

GUEST ESSAY

The New Atheists 'Attack a God I Don't Believe In, Either': A Q&A With Rowan Williams

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Rowan Williams is among the most important religious thinkers in the world. A theologian, poet, playwright and literary critic, he served as the archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012. I spoke to Dr. Williams about his journey of faith and doubt, why God allows the innocent to suffer and how to interpret the Bible (and how not to). He talked about the New Atheists and the influence on his theology of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, what makes Jesus such a compelling figure and what it means to pastor people through grief. Dr. Williams also talked about how, for him, the Christian faith is “the perspective that enriches.” Our conversation, which has been lightly edited, is the third in a series of interviews I am doing that explores the world of faith.

1. Dostoyevsky Led the Way

Peter Wehner: Let me start out by asking you to describe your journey of faith. As a young adult, what was the pull toward Christianity for you? Was it primarily intellectual or aesthetic or an appeal to the imagination or some combination of those? Did you experience what C.S. Lewis called “Sehnsucht,” an intense longing and divine spark for something that’s unattainable in this material world?

Rowan Williams: I’d grown up in a Christian environment but not a very intense one. It was really when I was a teenager that it began to speak to me, and it did so largely, to pick up your categories, at the imaginative level. It felt like a larger world to inhabit and at a time when I was discovering more and more about the literary world, about philosophical questioning, about the historical roots of our culture.

All of that seemed to me, as a student, enriching and exciting. But it was also brought alive — and here was my good fortune — through particular people who were very important to me at the time, especially my parish priest, who was a huge influence — encouraging, supportive, giving me the message all the time that there’s room for all that in the life of faith.

When I started as a university student — coming into contact with an awareness of human need and human suffering that I hadn’t quite registered before, meeting homeless people when I was a student in Cambridge, the sense that you needed to have quite a capacious picture of human nature in order to see the dignity and the need — that reinforced my feeling that the faith I’d grown into was something which actually allowed you to engage at depth with people.

Wehner: Is the draw of faith for you now essentially what it was when you were younger?

Williams: It’s probably pretty much what I grew up in, in many ways, which is not to say it’s not changed or developed. It’s certainly been battered and tested in various ways. But when I go back to what I was learning at that time, it’s still that same sense that this is the perspective that enriches. This is the perspective that enlarges.

Wehner: You're a person of great theological depth, but I imagine, like many people of faith, you've struggled at various points with doubt. If so, how has that manifested itself to you?

Williams: Looking back, there have been very few times when I felt what you might call a substantive doubt of the whole thing. You know, "Is any of this true?" It's much more, "Does any of this make sense where I am?" I've always resonated with the person who said, "God exists, but I don't believe in him," in the sense that the system's there, the pattern's there and it's compelling. But how much am I actually inhabiting it? How much am I making it my own? How much is it really making sense of where I am? And there have been periods, especially of personal loss and personal awareness of struggle and uncertainty, where it's been not so much I doubt that God exists but I don't know whether I'm connecting with what's there — and I don't know how to.

Wehner: Those moments, that particular manifestation of doubt, how have you worked your way through that?

Williams: It's a lot to do with doing the next thing. It's a lot to do with trying to hold your position, and I don't mean an intellectual position. I mean holding a place where you are standing firm and doing what you can do. I was very struck as a young man reading the fiction of Iris Murdoch, particularly her novel "The Bell." At the end of that, you're faced with a chapter about the experience of somebody who has been intensely involved in religious activity and has just had an absolutely traumatic shock to everything that he believes in and everything he holds dear.

He's living next door to a convent, and all he can do is to go to Mass every morning. And I thought, "Yes, I see what's going on there. He's doing the next thing." He's treading water, you might say, but also he knows something can be done — not to keep the darkness at bay but to keep breathing, to keep moving, to keep open to something. I think that sense of wanting to keep open to something is probably quite near the center of what I believe about a spiritual life. You don't pray or meditate or contemplate in order to get results, exactly.

Wehner: Sometimes doing the next thing is the best thing to do. You wrote a book on Fyodor Dostoyevsky. He's one of the writers who have meant the most to you, and it's understandable why. What is it about the work of Dostoyevsky, in particular, that has so impressed you in the context of faith? How has your theology been shaped by him?

