

Hope and Time in Theology and Religion

An Interview with Lord Williams of Oystermouth, Theologian, Poet, and 104th Archbishop of Canterbury

Rowan Williams

Honorary Professor of Contemporary Christian Thought, University of Cambridge

Abstract

The following is an interview hosted by the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS) with Professor Rowan Williams—The Right Reverend and Right Honourable The Lord Williams of Oystermouth—in February 2022. We discussed the themes of “Hope and Time” in theology and religion in relation to Professor Williams’ extensive scholarship and work within the Church of England. A recording of the original interview is available on the JOGTS YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/yXtdQj7WEH0>

Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS): We are delighted today to be talking to Professor Rowan Williams as a special feature for the forthcoming volume of the Journal, whose theme is “Hope and Time in Theology and Religion.” Professor Williams needs no introduction, and we would need much, much, more time to do any real justice to his considerable academic background, his tremendous work, notable accomplishments, and remarkable honours, so this is just a formality! Professor Williams is a scholar of the highest calibre with degrees in divinity from both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He recently retired as the 35th Master of Magdalene College and is now Honorary Professor of Contemporary Christian Thought at the University of Cambridge. He was the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012 and in this role worked to strengthen relationships between different communities, tackling many difficult and controversial issues at the time. Professor Williams is a noted theologian, a poet, and a fellow of both the British Academy and the Royal Society of Literature. He has lived a life of utmost hope;



Rowan Williams, “Hope and Time in Theology and Religion: An Interview with Lord Williams of Oystermouth, Theologian, Poet, and 104th Archbishop of Canterbury,” *JOGTS* 3.1 (2022). pp. 21-30

educating, inspiring, and uplifting people from many backgrounds along the way. We cannot think of anyone better to speak about hope and time in theology and religion.

Thank you very much indeed for joining us, Professor Williams.

Professor Rowan Williams (RW): Thank you for the invitation.

JOGTS: The first question is actually three questions. First, how would you describe hope? Second, how would you describe hope's relationship to the temporal and the eternal? And then, third, what is the theological significance of this?

RW: Hope, I suppose, could be defined as a kind of confidence. Not a prediction that everything's going to turn out all right, which is optimism, but a confidence that whatever turns out there is a resource that enables you to stay alive, intelligent, and grounded. So, I begin with that. But, if we're talking about what nourishes hope, we have to ask: What nourishes confidence? And, theologically speaking, of course, we say that the ground for confidence is not in ourselves, what we can achieve, what we can get on top of, or what we can organise. Our confidence lies in the belief (certainly in the Judeo-Christian tradition) that the world exists because God desires that it exists. We exist because God desires that we exist, and God's desire is expressed in faithfulness to the world that God has made and God's faithfulness to us as a human family. We may do all kinds of things to wreck, injure, and frustrate that purpose and desire, but—because it's God's purpose and God's desire—the fact of it doesn't alter. So, that's our ground for hope, and that means that hope in relation to the passage of time is something to do with the fact that we are able both to look forward with confidence, and to look back and say (rather as in the scriptural narratives): “Here and here and here, we see what it might mean for God to be discovered to be faithful, for God to be discovered to be the one who doesn't go away in crisis or disaster.” So, the telling of the story is a very important part of the ground of hope as well.

JOGTS: In what ways can the church, then, situated in this world and in this time, act in the service of hope?

RW: The church doesn't exist, of course, to solve problems. One of the great misunderstandings people have about the church (both inside and outside) is in thinking that the church were a kind of slot machine where you went with your problems and out came answers. Or, even worse, as somebody once put it, that the church exists as an organisation providing perfect answers to questions that nobody's asking. Forget all that, because the church is there to point to precisely that unalterable fact of the divine commitment. And, if I had to define what really grounded the integrity of the church and, for that matter, the integrity of the Jewish people likewise, I would say it's that this community has its rationale in standing as witness to the commitment of God, the God who doesn't go away. So, how does the church express this? Certainly not in terms of anxiously flicking through a catalogue of strategies. It has to strategise. It has to think about priorities

and resources. But its primary job is to say: “This is why we are confident in getting up in the morning.” That God remains God. That, for the Christian, the God who has shown the divine consistency in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus is a God who has demonstrated that this God is worth believing in, because this is a God who does not abandon.

