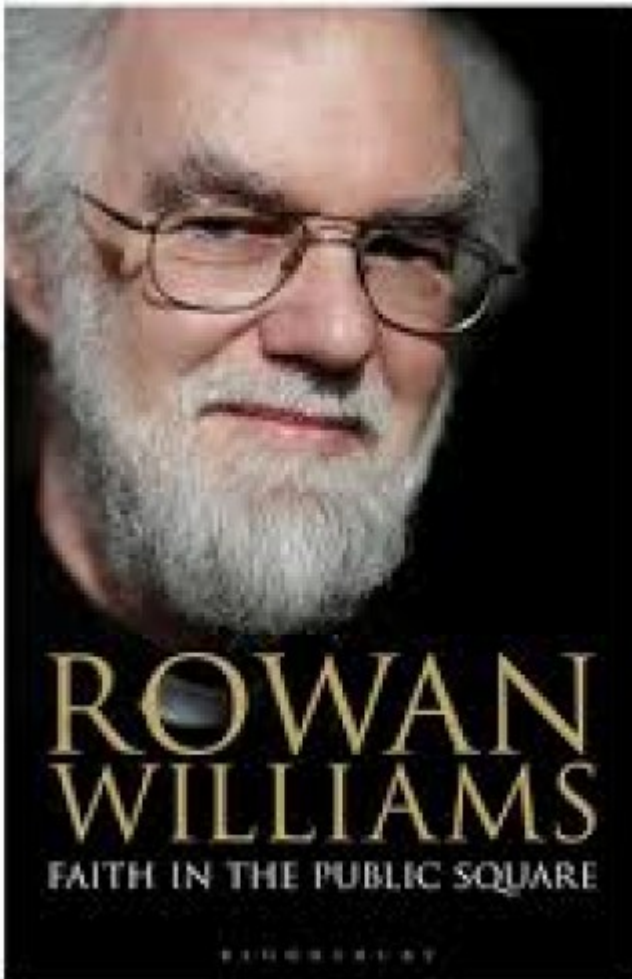


Faith in the Public Square, by Rowan Williams

reviewed by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [May 28, 2014](#) issue

In Review



Faith in the Public Square

by Rowan Williams

Bloomsbury

Rowan Williams never set out, as archbishop of Canterbury, to be an energetic chief executive of a flailing denomination. He saw himself much more as an interpreter—between one religion and another, between faith and unbelief, between

civil society and politics, and between the West and the two-thirds world. He knew there was no one better placed in public life in England (and perhaps beyond) to speak to issues of common concern without the need to be popular, simplistic, reductionist, or eye-catching. He could be intelligent, probing, compassionate, generous, challenging, bold, even-handed, reflective, and a little playful—as he is in this collection of 25 lectures.

So what does he want to say? More than anything else, that there's an honorable and needed place for religion in public life. That means making a distinction between programmatic secularism and procedural secularism. The latter, which Williams favors, assumes a crowded and argumentative public square and thus requires an honest broker to mediate and manage genuine difference. The broker must hold a high view of respect for law as that which enables vibrant diversity to flourish and that fosters a society that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Programmatic secularism is, by contrast, the great enemy in the book: it seeks a merely instrumental liberalism and aspires to little more than maximized choice, rendering the human subject a lone figure facing a range of options, any of which may be adopted but none of which has any public validity—and it perceives religion as no more than such an isolated and private choice. In such a perspective, “conviction is free, . . . but visible and corporate loyalty to the marks of such conviction is to be strongly discouraged.”

What is so bad about the neutral space posited by programmatic secularism? Williams points to its consequences. One is that when there is no “accepted, conviction-based and widely approved rationale for taking responsibility for others,” the motivation for doing so plummets. Another is that all major moral questions are reduced to calculations over finite resources; only by being “parasitic on three-dimensional cultures” can an ethos of public neutrality avoid dissolving into “functionalist and bureaucratic tyranny.” This is where the Enlightenment legacy goes awry: of course it was right to eject irrational and tyrannical assertion, but “the effect was to confuse unchallengeable authority with the unavoidably social elements of learning and discovering one's own humanity, and by rejecting the first to obscure the importance of the second.”