Williams: I discovered Dostoyevsky as a teenager and read him fairly intensely as a student and as a graduate student. What struck me most was two things. One is he's very good at depicting characters who are holy, who are in some sense transparent to the divine and also letting you see that they're not going to have all the answers. They're going to be the window that lets the light in. And I thought, "That tells me something about holiness. Don't look for the leader, the controller, the problem solver. Look for where the light gets in." In Leonard Cohen's famous image, the persons who are part of the crack that lets the light in.

Throughout my life I've been privileged to see a number of individuals in whom I could say, "Yes, there's the crack. They've let the light in." They've been people of varied accomplishment or status, but the one thing in common is things look different in their light. So that was one thing I learned from Dostoyevsky.

I suppose the other thing was Dostoyevsky's absolutely relentless commitment to making it as difficult for himself as he possibly could. He says: You want the grounds for atheism? I'll tell you the grounds for atheism. Let me lay out to you all the good reasons for not believing in God.

Of course, in the famous chapters in "The Brothers Karamazov" where Ivan Karamazov talks about the suffering of children, that's Dostoyevsky saying: Let me show you. You think you have reason for not believing? I can show even better reasons for not believing. And pushing through that, saying: I'm not going to pretend it's simpler than it is. And saying at the end of that: I'm not going to pretend to give you an answer. I'm going to give you the fact that love is possible in the middle of this.

The moment of reconciliation, of love, of forgiveness, of acceptance is as real as all the nightmares that he describes. Dostoyevsky, as it were, flings down his pen and says: Well, there you are. You make your choice. The world is full of evidence against love, against reconciliation, against the possibility of a God who holds the world.

The probabilities stack up in a fairly unpromising way, and then a moment happens where the light gets in, where something in the world refuses to be crushed by that.

Nick Cave, the singer and songwriter, with whom I had a long conversation a couple of years ago, spoke about the impact on him of the tragic death of his teenage son. He said his main feeling was not that it made faith harder but that it made faith more imperative: I'm not going to be defeated.

I think there's something of that in Dostoyevsky, when at the end of that astonishingly painful and difficult section of "The Brothers Karamazov" Alyosha kisses his brother. It's as if Dostoyevsky is saying: Well, that is as real as any amount of suffering. Make what you will of it. I'm not going to tell you, but there it is.

Wehner: Let me stay on Dostoyevsky for a moment, because, as you said, his indictment of God was so searing in "The Brothers Karamazov" that he wasn't even confident that he'd adequately refuted it. That raises the issue you touched on, which is theodicy, the effort to resolve the problem of evil with the existence of an all-powerful and all-benevolent God. You touched on this in your answer, but I want to home in on it a little bit more. What is Dostoevsky's response to suffering? If I understand you right and if I've read Dostoyevsky correctly, the answer is not philosophical or theological. It's primarily love. How would you respond to people who ask this ancient question: Why does a good God allow the innocent, the children, to suffer?

Williams: The question I want to ask in reply — though, of course, I can't ask it in quite these terms if somebody is actually in the middle of suffering — is: What would a satisfactory answer to that look like? What would our lives be like if I could say, "I'll tell you exactly why your child died. I'll tell you exactly why you

suffered that terrible accident. I'll tell you exactly why people are dying daily in Ukraine and Gaza and Congo. I can tell you, and it'll all be clear, and you won't have to worry about it any longer."

What would that feel like? When people say they want an answer, it's not that kind of answer they're really looking for. I don't know entirely what to make of that. But whenever people say, "Have you got an answer?" I say, "Do you really want that kind of answer?" Imagine the bereaved mother turns up at the parsonage door and says, "Why should my child die?" And you say, "Because of this, this and this. Satisfied? See you next week."

No, that's not it. And what is "it"? I don't entirely know, except that people live with these horrors. People make personal sense of them. People are sometimes opened up by them to depths they hadn't expected. That's, again, as Dostoyevsky would say, it's as much a part of the fabric of the world as anything else.

The other dimension was that he's always nudging us to ask, "You talk about suffering. So what's your complicity in this?"

