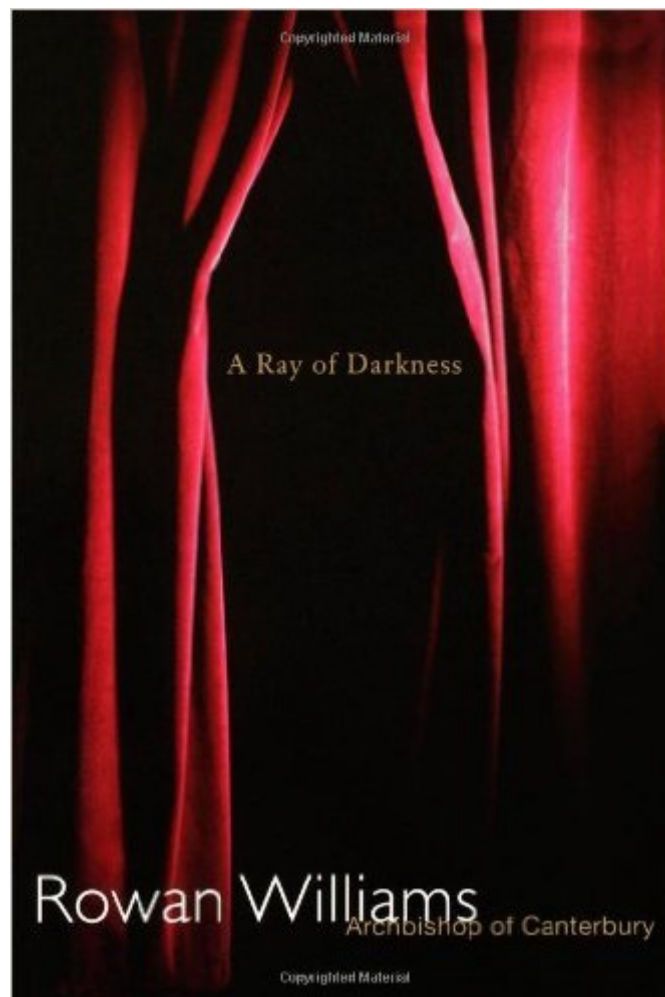


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A Ray Of Darkness



Synopsis

Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury. In this collection of pastoral sermons and addresses, Williams shows how the faith of the creeds can still equip Christians for a vigorous and critical engagement with the world of today. In his often poetic, sometimes scholarly, and always thoughtful and engaging style, Williams reflects with wisdom and empathy on the gospel connections to issues of peace, war, justice, sexuality, wholeness, suffering, loneliness, vocation, and mission. Sermons from the church year and practical matters of Christian spirituality such as intercessory prayer and Bible study are also included; still others celebrate great Christian figures across the centuries, from the Anglo-Saxon saints to Michael Ramsey and T. S. Eliot. Also, published for the first time are Williams's addresses on Mission and Spirituality delivered at Yale in 1991, a sharp but sympathetic perspective on evangelism in the church today.

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Customer Reviews

'My title is a paradox, and people tend to be annoyed by paradoxes -- in many ways quite rightly. We suspect them of concealing muddle, and so of representing some kind of intellectual or spiritual cowardice.' - Sermon entitled 'A Ray of Darkness' Rowan Williams, lately Archbishop of Wales and professor of divinity at Oxford, recently took the chair occupied by the likes of Thomas a'Becket, Cardinal Wolsey, and others of that ilk to become the Archbishop of Canterbury, spiritual head of the Anglican communion. Williams was, I must admit, my first choice among the various candidates, not only because his theological views and socio-political temperament are in agreement, or at the

