

SHADOW GOSPEL: Rowan Williams and the Anglican Communion Crisis

Charles Raven

The Latimer Trust: London, 2010 179pp £6.99pb ISBN: 9780946307784

In *Shadow Gospel* Charles Raven provides us with two things. In chapters 1-4 we have a fair and clear guide through the widening gyres of Rowan Williams's theology. Then in chapters 5-12 Raven shows how Williams's actions as Archbishop of Canterbury flow out of his theology. Raven has done the hard labour of trying to understand Williams, and he never makes personal attacks. Nor does blame Williams for everything: in his view the Archbishop is as much a symptom as a cause (and by undermining Lambeth 1.10 through a "spurious listening process" he has continued the policies of George Carey). Raven contends that William's offers a "shadow" Christology and gospel: the language of orthodoxy is used, but eviscerated of content.

Starting from the apophatic tradition, and rejecting the idea that scripture is itself revelation, Williams re-defines "orthodoxy" as not a matter of what we say but of the way we speak: for him, orthodoxy is a commitment to a process rather than faithfulness to a given body of truth. Williams draws on Ricoueur, Wittgenstein, and Hegel to develop an idea of theology as an endless conversation, a dialectic which resists final closure. To take part in this conversation requires "dispossession": the setting aside of personal commitments and claims to be in the right. Unfortunately for Williams this has proved impossible for anyone with firm convictions, conservative or liberal.

A theology that privileges process over confessional substance has then dovetailed with the "institutional pragmatism" inherent in the bureaucracy of the Anglican Communion, and the Church of England, to produce the present

mess. Before 2002 Williams was an outspoken advocate of the acceptance of homosexuality by the church. Since then he has declared his willingness to separate his private views from his public responsibility. Strangely, he did not do this as Archbishop of Wales. But as Raven shows, he has continued to contribute to the gay rights agenda by “creating a climate in which the orthodox become progressively desensitised to biblical morality”; by not repenting of his private views, he holds out the possibility that they may become the views of the majority. The Windsor Process and the Anglican Covenant are examples of the endless conversation required by Williams’s theology. But they cannot solve the “credibility crunch” that has emerged within a communion that lacks any firm beliefs, (its’ “confessional deficit”), and will not discipline TEC. The middle ground offered by Williams has proved to be an illusion: his leadership has degenerated into ad hoc political pragmatism.

Against this gloomy background, Raven sees a new dawn in GAFCON, which he believes is a return to the theological vision of the Reformers. Here I wasn’t quite convinced. GAFCON is certainly a step in the right direction. But, given the Jerusalem Declaration’s notorious omission of “alone” after “faith”, only time will tell if it is a new wineskin or another Anglican fudge.

Liberal blogs vilify Williams as autocratic and a traitor. Charles Raven has been proved right. In this tragedy, Rowan Williams emerges on to the storm-wracked Anglican heath as Lear, wandering, marginalized and having lost the respect of all around him, both conservatives and liberals. Anyone who wishes to understand both the Archbishop and the last decade (not to mention the impending collapse of the Church of England) would do well to read this excellent book.

STEPHEN WALTON

St. Michael’s, Marbury, Cheshire