He invites you to understand that you are part of the problem. You're part of what tangles and embroils the world more and more in injustice and suffering. Just step up to that and say, "Yes, I'm part of this. I'm responsible. I'm answerable for the neighbor." We're not just talking about love in a vague and general way, but as he put it and as the great Dorothy Day liked to quote, this is a "harsh and dreadful love." This is asking something really quite frightening of you, that you understand your solidarity in this.

Wehner: I imagine what some people might ask, what Ivan Karamazov might ask, isn't simply, "Tell me the reason that this happened." It might be, "Why did you allow it to happen in the first place?"

Williams: Of course. It essentially has to do with the basic question of why there is anything other than God. Because anything other than God is going to be, in some ways, unstable, in some ways flawed. If God made the perfect, God would make

another God. So why does God invest in what isn't God? And not being God, I don't have a very clear sense of the answer to that, nor do any of us.

2. The Purpose of God's Elusiveness

Wehner: Why would God deny tangible assurances — empirical and nearly incontestable proofs — to those whom he loves and who desperately cry out for it?

Williams: It's not that God is deliberately making things difficult but that God is God. God is not a thing among other things. God is not an item in the world, and God is not a response to our mail order form. He doesn't simply slot into what we think is intelligible or manageable. God is the infinite, unmanageable, unconditioned context of all that we are and we do, and so it's not entirely surprising if we can't boil that down into something we can manage. That's why, of course, in Hebrew Scripture, when the people of Israel gather at Mount Sinai, the mountain is covered with cloud and fire, and God says to Moses: Keep your distance. I'm sorry. This is how I am. You're not going to boil me down to something that's manageable.

There's always an innate depth, inaccessibility, unmanageability about this, and at times that comes home to us with enormous force when we would like there to be a simple answer — part of the burden of what Old and New Testaments alike say: Be careful of idolatry. You're always prone to making a God you can manage.

That's what idolatry boils down to. You can make that manageable God in any number of forms. You can make it in religious forms. You could make it in economic and social forms. Just be very conscious that, as the Lord says to Moses, "You shall have no other gods before me." Don't go putting in his place something which is a pseudo-God.

When you've got all that going on in the background, then it does seem to me that there's always going to be that elusiveness, that "something around the corner of your vision" quality about God. At the same time you are talking about this elusive and unmanageable, unimaginable God there have been lives and signs and nudges and hints everywhere you look. In the work of some great mystical writer like St.

John of the Cross you have that sense that at one and the same time, there's nowhere you can pin God down in the world and there's nowhere where God isn't. And you are always poised on the knife edge.

Reinforcing that, look at the basic story of Christian faith, the story of Jesus Christ, and you see that Jesus himself, as he moves toward his death, stares into the darkness and says: Well, can't you do something to stop this? "Let this cup pass from me." On the cross he asks, "Why have you abandoned me?" And those things have always been profoundly difficult for Christians to get their mind around but also profoundly important in helping us see that Jesus' humanity is real. It's as three-dimensional as ours. And also, when we feel those dark moments of rebellion, we're not alone. Those words have been spoken by the son of God himself, so don't be too surprised. As St. John of the Cross says in one of his works: Don't imagine that God is going to make things so much easier for you than they were for Jesus.

Wehner: It sounds like what you're saying is God is elusive but deeply present.

Williams: Deeply present, yes. Absolutely that, and I love the Jewish image of the divine glory, the Shekinah, being present everywhere in the world but present as if it were a beggar in the street, as if scattered, exiled, obscure. Yet around every corner is this presence, this insistent reminder.

Wehner: Early in my Christian journey, I was struck by the exchange that Jesus had with Thomas, when Jesus told Thomas, after Thomas asked for evidence, "Blessed are those who haven't seen and believed." I thought, "Now, why is that? Why would it be better to believe not having seen?" I was never fully able to answer that question, but I came to understand that there was something in the nature of faith that was important to God, that Kierkegaard's leap of faith meant something to him.

Williams: It's a real theme in St. John's Gospel, isn't it? Because it's not only the story of St. Thomas but also earlier on, at the Last Supper, when Jesus says, "It is expedient for you that I go away," as if Jesus is saying, "If I stay around, it'll be all too easy for you to be comfortable with the assurance of the love of God and the healing power of God that I have embodied for you. But actually, for you to be open

to the full range and depth of what God is going to give through the life of the Holy Spirit, then you've got to let go of having me around as a best friend. It's more than that."

