

**ANGLICAN IDENTITIES** by Rowan Williams, *Darton, Longman and Todd*, London, 2004, Pp. viii + 149, £7.95 pbk.

*Anglican Identities* has no pretensions to be a programmatic survey of the marks of Anglicanism presented in some sort of abstract format. On the contrary, it is a series of sorties into the thought of 'representative' Anglicans of different periods (Tyndale an honorary Anglican because so much a precursor of its key concerns). But this is not a handicap: Williams clearly holds that good theology is always situated, and the book is clear about the contingency of its own production ('the material here presented has depended a good deal on particular invitations to reflect on particular people'). This having been established, we are introduced to eight varied Anglican thinkers: Richard Hooker, George Herbert, Brooke Foss Westcott, E.C. Hoskyns, Michael Ramsey, John Robinson, and William Temple as well as Tyndale (not to mention some very valuable critical 'placings' of Austin Farrer, Donald MacKinnon, Don Cupitt and others). That clear themes emerge across the chapters is a sign of convergences uncovered rather than a scheme imposed – and a sign of Williams's abiding theological interests as elicited by his constant conversations with his tradition.

Unprogrammatic though the book is, characteristic features of an Anglican approach to theology and to Christian life emerge nonetheless. The respect for scripture, history and indigenous human contexts as sites of God's self-explication are central to a 'sapiential' Anglican habit of thought, with a concern for the interplay of insights drawn from attention to each. Such sapiential theology, Williams writes, is as significant as ever 'in an age when the theological debate so readily polarises between one or another variety of positivism (biblically fundamentalist, ecclesiastically authoritarian, or whatever) and a liberalism without critical or self-critical edge.'

Williams finds and appreciates this respect for scripture, history and ethnography in his selected thinkers. He talks of the 'discipline of scriptural thinking' which insists that the Bible's texts cannot be resolved without remainder into doctrinal systems or statements: 'Scriptural and Christian language always says more than it initially seems to say. To believe that you have mastered that "more" is to arrest a process in which God is actively causing you to grow.'

In highlighting what he sees as a distinctive historical sensitivity in Anglicanism, he praises the seminal influence of Hooker in being 'perhaps the first major European theologian to assume that history, corporate and individual, matters for theology; and ... one of the inventors of that distinctive Anglican mood which I have elsewhere called "contemplative pragmatism".' He goes on to elaborate that this pragmatism attends to 'the accumulation of historical precedent' as having 'real intellectual weight', while remaining contemplative 'to the degree that [its] guiding principles are seen ... as received, not invented, as the uncovering of a pattern of "wisdom" in the universe, focused in and through the Word incarnate.'

And in relation to Anglicanism's 'ethnographic' register, so to speak, he remarks on the habitual urge in Anglican thinkers to 'break down certain barriers between sacred actions or persons and the social enterprise at large ... Divine election deals with us ineluctably as members of communities, including the natural communities we happen to belong to.'

These characteristic features, argues Williams, amount to a theology that is *patient*, in a 'theologically informed and spiritually sustained' way. It is provisional and vehemently anti-Pelagian by instinct, refusing the idea that the efforts of the ordering intellect can achieve the reconciliation of all historical experience in a definitive formulation or scheme. The humility of the *intellect* this demands is explicitly correlated in the course of the book with the awareness that we cannot lay claim to complete *holiness* this side of the eschaton. Both those 'conservatives'

concerned with a sub-Calvinist 'purity' of doctrine delivered by a cadre of sound knowers to an audience of obedient recipients, and those 'liberals' confident that they know better than the tradition because of their superior intellectual and analytical resources, are challenged in these pages and by the examples of their forebears to beware of selling short the principle of the free, prevenient grace of God. The free, prevenient grace of God was the watchword of the Reformers, and it has sharp things to say to ambitious theologians who seek to make their theology what Balthasar once called the 'enlightenment of revelation'. The Calvinists are reminded that salvation cannot be made conditional upon a 'full and flawless apprehension or articulation of faith' without undermining 'the priority of God's active righteousness.' And the modern liberal is reminded that 'a purportedly critical theology can become an uncritical deployment of whatever are supposed to be the most obvious and socially accessible models of the good life at any given time', and that this is fatally to forget the 'ultimate critical point of reference' established by God, namely, 'the history of Israel and Jesus'.

By talking about the heart of Christian belief, Rowan Williams ensures his book's relevance not just to present localised debates, and not just to their Anglican protagonists, but to intelligent Christians everywhere. His conversation partners are chosen not because of some blind acceptance of their place in an Anglican pantheon, but because of how, with instructive exceptions, they are inspirationally God-struck, and are animated by the same deep questions about God and the world as he would like the wider Church to be.

BEN QUASH