So, we tell that story; we tell it in the sacraments of the church. We tell it in the reading of the Bible and the exposition of the Bible. And, of course, we tell it in the lives of human beings. And, I would say that one of the tasks the church always has is to find the narratives of human life that exemplify hope. I once said that we in the church like to tell the stories of the saints, and we think of St. Francis and St. Teresa and all the rest of it. We ought perhaps to have a rather more local view. Every parish ought to have, if you like, a little repertoire of stories it would like to tell—not about St. Francis and St. Teresa, but about “St. Darren” and “St. Gladys” and the local people who have lived out lives of fidelity and trust and confidence and shown us that it can be done. The other thing which I think the church can show is, both locally and globally, that the church is a community that is visibly faithful to the environment in which it lives. Does it show commitment itself to the need and the struggle of those immediately around? That can be the church's willingness to, let's say, advocate on behalf of the Uyghur community in China or it can be the church's willingness to host the food bank in the local church hall. You know, between those poles, there are many varieties of action by which the church can demonstrate that it is dependably there for those who need assurance, who need to know that their humanity is treasured and valued.

JOGTS: What can we learn from scriptural and religious texts regarding time, timelessness, temporality, and eternity?

RW: It's a very large question, thinking about time and eternity, for obvious reasons. But, I'd say, first of all, that the scriptural narrative suggests to us that what we learn of God, we learn as time-taking beings. We grow in time. We move in time. And, even if God really wanted to, God couldn't just tell us everything about the divine nature in one go. We would still have to learn. So that's why it's important that scripture, Hebrew scripture and Christian scripture alike, are stories of learning. Jesus draws around himself disciples and disciples are, literally, learners. It's not that Jesus calls Peter and James and John at the Sea of Galilee and hands over the Nicene Creed to them. They have to spend time with him and, in his life and his death and his resurrection, they learn. So, that's one area where I think the temporality of our lives is extremely important.

When we're living, as I think we are, in a culture that actually doesn't much prize the activity of learning—you know, we like things to be delivered in tidy packages immediately, we like our knowledge to come in an Amazon package, we don't want to spend the time it takes to learn——this is quite a hard thing to suggest, but it's also something which tells us how to value our history. Not uncritically, but nonetheless positively. It tells us that we may expect to move on,

to learn more. It tells us, therefore, that our own immediate doubts and brick walls today may not be the last word, which again is a form of hopefulness. And so, the eternity that Christians believe in is not so much a kind of abstract realm beyond it all as the bare fact of God's unchanging self-committing to what's being made. That's eternity. That's what doesn't alter. That's what other religious traditions have called the unborn; that which doesn't come into being and doesn't fade away, what Buddhists talk about in terms of what you encounter in meditation, an eternal reality which is neither abstract nor just time protracted forever, that simply says: "There is something which is impervious to the changes and uncertainties we live in. There is something which, in respect to us, is utterly to be relied on, and it is love. It is committed love."

So, the doctrine of God's eternity is actually good news. It's not just a speculative philosophical point. It's an aspect of the gospel or, indeed, the Jewish sense of God, because we read in Malachi (v. 3:6): "I the Lord do not change. Therefore you, children of Israel, are not consumed." It's because I don't change, says God, that you don't fall apart.

JOGTS: To follow up on that: what about this idea of eternal heaven and eternal hell? I mean, it sounds beautiful when we say that God is eternal love—that sounds amazing. But then when someone says, "Okay, there's a judgment day and then there's an eternal heaven or an eternal hell," and one imagines being in eternal hell, that sounds terrible.

RW: It's not an easy question to answer but I'd say something like this: In our time-bound lives here and now, we are—we hope—learning something about God, and not something abstract, but something about how we live in such a way that we are in tune with God. We are, in some sense, sharing—what should I say?—the wavelength, the frequency, of divine life. In Christian terms, again, we are sharing the prayer of Christ to the Father, which is the eternal reality of the Holy Trinity. And that's a very ambitious thing to believe and to be confident of. But I think that is the heart of our faith in the Spirit. We share Christ's relation to the eternal source of everything and so we seek to live in such a way that that harmonic relationship remains. Now, heaven, I think, would be that state of affairs in which we were rooted and grounded—consolidated—in that harmonious relation with God the Holy Trinity. And, again, we're not talking about an immeasurable extension of time. We're talking about being in a state where in some sense we know, that, as St. Paul says in Romans (v. 8:31-39), nothing can fracture that relationship, that attunement. So, what, then, do we mean by "hell?" I suppose what I understand by "hell" is what results if I've led a life which constantly puts me out of tune with that unchanging eternal reality—what results if I have made myself so tone deaf that I cannot sing in tune with that melody. Now, I don't know, and nobody can know, whether anybody is so terminally, drastically tone deaf that even in a kind of endless perspective they could never "learn the tune." I'd like to think (and I pray that this is the case) that all of us are in some sense capable of learning that, even though it may