"The point of my going away is that immeasurably more will open up. If I don't go, the Holy Spirit won't come," says Jesus, in effect. "If you cling to me as a human friend, a warm presence, that's not it." There's a joy and a fullness beyond that.

That's the good news. The bad news is that in order to open up to that fullness, you've got to let go of pretty well everything you think makes you feel better, which is why Christian spirituality has a very complicated relationship to joy and fulfillment. It's all about joy and fulfillment, and it's all about the fact that joy and fulfillment, if they're real, if they're durable, cost you.

Wehner: You've debated some of the most prominent New Atheists, as they were referred to some 15 years ago. One of them is the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. What do you think they might have missed in their understanding of faith or of God?

Williams: It's been an interesting experience, being in debate with Richard, with others like A.C. Grayling and Philip Pullman. I always learn from those encounters, and I have respect and affection for them. I think what's missing sometimes is precisely that sense that when we talk about God, we're not just talking about a thing or a person, in the sense of an individual. As a Christian, I believe in God as Trinity. I believe in God as an interweaving of personal agencies, the love and mutuality of what we call the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In that sense, I'm not saying I believe in an impersonal God. Far from it.

But very often the God who's being attacked and questioned by the Dawkinses and the Graylings and the Pullmans of this world is a God I don't believe in, either: an individual who sits in the remote parts of the universe and treats the rest of the universe as an intriguing hobby for himself, rather than the God who is much more like the ocean that soaks through everything that is and yet is infinitely beyond it.

I found recently in the work of a 17th-century Welsh Catholic writer, Augustine Baker, a wonderful image: that the soul without God, the soul cut off from God, is like a whale stuck in a pond. It longs for the ocean, he said. It can't be in the depths where it belongs. Now, I don't hear very much of that sense in the New Atheists. They come up with all sorts of very neat and, as far as they go, perfectly rational arguments about how difficult it is to believe in some chap out there in midspace.

I want to say, "Well, yeah. I have no interest in a chap out there in outer space, none at all." But I am quite interested in what the infinite, unconditioned life of generosity is within which I and everything else live. And I have every interest in the story of how that life astonishingly comes to fruition in the middle of our history in the life of Jesus. Now, that's something I do think I can spend my life thinking and praying about and something that transfigures the horizons in which we live.

So the old chestnut about talking about the existence of God is like saying, "Well, there's a chocolate teapot infinitely circling the earth, and it happens to be invisible and intangible and incapable of offering any evidence at all for its presence, and I still believe in it." Well, no. Open a page of St. Augustine or George Herbert or T.S. Eliot or Dostoyevsky, and chocolate teapot doesn't quite do the work there.

Wehner: It sounds like you reject the God of the New Atheists but your God is not their God.

Williams: Indeed, and there's a very interesting paper by a French writer, Olivier Clément. He was a convert to Russian Orthodoxy, and back in the late '60s he wrote a very interesting essay called "Purification by Atheism," in which he said, long before the age of Dawkins and the others: When people talk about the death of God, when people talk about the impossibility of belief, one thing we might say in response is, "Well, thank God, you've been delivered from a particular kind of idolatry in mythology. Thank God, you've broken through the chocolate teapot level and realized that it's much more exciting than that."

Wehner: Let me ask you an interpretive question related to Christianity. How would you recommend Christians think about situations in which they're convinced the Bible is teaching something that their moral conscience would otherwise say is horrifying? For example, the slaughter of the Canaanites, including children and other innocents, or God predestining people before time to eternal conscious torment.

Many American evangelicals argue that our moral consciences are fundamentally flawed and often unreliable and therefore we have to let the Bible shape our moral consciences rather than the other way around. Their view, as I understand it, is 1) the Bible, inerrant and infallible, clearly teaches these things and 2) human beings are in no position to question any action of God. They'd much rather have God's revelation — or what they believe to be God's revelation — be the source of what they consider to be true and good. They don't want to rely on human logic or moral intuition, even if God's revelation seems to endorse genocide or God creating individuals predestined to experience unceasing agony. What problem, if any, do you see with this fairly widely accepted approach to the Bible and moral reasoning?

