the page somewhat. Only Wittgenstein and Simone Weil have the same effect. It's not even because his writing is pithy, it's just that he says so many wise things you have to read him in quite a different way. Take the opening line of his last chapter: 'A religious life is a material life' (p.313). He goes on to talk about the life of Etty Hillesum, who died in Auschwitz in 1943, and the importance of physically kneeling before God. Or this, in his chapter on ethics, economics and global justice: 'We change because our minds or mindsets are changed and steered away from certain powerful but toxic myths' (p.213). In fact Simone Weil could be talking about reading Williams when she talks about the crucial – and spiritual - importance of attention. So before I say any more about the book, I should say more about you, O reader. First, don't pick this as a light read for a journey. Second, don't try to read it all the way through in one sitting. Third, try taking it with you on retreat, or reading a chapter at a time as more of a devotional than an escapist pursuit. Because there is great stuff in here, which is easily missed by too casual a read through.

The book itself is unashamedly a grouping together of a wide range of lectures delivered by Williams between 2002 and 2012 to audiences as diverse as the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and the Hay-on-Wye Festival, via LSE and the Hampstead Synagogue. Williams has inserted a useful introduction in an attempt to weave them together, which presents his central thesis: 'Pluralism is more than nervous or evasive good manners. *Argument* is essential to a functioning democratic state, and religion should be involved in this, not constantly demanding the right not to be offended' (p.4). But I think the book is stronger if you try not to read it as a piece, because each chapter is interesting in its own right.

Williams covers a lot of ground. Secularism, Law, the Environment, Economics, Justice, Religious Diversity and 'Rediscovering Religion', which is his chapter on Etty Hillesum. Because *FiBQ* has a particular interest in the world of work, his section on Economics may be the most relevant, so I will talk about that in more detail. But please do read the other chapters, which talk so wisely about our context and challenges, and throw down several gauntlets to the thoughtful (and perhaps sometimes too comfortable) Christian. His beautiful chapter on the elderly is particularly thought-provoking, and a lovely reminder of how the churches are already helping society in this area.

Our section is called 'Housekeeping: the Economic Challenge', which is a common Williams trope, because it is easy to forget that 'economy' basically means 'housekeeping.' The section comprises a chapter on ethics, economics and global justice, delivered in 2009 in Cardiff's Temple ►►

►► of Peace, and a chapter on theology and economics, delivered in 2010 at Trinity Church in Wall Street, New York. The first starts with a discussion about the ‘short term curse’ that has spread from business into the professions and the voluntary sector. One side-effect is that if we get such immediate feedback about outcomes, we don’t need to trust anyone very much for very long, which over time erodes our ability to do so, as our ‘trust’ muscle gets flabby through lack of use. This also makes us less well versed in uncertainty, risk and dependency, reinforcing an ethic that is highly certain, transactional and individualistic. This is problematic because, for Williams, ‘ethics is essentially about how we negotiate our own and other people’s vulnerabilities’ (p213) and ‘we shall care about this largely to the extent to which we are conscious of our own vulnerability and limitedness’ (p.220). So, while not issuing any blanket condemnation of market principles, or indulging in ‘nostalgia’, Williams concludes that ‘we must resist policies or practices which accept the welfare of some at the expense of others.’ (p224)

In the chapter on theology and economics, he talks about this in more detail: ‘A working household is an environment in which vulnerable people are nurtured and allowed to grow up (children) or wind down (the elderly); it is a background against which active people can go out to labour in various ways to reinforce the security of the household... “Housekeeping theory” is about

how we use our intelligence to balance the needs of those involved and to secure trust between them’ (p.227). This careful back-to-basics through etymology is vintage Williams. Immediately it shows how narrowly focused ‘economics’ has become, and why theology has such a vital role to play in widening the focus to include those who aren’t ‘economically productive’. This allows Williams to reassert that the test for successful economic thinking is how well it serves the whole household, which includes the weak and the vulnerable as well as the strong: ‘Helpless alone and gifted in relationship: this is where we start in addressing the world of economics from a Christian standpoint’ (p229).

As Archbishop, Williams had to write most of this material to order, and has done a fairly convincing job of retro-fitting it with a collective logic for publication. It would be interesting to see what he would come up with if he wrote a book like this from scratch. But he is so consistent that the book does in fact offer a coherent thesis, which is all about about how crucial it is that the Church keeps wrestling with society about the public square. Given that anxiety about the Church’s right – and its ability - to do this is reaching fever pitch, it is hugely encouraging to be reminded that this seasoned theologian does so both authoritatively and confidently. So please read his book, then pass your copy on to someone else who could use it, so that we can all feel more resourced for this demanding and vital work. ■

Eve Poole is Chairman of Faith in Business. She teaches Leadership and Ethics for Ashridge Business School, following earlier careers working for the Church Commissioners and Deloitte Consulting. Her books The Church on Capitalism and Ethical Leadership (edited with Carla Millar) were published by Palgrave in 2010. She can be contacted via eve.poole@gmail.com or twitter @evepoole and keeps a blog at <http://evepoole.livejournal.com/>



Faith in Business for 25 years

Faith in Business celebrated 25 years of working alongside Christian businesspeople with a special reception at the Athenaeum Club, Pall Mall, on Wednesday 25 June.

75 people attended the event. David Urquhart, Bishop of Birmingham and Chair of Ridley College Council, kindly acted as host. He, Eve Poole (chair of Faith in Business) and Director Richard Higginson all spoke.

Richard thanked many people for their active participation, support and encouragement over the last quarter of a century and outlined Faith in Business’s exciting plans for the next five years. Ridley Hall’s partnership with ICF in the launch and ongoing publication of Faith in Business Quarterly featured prominently in his account.

To watch a video which captures the flavour of the event in a memorable way go to <http://vimeo.com/99518665>.

