

Perhaps it's when we try to make God useful in crises that we take the first steps towards the great lie of religion: the god who fits our agenda.

Writing in the Dust: After September 11

by Rowan Williams, 2002, Eerdmans (78 pages)

PROLOGUE: Williams describes his experiences on September 11:

On September 11, I was in a building used by the staff of Trinity Church a couple of blocks away from the World Trade Center, with a group of people planning to record several hours of discussion around issues of spirituality . . . We were interrupted. We learned and received a very great deal from each other in the hours that followed . . .

After the 11th, what are we prepared to learn?

1 LAST WORDS: Williams contrasts two very different forms of last words on that day: the “messages sent by passengers on the planes to their spouses and families in the desperate last minutes, and the spiritual advice apparently given to the terrorists by one of their number, the thoughts that should be in their minds as they approach the death they have chosen.”

The religious words are, in the cold light of day, the words that murderers are saying to themselves to make a martyr's dream out of a crime. The nonreligious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about — the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.

It should give us pause, especially if we think we are religious.

Then Williams encounters a young Catholic airline pilot who wants to know “what the hell God was doing when the planes hit the towers.” At that time Williams has no comforting answer, and even now he can only say:

Any really outrageous human action tests to the limit our careful theological principles about God's refusal to interfere with created freedom. That God has made a world into which he doesn't casually step in to solve problems is fairly central to a lot of Christian faith. He has made the world so that evil choices can't just be frustrated or aborted (where would he stop, for goodness sake? he'd have to be intervening every instant of human history) but have to be confronted, suffered, taken forward, healed in the complex process of human history, always in collaboration with what we do and say and pray.

2 ANSWERING BACK: Williams considers our possible responses to the acts of September 11.

Violence is a communication of hatred, fear, or contempt, and I have a choice about the language I am going to use to respond. If I decide to answer in the same terms, that is how the conversation will continue.

Williams proceeds to a homily about Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. He says that people wrongly think Jesus is "commending passivity." Williams feels that turning the other cheek is not passive, but is actively refusing to be a victim, while refusing to simply reproduce what's been done to you (that is, to slap back). This is a frightening response (as Gandhi learned) to those in power.

3 THE END OF WAR: Williams is not a radical pacifist and does not exclude force under all circumstances. However, he is bothered by many things about the American response to the attacks, including even the overuse of the word "war" (war on terrorism). He is disturbed by the civilian casualties, by the cluster bombs, by a war that seems to have no end in sight. "We could refuse to be victims, striking back without imagination."

4 GLOBAL NEIGHBOURHOOD: Here Williams speaks out against globalization and against many wrongheaded policies: "Every transaction in the developed economies of the West can be interpreted as an act of aggression against the economic losers in the worldwide game."

5 AGAINST SYMBOLS: For Williams, instead of "recognizing common experience" with others, we are using symbols to make the others fit our agenda. (A complex chapter that needs to be read.)

EPILOGUE: Thoughts about the story from John 8 of the woman taken in adultery. Jesus pauses twice to write on the ground. The idea is for us to pause also before judgment "long enough for some of our demons to walk away."