Williams: I'm familiar with the approach, and I've come across it in parts of my own church from time to time. The problem that strikes me is that it takes the Bible completely out of any sort of human context, as if the Bible had fallen from heaven as a self-contained unit, as if it were exactly like what the Quran claims to be. But the Quran, of course, is radically different. The Quran was composed in one short period and proclaims itself to be direct revelation. The Bible doesn't seem to work like that. The Bible is the accumulation of what you might call the interaction of God with a succession of human societies.

Within the Bible itself, you have little bits that are in tension with one another. To take one of my favorite examples: You have God apparently telling Elisha to go and anoint a new king for Israel, Jehu, and to overthrow the dynasty of Ahab, and there's a blood bath that follows. And then, at the beginning of the book of Hosea, a century or so after that, you have a statement essentially that that blood bath was an offense in the eyes of God.

So you have already — and this is the really important thing — you have the self-critical element within Scripture. The one thing you don't have is a revelation you can grasp hold of and say, "Now I can weaponize this against whoever I choose."

Now, that means if you read the Bible as it stands — literally, if you like — what you have is a painful, protracted conversation on who the God is that is engaging with you. There are moments where you will draw radically mistaken conclusions from that.

There are also moments where you can see a continuity you hadn't expected. I love the idea that the Book of Ruth was written as a pushback against an excessively exclusive racial policy in the Judaism of the postexilic period, where somebody said: All right. You may be very unhappy with the Jews returning from exile and marrying the people of the land. But don't forget that King David's great-grandmother was a Moabite.

Even within the New Testament, you can see the gradual emergence of a recognition that this new community doesn't work by quite the same standards and quite the same protocols as the Jewish world. It's continuous, but it's also fresh. What does that mean? You have sometimes the painfully difficult language of antisemitic hatred that appears in pages of the New Testament. At the same time, you have in St. Paul the clear affirmation: Well, I'm proud to be Jewish, and the future of the world is somehow connected with the history that begins with Jews, and don't forget it.

So a process is always going on, a lively exchange, a discovery over time. Now, I think that is how to read the Bible literally, and I think that is quite consistent with saying the Bible is the Word of God, in the sense that the Bible tells us what God needs us to know. And looked at as a whole, it says what we need to know is that we are made freely by God, in God's image. That we are from the very first moment of being made in God's image also capable of an almighty train crash of misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Our massive misinterpretation of who God is and what God is up to doesn't frustrate the purpose of God. God is faithful. Any Jew would say that. A Christian would add that faithfulness is embodied once

and for all in the event where the worst thing possible is done to the incarnate representative of God and God is not defeated by it — the cross and the Resurrection.

Now, I think that gives you quite a bit to go on, and I think it does indeed shape a moral perspective on things. What it doesn't do is say anything and everything that is described in Scripture as good must be accepted as good and anything that Scripture describes as bad has to be accepted as bad — never mind the context, never mind the place it holds the unfolding story that I've mentioned. I just don't think it can be quite that simple.

That's not putting our values or our principles in the place of the will of God. It's much more saying: Let the whole of that story shape my principles and my vision. Because when that happens, I don't see that it's consistent to believe in a God who deliberately endorses genocide, a God who deliberately creates people for damnation. Is that the God who is at work in the story of faithfulness, the story of a constant radical reclaiming of the human world through compassion and absolution, the God of Jesus?

So, yes, I think the idea that we just park our instinctive moral reactions and accept what the Bible says is a travesty. And I would use that strong a word, because of course, our moral instincts are faulty, but they're faulty because they are self-protective, self-serving, idolatrous, short term, based on fictional views of who we are and what we are. Yes, they're faulty in all sorts of ways. But when I say I can't imagine God commanding genocide, then my inability to believe that God commands genocide is precisely not a failing to do with my selfishness or my idolatry. I think it's the beginnings of a sense of where the true God is at work and where he isn't.

So I want us to read the Bible again and again. I want us to read it literally and closely and intensely and prayerfully and to read it as a whole and not just to say, "It's a sort of monolithic block." It's much more interesting, much more challenging, much more transformative if we can get into the conversation that the Bible embodies.