By contrast, the vision of procedural secularism—or interactive pluralism, as Williams also calls it—is rooted in his Augustinian politics. With Augustine he holds to a sense of the flawed and self-deceptive nature of personal and political life, and

thus he has no time for a theocratic state that sees itself as the fount of every blessing. But also like Augustine, he has a realistic notion of the shortcomings of human beings left to themselves, so he sees a lively role for the state in guaranteeing stability, offering freedom, and giving each their due. Giving each their due requires a somewhat elastic notion of law, for law is not a comprehensive code that enforces a set of universal claims, but an expression of what mutual recognition requires, especially in relation to society's weaker members—and thus it cannot avoid judgments about priorities.

What does the church offer? Christianity challenges consumer pluralism and rootless individualism; it upholds local communities and encourages other faiths; it cherishes the stranger; it holds a public space for moral debate and thus prevents faith being relegated to privatized fanaticism and exclusion. Williams does not pretend that the church always does these things. He laments the way that traditional religious affiliations “lose their integrity when they attempt to enforce their answers,” and he blames this impersonal and coercive ethos for alienating much of the culture at large. On the other hand, he believes that without the positive role of the churches, European pluralism would collapse.

The route back for the churches has been charted by thinkers such as Michael Sandel, who laments that the West has come to think about justice primarily legalistically, in terms of individual rights, thereby impoverishing the notion of the good. A richer, thicker civic life requires a greater public discussion of the good—which involves a more visible role for moral and religious convictions.

Although these core arguments form the first half of the book and undergird the rest, Williams includes a number of complementary lectures in which he develops similar lines of thought in relation to ecology, aging, economics, and interreligious well-being. Perhaps the most impressive lecture, for its depth of understanding of a vast and complex subject, is the one on punishment and the criminal justice system. What emerges is an awesome achievement, a testament to a life lived on the frontiers of faith and reason, the fruit of deep thinking, wide reading, and profound patience with unanswerable questions and indefatigable critics. Religion may continue to have its cultured despisers, but it would be hard for any cultured person to read this book and despise its learned, subtle, and probing author.

Yet for all this magnificent discourse I found myself wanting one thing more. As Karl Barth consistently pointed out, and as Williams notes, it's not entirely clear that

Christians have a particular stake in securing the status of religion as a general conceptual or sociological phenomenon. It's not certain that Jesus needs a prolegomenon, or that the clarity and subversive quality of the gospel is aided by formal claims for the plausibility of faith in general or for the usefulness of faith communities for social cohesion and renewal. Williams's erudition has earned the respect of an audience that seldom attends to Christian claims. That status attained, what is the task of the apologetic theologian or, more specifically, the constitutional prelate, once the ear of educated elites has been secured?

I suggest that the task is not simply to expose the inadequacy of a world without God or to show the collaborative spirit of religious engagement in the common good. It surely must more specifically be to demonstrate the unique power and thrilling wisdom of the logic of God in Christ and to reconceive tired issues in the light of the shape of Christ's coming. The authority and the credibility of the public theologian rest not so much on the theologian's insight, intelligence, or subtle grasp of complex issues (wondrous as each may be) as on the ability—respectfully, lucidly, and accessibly—to show how Christ redefines human nature, transforms death, and overturns the givens of life; to show what only God can do and what only God has done; and more intriguingly, to highlight the way that questions in public life today reflect and recall issues faced by the church in shaping and embodying Christian doctrine. This is a task that only someone who listens to society's soul and to the rhythms of God as deeply as Rowan Williams can accomplish. When he does, he does it brilliantly; I just wish it were the heart of this book.