March 2008

Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church (Book Review)

Jonathan Warner
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol36/iss3/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.
create life. This warning is fair enough, as the “God of the Gaps” argument is unsound and relegates God to areas of our ignorance, which makes God increasingly superfluous as ignorance is replaced by new knowledge. But the lack of a plausible mechanism for the origin of life is due not just to ignorance but to our knowledge of the physics and chemistry of cells, which indicate that spontaneous life is impossible.

The final section of the book addresses perceived conflicts between Scripture and science, particularly evolution. Clearly, an evolutionary scenario conflicts with a literal interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. Collins responds by describing these chapters as poetic and by appealing to Augustine, who himself questioned whether the creation happened in literal days (but I’m sure he would not have argued for billions of years!). Although I can sympathize with Collins’ warning that we not take the Genesis chapters as a scientific treatise, a “poetic” label does not mean we can dismiss the content of the text. I am also not comfortable with Collins’ argument from the genetic evidence that there was no literal Adam (or Eve) but that humans began as a population of around 10,000 individuals (206). I have difficulty reconciling such a scenario with the Fall, described in Genesis 3. In my conversation with Collins, he readily conceded such difficulties but chooses to put them “on the shelf for now.”

Space limitations prevent me from commenting on all parts of the book, but I do want to address his critique of Intelligent Design (ID), with which I have some sympathies. In this tumultuous debate about human origins, it is often difficult to represent a position accurately, and Collins’ description, although sympathetic, is not helpful. He incorrectly portrays ID as a primarily religious movement, although it does have religious implications. ID merely claims to be able to identify design but says nothing about the designer. Collins also portrays ID as a “God of the Gaps” argument, claiming that our gaps in knowledge are starting to be filled by further research. I beg to differ on that point. Further research has only made us more aware of the inadequacy of random mutation and natural selection to account for all of life’s features. For example, his explanation for the evolution of the bacterial flagellum, a well-known ID argument, does not fit with the evidence (the interested reader may refer to Michael Behe’s The Edge of Evolution for more details on this). Returning to the pattern vs. process distinction made earlier, ID’s arguments focus primarily on the process, and these “gaps” have only widened, despite Collins’ claims.

Collins also displays some inconsistencies in his arguments. Earlier in the book Collins supports the Anthropic Principle, but in his criticism of ID he ignores the fact that the Anthropic Principle is commonly used to support ID (an important theme in The Privileged Planet by ID proponents Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards). Collins also claims that “ID portrays the Almighty as a clumsy Creator, having to intervene at regular intervals to fix the inadequacies of His own initial plan for generating the complexity of life” (193, 194). Yet earlier in the book Collins acknowledges the existence of miracles, particularly Christ’s rising from the dead (48). By this same logic, do Christ’s birth and resurrection then portray the Almighty as a clumsy Redeemer, having to intervene to fix the inadequacies of His own initial plan for his people? It is a risky proposition to dictate how God should act in creation and whether supernatural actions are permitted, required, or unacceptable. ID merely argues that if natural processes are shown to be inadequate in explaining phenomena, then design is an acceptable inference.

Do not let my criticisms of the book deter the interested lay reader. Collins writes accessibly, lays out his arguments carefully, and is gracious to those with whom he disagrees. Collins is open about his faith and in that sense is a model for us to follow. Finally, he attempts to reconcile his understanding of science with his understanding of Scripture, although we may not always agree with his conclusions. There is much food for thought here for people who would like to learn more about the Human Genome Project and how one scientist sees his faith strengthened by his science.


In this book, Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, seeks to make three points. First, he sees history as a set of stories that helps us better understand the world we are in; second, he traces how the Church has demonstrated its divine origin through the ages; and third, he tries to show how the Christian today can be nourished and informed by what has gone before. The argument is rich and carefully nuanced, as one would expect, given the nature of the Archbishop’s role as head of the Anglican Communion. It is the book’s richness and careful argumentation that comprise its greatest strengths; its greatest flaw is the failure of the Archbishop to apply the framework he produces in any detailed way to the current crisis (the ordination of practicing homosexuals) that could splinter the Anglican Communion.

The Anglican Church has a long history of accommodating very disparate beliefs within one ecclesiastical structure. The book would have been much more relevant had the Archbishop chosen to apply the message of the book to difficult cases such as gay ordination. Instead, he briefly addresses the contemporary, but rather arcane, difficulty of the participation of lay people in the administration of the sacraments and ways of examining the question of Christian participation in
interfaith worship. With the issue of homosexuality, he
contains himself (but probably few readers of the book)
with pointing out that, given the Scriptural evidence, it is
going to be an uphill task to make the case for the full
acceptance of gay and lesbian clergy within the Anglican
communion.¹

At its founding, Christianity, like any new movement,
needed to validate itself by stressing its continuity with the
past. Christians read the Old Testament but with different
eyes and a different set of questions from those of its
original Jewish readers. For early Christians, the visible sign
of God rejecting the Jewish religion was the destruction of
the Temple in A.D. 70 and the fulfilment of the Old
Testament law in Christ.