Wehner: It sounds like what you're saying is that the Bible is both the Word of God and a dialectic and that God has invited human beings into the process in an intimate way beyond simply being transcribers.

Williams: Absolutely, yes. Because of course, if you say that the whole of the Bible is the Word of God, then you are saying that, for example, the passionate protests against God that you find in the Book of Job are the Word of God. That the Psalms — where the psalmist says: Where are you? What are you doing? I can't come to you. Are you deaf? — that's the Word of God. The words of protest and pushback against God, that's also what God wants you to know. He wants us to hear: It's all right to express that anguish and frustration. Don't panic. I'm not going to go away because you shout at me.

3. The Jesus Who Never Stops Asking Questions

Wehner: The theologian David Bentley Hart said that he finds Jesus to be “infinitely compelling.” Hart says he finds the Christian religion is “a dogmatic and institutional reality” secondary and even marginal to his faith. It's the person of Jesus, “the presence of God in time,” he finds impossible to abandon. I wonder if you could talk about what aspects of Jesus you might find infinitely compelling.

Williams: Let's begin with Jesus as a storyteller. One of the things that people seem to have remembered about Jesus is that he told extremely good stories and stories which left you with an enormous agenda of self-discovery. So with the great classical stories like the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, you are left not with a neat answer to the question. You are left with a question to you: Who do you identify with? Where do you stand in this? And what are you going to do? Are you going to be the sort of person who resents the generosity shown to another, like the elder brother in the prodigal son? Are you going to be the sort of person who finds a good religious excuse for not crossing the road to attend to suffering?

So the first thing that strikes me is that the compelling distinctiveness of Jesus has a great deal to do with the stream of powerful, disturbing stories which put you on the spot, which make you ask: So who am I? Where am I? And do I know who I am yet?

The second thing is — it's an odd thing to say about the figure of Jesus in the Gospels, but I've always been struck by it — from time to time there's a deep impatience in Jesus: How can I make this clear to you? You're an unfaithful generation. He bursts out in exasperation at the disciples. Do you understand nothing? Even in exasperation of the crowds. Jesus said: You're all looking for miracles.

In a strange way, I feel that's a rather compelling aspect of the story of Jesus. There's more going on in him than he can express, and sometimes it kind of bursts out. And when I think of what the divinity of Jesus means in that context, one of the signs of it is that feeling he's got more to say than human language can carry. As he says in St. John's Gospel, "I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

And it's almost as if Jesus goes to the cross saying: The only way of telling you what the love of God is like is to absorb this monumental violent injustice and show you that God is not crushed by it.

Not words but the act of redemptive self-giving. The image I've sometimes used, especially with St. Mark's Gospel, is it's almost as if you're looking at a Jesus who stands at the mouth of an enormous dark cave. Behind is a mystery you can't get at and express. He's trying to tell you something about it, and it doesn't always come through. But it comes through finally in the act and the suffering rather than in the words. And that I'm completely compelled and haunted by.

But on top of that, the more obvious things — the instinctive compassion for the rejected and the forgotten — and the deeper tension when people come for healing and Jesus turns to them and says: So what do you want me to do? You have to say it. You have to tell me. It's as if he's saying: Step out. Let me know where the pain is. Let me into that.

I find it so deeply moving that he doesn't wave a wand. He attends. He spends the time. And of course, famously in the story of the woman taken in adultery where he, in effect, enacts an enormous joke. Addressing professional teachers of the law, you could paraphrase his response: So you are very keen to uphold the standards

of the law, right? You're clear the law says such behavior is sin. So fine, go ahead. If you're confident that you deserve better from God than this person does, just go ahead. I'll watch.

And that profoundly convincing and compelling moment when nobody quite has the nerve to say: I deserve a reward from God. And they all drift away. You have that almost comical moment where Jesus looks up from doodling on the ground in the dust and says: Oh, have they all gone? It's one of those moments which to my mind just shines through with a sense of the eyewitness recollection of something very, very unusual.

Wehner: You mentioned Jesus entering into the pain of others. I want to ask a question about Rowan Williams entering into the pain of others. You're a renowned scholar, but you're also known as a man with a pastor's heart. So I want to ask you this: When you've pastored people in the midst of grief — a terminal diagnosis, the death of a dream, the death of a child — what have you found is most helpful for them to receive from you? Is it something you say? Some perspective you can offer? Or perhaps it's mainly your presence, listening to them, weeping with them, reassuring them, even giving them the space to rage at God. So what does it mean for you to be a minister of the Gospel in those moments?