very least in conversation with, my own, but also because he is an established theologian and historian, and that is something this high office requires. No mere administrator, Williams brings a keen mind to the position where much theological insight will be required to navigate the changing tides of worldwide Anglicanism. This was published in 1994/95, long before the prospect of occupying the See of Canterbury was on the horizon. Thus, they are not written in anticipation of any such elevation. Even so, Williams reflects in the Introduction a certain unease with producing this volume: 'There is always something a bit odd about a collection of sermons. Apart from the echoes of Victorian self-importance that 'Collected Sermons' tend to rouse, every preacher knows that a sermon is a particular event, far more than a text. It is a moment when you try to make a connection between a specific group of people in a specific time and place and the resources of the Christian vision in its historic wholeness.' In other words, reading a sermon can be somewhat like reading the words to a song -- you lose much in translation from the aural experience to the printed page. Also, things change, and rare is the sermon that serves a 'timeless' purpose; many preachers, and Williams is among them, preach to the place and time. While one hopes that every sermon may touch the divine and the timeless, few can master the timelessness of a John Donne, yet even most of his sermons are rooted firmly in his time. Williams sermons here are collected into broad categories: + The Word Was Made Flesh+ Toward Easter+ The Unknown God+ Testing Questions+ Callings+ Celebrating People+ Celebrating Occasions+ Mission and Spirituality. The title for the entire collection, 'A Ray of Darkness', comes from his sermon of the same title in the section on 'The Unknown God'. Drawing from the quotation at the beginning of this article, one can see that Williams is willing to face the challenge of speaking about the unknowable, and ready to discuss the changing and myriad views of God. Williams in his sermons draws in the Bible largely through lectionary texts, as any good Anglican would. However, few of the sermons in this collection are strictly 'lectionary' sermons. Many are topical, many are 'occasional'. Among the topical sermons are the four sermons under the heading of Callings. He has two sermons on Vocation, a sermon on deception in calling, which can be on the part of the individual himself or herself, and a sermon on the role of community in the vocational process. 'The trouble with the idea of vocation is that most of us, if we are honest, have a rather dramatic idea of it. I don't mean dramatic just in the sense of self-dramatising, but dramatic in the simpler sense of theatrical -- vocation as casting, you might say. God has a purpose for the world, a very long and very good play, even longer and better than Shaw's "Back to Methuselah", with plenty of juicy parts in it. The nuisance is that he draws up the cast-list before doing any auditions. We find ourselves called to fulfill a definite role, but we haven't actually seen the script, and as time goes on we may suspect we would do better in another

part.' This excerpt shows the creative side of Williams, as well as the spiritual side and thoughtful application of the current with the academic with the timeless. In addition to sermons, there are a few lectures contained in this collection, largely lectures derivative of his time at Oxford, though not exclusively used there. One such lecture is his final piece in the collection, 'Against Anxiety, Beyond Triumphalism'. Williams here talks of the difficulties of determining exactly what is meant by the terms 'spirituality', 'communion', and 'church'. He also cautions against those who make the church, or even greater Christianity, into a victorious (and thereby, an infallible or inerrant) institution of domination, particularly when it is fraught with such paradox and vague notions. This is an interesting and intriguing collection. It lends itself well for bedside reading or reflection-time reading, as each of the sermons and lectures are only a few pages in length (they average five to six pages), but are filled with language and depth that go beyond their small word counts. This book is a product (in America) of the Cowley Press, a press adjunct to the Episcopal Church and dedicated to liturgical, spiritual and theological writings. This collection gives a good insight into the man who is the symbolic head of the Anglican communion, and as such, is well worth investigating.

A few months ago, I read a description of Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, that described him as being "post-liberal". Some may react to the term "post-liberal" as being yet another banal way of exploiting the end of the modern period and its narrative/s, but responding in this way would likely fail to engage and appreciate the eloquent and gracious subverting of narrow categories such as "conservative" and "liberal" that takes place in Williams' work. He is a deep breath of fresh air; even when you don't agree with him, he still shines a new light on topics, especially those that are worn out by tiresome conservative and/or liberal *over*simplifications. This book is a collection of sermons; it makes for good contemplative reading as one may read only one or two sermons at a time or, instead, read through an entire section of the book in a single sitting. Being a collection of sermons, it contains neither a bibliography nor detailed footnotes. Although both would be welcome, both would probably also take away from the point of the book, which is not to be an academic work so much as it is to be a pastoral work which encompasses but is not limited to the academic. And, it is Williams' pastoral heart that shines through in each sermon. He shows himself to be a man of not only academic learning and intellectual insight, but also full of compassion and having a deep spirituality. The universality and the particularity of Christ's saving work and message dance an intricate dance with each other throughout the book. The universal and the particular both move in grace; Williams gives his words over to embodying these movements in their depth, complexity and mystery. My favorite sermon is titled, "Is There a Christian

Sexual Ethic?" Characteristically, Williams avoids a simple "yes" or "no" but instead outlines contours, some of which show their depth and fullness in the light of "conservative" thought, and others of which show these in the light of "liberal" thought. Williams resists the license of liberalism and the legalism of conservatism, choosing instead to understand the giving of the body in terms of gift, grace and love - in short, Christian *thinking*. Although he remains more liberal on the topic than I am, I remain indebted to his insights, which have pushed me to think more deeply about what is not just a complex issue, but a beautiful one as well. For those that have not yet read the good Archbishop, this is a wonderful place to start. For those that have read him, this is an excellent place to continue. Regardless of where you are, Williams' Ray of Darkness will put things in a wonderfully new light: humbly, gracefully and with all their depth, complexity and beauty intact.

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