At least this is how we might now understand it.
As the Archbishop points out, two dangers lurk in the
way we examine the lives and writings of people from
the past. One is to see them as being very similar to us,
having the same understanding of what the church, the
ekklesia, means, and of seeking to ask and answer the same
questions as we are now. In this view, the past is just the
present in fancy dress, and so the motivations, thought-
processes, and ways of conceptualizing creation and the
church are very similar to ours. The second danger is to
see the past as so completely different from our own world
that it is impossible to understand, and hence we can learn
nothing from it that can speak to us today. Instead, argues
Williams, we should be aware of the strangenesses of the
past, of the way in which things were different, of what
the pressing issues of the day were, and yet still see the
Body of Christ in those who have gone before. They
form a community from whom we can learn and which,
through its legacy, helps us understand old answers to old
questions. We can also understand the ways in which they
might have thought about the questions that worry us,
that is, the methods by which we might possibly arrive at
answers to those concerns we have today.

Chapters two and three of the book are, in effect,
case studies. The former examines what the Church of
Jesus Christ understood itself to be during the first 500
years or so of its existence; the latter focuses on the
Reformation. As Williams shows, over time what defines
membership in the Christian community has shifted from
a willingness to endure persecution (pre-Constantantine)
to doctrinal orthodoxy (from the fourth century onwards)
to a testimony to God's sovereign acts of grace (at the
Reformation). But there is continuity. Ultimately, the
church is not a human creation but a witness to God's
presence among His chosen people. The ways in which the
Church has preserved this witness over the centuries are
many and diverse, and some of them are suspiciously alien
to us. But the question we must ask is this: How do we live
if we are serious about our accountability to that prior act
of God that called out a people for His own possession?

So, why bother to study the past? Can we not just read
Scripture and see in it the answers to all the questions that
we face? The Archbishop argues that there is much to
be learned from the way those who have gone before us
used Scripture and witnessed to the Good News of the
Gospel. Pace the modernist scientific view of the role
of the academy, all good history is irreducibly moral—it
makes judgements of good and evil. Reading Scripture and
Church history, for all their strangenesses, does provide us
with tools to help us deal with the questions that worry
us today. Perhaps true Christian unity can be seen only at
times of crisis (such as the Confessing Church movement
as a response to the evils of Nazi Germany, or the unity
of the opposition to South African apartheid); but if that
is so, it becomes hard to say what constitutes the church
today.

Rather than propositional or creedal faith, Williams'
bottom line is that what defines the Body of Christ is its
faithfulness to the message of the Gospel and its ability
to use the same words in liturgy and worship. These
encompass all believers in the past, present, and future. In
most churches, we continue to use vocabulary and liturgy
from past centuries, and we think it worth the effort to
understand the images used in hymns from earlier centuries.
We recite, chant, or sing the Psalms, attesting to our belief
that these (as with all Scripture) are important for our
worship and understanding of the Body of Christ.

So how can the church meet new challenges? For
any theological innovation the question that needs to be
answered is this: can the desired change, in subordinating
one aspect of the Biblical text to another, take place
without weakening the fundamental commitment to the
Church's foundation in initiative and gift from elsewhere?
In other words, does the innovation keep us true to what
it means to be the Christian community? Williams states
that his aim is to put forward a way of engaging with the
Christian past that is constructive, using it neither as an
infallible standard (the error of many traditionalists) nor
as a record of past error (the mistake of many innovators)
from which we are isolated. But, of course, to remain on
this narrow way is not easy.

Telling the story of the church (especially in the light
of its all-too-evident failures and disunity) has never been
easy—or, if it has, we should be suspicious that we are
missing out on the mystery and wonder of it all: “A Church
that reflects more systematically on why it should be grateful
for its existence is a more effective witness to revelation
than one that has ceased to be surprised by itself “(114).
As we celebrate a divine stranger who came into the world,
we remember once again that we are part of something
transcendent, something far larger than ourselves. If church
history can bring this truth alive to challenge parochial or
tribal concerns, its study is worthwhile for that reason
alone: “It will have shown a little of what Christians have
meant by allaying their freedom with the alien sovereignty
of God” (114). Despite the book's failure to engage with
issues we might want it to, Archbishop Williams helps us
see the importance of engaging in this work.
Endnote

1. This review is being written as the Anglican Church edges ever closer to schism; the Episcopal Church in the United States has just rejected the idea of a parallel church structure for traditionalists who see homosexuality as a sin that should prevent ordination. Dr. Williams sees the issue as, “A challenge to the Episcopal Church to clarify its position, a challenge also to those who have intervened from elsewhere to see if they can negotiate their way towards an acceptable, equitable, settlement.” (Quoted in a BBC news report, 20 February 2007, downloaded 27th March 2007 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6377761.stm.). Read, “African bishop willing to pastor churches wishing to disassociate with ECUSA.”