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

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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.

Williams, Rowan. *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 2005. 129 pp. ISBN 0-8028-2990-2. Reviewed by Jonathan Warner, Professor of Economics at Dordt College (and communicant member of the Church of England).

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 contents 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-Constantine) 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 allying 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.”