not be rapid and it may not be automatic and easy. But I would hope and pray that, at the end of all things, when the world (the universe) collapses into its final form, that it will be possible for people to still learn to love the God from whom they come. But who knows? I look at my own life, we look at our lives, and think, "I'm capable of getting it so wrong that perhaps *I can* so distort and disable myself that I make myself daily more unable to hear the music." So, day-by-day, I have to make sure that I've got some disciplines that put me back in touch with it.

JOGTS: We will be asking a bit more about this daily discipline a little later on. But for now, the next question is: Does hope, in your understanding, rest on an idea of eternity? And, for those who cannot believe in this, where is hope to be found? Is there any way in which looking beyond time, perhaps to an afterlife, can do more harm than good?

RW: When people express their uncertainty about whether the afterlife is a good or a bad principle to work with, I can understand what they're saying. I think if talking about an afterlife means either that we think of a deferred happy ending for everybody or a deferred responsibility, or "It's going to be alright in the end so I needn't worry about the suffering and the pain now," or "It's going to be alright in the end and I have, I will have, plenty of time to sort it out..." I can see that those views of an afterlife are fatuous, really, from a religious point of view. What is so interesting in many religious traditions is the emphasis on finding eternity in the present moment. In this present moment (of decision, relationship, the shaping of my life, the direction, or—to use the word again—attunement, of my life), am I or am I not trying to adjust to something that utterly doesn't depend on me and doesn't depend on the passage of time? Eternity in the present moment is what really matters. *Is there a reality that does not alter?* And, if there's a reality that doesn't alter, then it's not unreasonable to think that—on the far side of death—the relationship with that reality is not destroyed. And that's a sound hope which Christians share. And that's not about deferring it till an afterlife but about saying that the eternity that I now touch, in my attempt to be open and faithful today, holds me in being beyond time.

Now, if you don't share that view, where does hope come from? And this is an interesting question, I think, because we're going into one of those periods, and I think this goes in waves in human history, when we're much less optimistic about where the human race is going—for perfectly good reasons. We face, above all, the monumental environmental catastrophe that we have brought upon ourselves, and it's quite difficult to be optimistic about that (however hopeful we might be). We're also, I think, going into one of those periods when the notion of steady social and political progress looks a bit hollow, as we see tyranny and falsehood and totalitarianism resurgent all over the world when countries that have been democratic dip into a kind of authoritarian darkness again. So, it's not looking brilliant out there.

What do you then hope for? You can go on hoping in something called "human nature," but I scratch my head a little bit as to what the content of that really is. You can tell good stories and

share good stories and say, “Well, it doesn't have to be like this,” and that's good. But, I think there's still that difficulty as to where the resources are beyond ourselves that we might look to; what I've called the unborn, the unchanging, which says to us: “Even if there's failure today, that failure is not final, because the eternal remains.” Quite often you find people who don't have anything like a formal religious belief speaking or acting as if they believed there were resources more than ourselves and more than the present moment. They may not have a name for that, and they may not have a theory for that, but...that's fine. They have touched something and recognized something. I think we, as religious believers, do have words for it. I don't want to rush people into convictions they're not ready for, but I am struck by the way in which there is the sense that there is perhaps more resource in the world around us, and the universe around us, than we can quite compass or understand. That's something a surprising number of people would—I guess—give some adherence to.

JOGTS: So, trying to draw out the resources that human beings *do* have for wrestling with the additional “resource” that is beyond human ken... Can creation narratives, myths, science, and history be integrated into a symbolic rather than a literal formulation? For example, it is said that God created the earth in six days, but contemporary science indicates otherwise. How can we understand religious temporality today in light of current science?