Williams: The main thing is always accompaniment. You're not there to answer questions at the theoretical level. You are there to try to embody the God who is not going away. And that does mean sometimes sticking through times when people rage not only against God but against the church, against you personally. And the challenge is: Can you take a deep breath and absorb that as some kind of sign that God is not to be written out of this encounter, this event, and God will not turn his back?

And that's hard. It's hard in individual pastoral terms at times because you'd quite like people to go away saying, "Oh, he was so helpful." And when people say, as occasionally they do, "Well, that's no help to me at all," you just have to digest that.

But it's also something about the church, isn't it? Because people rage at the church, and I don't blame them. They rage about its history of exclusion of various kinds of people. They rage about its record on child abuse. They rage about its wealth, its indifference, all sorts of things. And here am I, ordained in the church. So I'm part of that system against which they're raging. And it's not part of my job to say, "Oh, it's not as bad as you think," but to say, "Yep, it's pretty bad. And the only thing I can tell you is that we're still here not because we're succeeding but because God is present."

What the church does is not to point to itself as an example of impeccable behavior and triumph and success but to point to the faithfulness of God who won't let go of even this very unpromising human material. So all of that somehow comes into this business of accompanying, accepting the pain and the anger and trying not to be crushed by it.

Wehner: That's very moving.

If faith was not a part of your life, how would Rowan Williams be different? And I mean as a person, not vocationally, what part of you that is essential to who you are would be missing? And would the world be less enchanting to you without your faith?

Williams: I certainly believe that the world would be less exciting without my faith. I've been blessed with so many examples of people whose faith has, as I said right at the beginning, enlarged and enriched what I see and what I sense.

But what would be different about me? The main thing that came to my mind was I think I'm very much a perfectionist, in the sense that I like to think that I'm doing well, that I can polish my image successfully. And I can be very unforgiving of myself when I get that wrong.

And I think, without faith, that would have made my life even less edifying than it is. I'd have been trapped in that mixture of self-punishing and self-aggrandizing that is so easy to slip into. I aim at a polished self-image, and at the same time, I'm

brutally unforgiving of myself if that doesn't work and unforgiving of others who make it difficult for me.

There are personalities around us, even in some very high places, who seem to be trapped in something of that kind of hall of mirrors. And I guess I would be much more trapped in that without faith, with how to manage the reality of failure, the reality of having to start again, the reality of knowing one's limitations, the reality of needing to be forgiven.

Wehner: When people have asked me about faith, I've said it's almost as if you're dropping food coloring into water. It changes everything. It's not compartmentalized. Over time you may not even be aware how you're different. So when you think of the question "How would I be different without my faith?" in some respects you think very little would be different, and in other respects you think everything would be different.

Williams: Everything would be different. Yes, that's right. That's right.

Wehner: It's the prism, I think, through which people of faith see things.

Williams: Interesting, isn't it? That we turn to these images of life in the water, like the whale in the pond once again. Everything's different if the whale is in the ocean.

Wehner: When you think about your vast work over the course of your life, which traverses so many disciplines and genres, what are the unifying themes? What are some of the things you've most wanted to convey to others?

Williams: What I've most wanted to convey, I suppose, is that sense of the enrichment just around the corner of your vision, the perspective of that eternally overflowing source of love and mercy and how that lights up everything. I'd like people to see the world afresh. I suppose that's why my other vocation, if you like, as a poet, has come in there. And I see what I do as a poet and what I do as a theologian or a preacher as absolutely bound up. I've been — I still am, to some extent — an academic theologian. I preach regularly. I write poems. They're all

about this new landscape, trying to get people into a new landscape. And if anything that I've said or done has somehow kept the door open to the depth and the richness of that new landscape, then I might not have been wasting my time.

Wehner: Well, you've helped a lot of people keep a lot of doors open through your life and ministry. So thanks for doing that, and thanks for doing the interview. It was moving and enlightening — and helpful to me on a personal level.

Williams: Thank you very much.

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