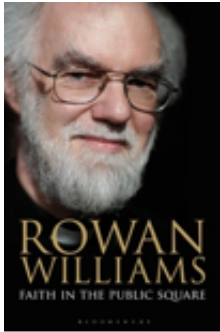


## **Book Review: Faith in the Public Square by Rowan Williams**



One of the accusations constantly made against Rowan Williams is that his communication often sacrifices clarity for depth and exactitude. That accusation cannot be laid against his latest book.

The press seemed to suggest that we were going to receive a somewhat explosive book, as if freed from the restraint of office, Rowan was going to say what he really thought and that he would deliver a few broadsides and possibly even reveal a few sensational pieces of information.

Who knows what Rowan might do in future days, though forms of tabloid journalism seem unlikely however remote from office. In this book he is wonderfully clear, erudite and grapples with some significant issues of the kind that should interest anyone who believes that Christianity has significance for debate in the public square.

In tackling a wide range of issues, really as a series of essays, the Archbishop says mostly what you would expect him to say. That is not a criticism because the way in which he says it is extremely well informed and covers a huge breadth in terms of the way in which the argument is presented. More importantly, he sets each issue in an historical context which nearly always illuminates the argument in an impressive and helpful way.

Some of the issues that Rowan tackles cover fairly familiar territory for me and so although there was not really much new information for me in these debates, I nevertheless benefited from Rowan Williams' lucidity. This gave me confidence that in the chapters dealing with subject matter about which I am not so well informed, I would presumably be reading a similarly authoritative presentation of the issues.

I read most of the book on a plane and it was a delight to read. The usual in-flight interruptions stopped me reading from time to time and it was with a certain eager anticipation of a real feast that I resumed reading on each occasion. This is good literature, wonderfully delivered as well as thoughtfully argued.

The book includes an account of the debate with secularism, multiculturalism and pluralism – connected with a discussion on human rights and religious faith. There is a series of debates

about ethical issues as they relate to the environment, economics, and a number of issues relating to justice, particularly in relation to the way in which we live in communities. There is a final series of discussions on atheism and its relationship to the world of faith which naturally leads on to a debate on how we can live together in unity and diversity. The final chapter encourages a new engagement with religion or as Rowan puts it, “rediscovery religion”.

Rowan’s chapter on atheism correctly points out that it is not a system in itself but can only really be understood as a coherent set of ideas in dynamic relationship with faith. In other words atheism is defined more by what it denies is true than by what it can claim to be true. That curious relationship between atheism and specific religious traditions helps to illuminate a potentially creative way of understanding particular religions, as being formed in part by a series of assertions about what is not true, as much as what is true, for example about God. This argument illustrates the way in which Rowan works with an issue. There are not “killer” lines that leap from the page into the memory designed to destroy the arguments of others in a single devastating thrust. Instead, there is the invitation to take the object being viewed and examine it widely and from many unfamiliar angles. It is genuinely a book intended to produce contemplation.