RW: To me, the supposed conflict between science and religion is the ultimate phony war. I think it's a completely false standoff of views. Not because science gives us facts and theology gives us the meanings, but because science itself is a discipline which involves imagination, projection, risky guesswork, metaphor, and all the things that make human language and human thinking exciting. Science is exciting not because it's certain but because it's constantly improvising and renewing itself. I think there's a real alliance between the creative scientific mind, the poetic mind, and the theological mind, and that we ought to see these as coming together. So, I don't think there's any deep conflict there. Even if science predicts, as it does, the heat death of the universe and everything collapsing back into stasis, nonetheless the scientist will still sign the petition for the release of a political prisoner. The scientist will still educate their children. The scientist will still behave as if tomorrow matters because tomorrow there will be human beings and every tomorrow in which there will be human beings is the tomorrow we work for. So, the long-term prediction doesn't erase that short-term sense that I'm answerable today and tomorrow. So, I don't see that there's an impossible, tensional conflict involved here. I see any number of real possibilities for theologians and scientists to talk to one another, not about who's right about the creation story—where again we've fallen into a trap of supposing that a manifestly poetic liturgical text like Genesis is meant to be a kind of photographic record—but about how scientists and theologians understand the nature of knowledge, the nature of speech, the nature of the mind; how we map the world, how we understand our bodiliness. There's so much to talk about there and so much of real creativity, I'd say.

JOGTS: Going back to the concept of hope, have you experienced instances where religion is interacting with science in a hopeful manner?

RW: I've been involved for the last few years in a project based in an Australian university called Beyond Science and Religion, which is drawing scientists and theologians together to try and get beyond the sort of Punch and Judy Show of science on one side with a big stick, and religion on the other holding the baby—this rather futile model—to look at some of these issues around knowledge and the body and so forth. That's been really fascinating and really energizing. And many, many years ago, when I was first teaching theology, I belonged to a little group called The Epiphany Philosophers in Cambridge. This was back in the 1970s and we'd meet once a week to chat. This was a very informal group but, again, it included some theologians, some scientists, some philosophers, especially some of the people who were, interestingly, in on the first stages of developing artificial intelligence and the IT world as we now know it—people who were creating computer languages, that sort of thing. So, a very unusual and rather stretching sort of group to belong to. And, although that faded away with the death of some of the senior members of that group, it had been running for quite a while. We've actually revived it in the last few years. Two or three of us (who as very young scholars were part of that group) rather tentatively put out a call a couple of years ago, saying, "Anybody interested in carrying on these conversations?" And we found that people were.

JOGTS: That's fantastic. Reason for hope!

RW: Reason for hope.

JOGTS: The next question is about your book *Candles in the Dark: Faith, Hope and Love in a Time of Pandemic*. There you offer beautiful meditations and thoughts that uplift the spirits in seemingly unprecedented times. Where does your hope and inspiration come from? You mentioned earlier that you have daily practices that you keep. Where does it all come from?

RW: Well, in a rather boringly old-fashioned way, I say morning and evening prayer. I have a daily practice of silent meditation because I think that is one of the main ways in which we find some sort of attunement and openness to God; where the preoccupations that we usually bring around our success, our impact, our reputation, and our status just have to be parked. If you're sitting in silence, there is absolutely nothing you can do to impress anybody, not even God. And, when you're stuck in a situation where you cannot impress anybody, then there's a little bit of panic, because we love to impress people and we think that's the way to survive. But what if you're just stuck where you really can't do it? Then either you go completely round the bend or you find a way of opening yourself up to what is there. And, to be aware in that moment of your body and your breath and to hold yourself physically still without tension, without frowning the brow and clenching the fists, but to hold yourself there and say: "I am held by more than myself. I am. I'm a

place where,” if you like, “the water and the depths of the well here receives the water falling from the sky above.” And, you sit there like the well, waiting for the rain to fall. Those are moments where you are anchored freshly in hope. Not in the sense of, “Oh, now I know what to look forward to tomorrow.” But saying, “Now I know that this universe is not a place where I have any right to despair, because it is not abandoned. I am not abandoned. The water in the well is there. The rain still falls.” So, those practices of silence, awareness, recognition of where I stand and where I sit, moments where the fuss and fret have to be put away, those are the moments where hope grows. And, if those moments are surrounded in the liturgy of morning and evening prayer, with (going back to stories) the Psalms, the Gospels, *et cetera*, then that sort of fills it out. That builds a little structure around it to say, “Well, I’m doing this because those are the stories that convince and hold me and show me that all this is worth doing day-by-day.”

JOGTS: Have you always had these practices?

RW: I suppose since I was 17 or 18? Yes.

JOGTS: And what inspired you to start practicing meditation?

RW: I suppose having some wonderful Christian teachers, wonderful priests who helped me when I was a teenager. I’ve often said this: I can’t believe how lucky I was as a teenager. After all those moments where so many of my friends said, “Well, I asked a minister or a priest about this topic and they told me to go away and not worry my pretty little head about it,” I found I was able to go to priests who said, “Yeah, good question. Let’s sit down and talk it through.” And, I’m just so grateful. Among those priests was one who gave me a book about St. Teresa of Ávila, as well as having a parish priest who in his preparation for confirmation taught us a very simple scheme of daily prayer of reflection and thanksgiving and remembering others and just said, “This is perfectly straightforward. You do it and you grow with it and you grow through it.” All of that is where it started, I suppose, and it worked for me. What can I say?

JOGTS: Just to follow up on that... You’ve done a lot of work. You know nine languages, learnt all on your own, and you were talking earlier about how we want things *now* in an Amazon package. Even if it has not been immediate, you’ve done so much in not a massive amount of time. How is that possible?

RW: Well, you’re asking the wrong person really. I don’t know. There’s a poem by Hilaire Belloc about the water beetle. It says, “He glides upon the water’s face with ease, celerity, and grace. But if you try to make him think of how he did it, he would sink.” Well, I sort of understand that. I don’t know, I’ve always been in jobs that have been quite demanding, that have sort of rushed me from one thing and one person to the other. I think that makes it all the more important to try and make sure that you have some practices that allow you to focus on the job you’ve got to do and the person you’re actually with. We all know how awful it is when you’re with somebody

who is surreptitiously checking the time and wondering how soon they can get away. And, well, I'm not immune from that, I have to say, but you have to find ways of being present in what you do. Perhaps that helps a bit in getting a bit more done. Rather than, you know, a half hour in which the first ten minutes are spent thinking, "Oh my God, I've got such a lot to do," and the next ten minutes are spent trying to do something, and the next ten minutes are spent thinking, "Okay, I've done that but how on earth am I going to do the next thing?" Somehow, you've got to push those "bits of the sandwich," press them in and say, "Well, let's try and reduce those preliminary and posterior worrying times a little bit."

JOGTS: Do you have any particular ways that you do that?

RW: I wish I knew because, of course, I'm prone as anybody to that temptation. But sometimes the absolutely, elementary, gold-standard things like making a list and crossing things off. I get great satisfaction from making a list and crossing things off. You know, these simple things do help but I suppose, above all, it's trying to get into a state of mind where you say that what comes to you in terms of demand and request is always going to be both a gift and an invitation. This is the person God's given you for this time. This is the task God's given you for this time. Just start by saying, "Thank you," and work with that. I wish I could do it better but I think I know that's what I ought to be trying to do.

JOGTS: So, our final question: Do you have a piece of scripture or literature to share with us that you personally find particularly hopeful in uncertain or troubling times?

RW: Sometimes when I've been asked, "Have I got a favourite book of the Bible?" (which is a pretty silly question actually, but it does get asked), I think I would go for 2 Corinthians as my book of choice. I think 2 Corinthians is very much the voice of a man who is pressed and confined by all kinds of opposition, uncertainty, undermining, and all the rest of it. All those early chapters with the imagery about having treasure in earthen pots and how we're all being changed into the likeness of Christ from glory to glory, I love those chapters because they're about the basic tension between the earthiness and the fragility of who we are and the glory of what we are privileged to be part of and to be drawn into. So, certainly, that's my scriptural focus. If I had to go for a piece of literature, I would, without hesitation, go to George Herbert's poem, *Love (III)*, "Love bade me welcome. But my soul drew back," which is all about the completely unchanging, completely unreserved welcome that we are given by the holy reality that surrounds us and from which we come.

JOGTS: When you go back to reread the poem, do you find yourself taking away something different, or do you find that you keep returning to something that sticks with you?

RW: I don't know. It's not as if you get new ideas from it every time. There's one very basic idea. It's a very simple poem but I go back to it as I go back to pieces of music. I know them well, I can sing them but, all the same, I like to hear them.

JOGTS: Would you recite the poem for us?

RW: Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked any thing.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, said Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

JOGTS: Beautiful. That's our questions asked. Thank you so much, Professor Williams!

A recording of the original interview is available on the JOGTS YouTube channel:
<https://youtu.be/yXtdQj7WEH0>