

There have been various attempts to move the traditional goalposts and welcome back pleasure as the theological cornerstone of the sexuality debate. The Archbishop of Canterbury entered the debate while still at Oxford and his views on homosexual sex are well-known in principle, if not in detail. He wrote then, in a lecture given in 1989 and subsequently re-published three times, that 'sex forms persons', echoing Freud. He believed then that 'for my body to be the cause of joy, it must be there for someone else'. It must be,

. . . perceived, accepted, nurtured: and that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness of the other does it become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body.<sup>1</sup>

He is surely right, and marriage is provided for just this. But he is overly sanguine about the devastation wreaked as we learn the lessons, and even without the essay's remarks on homosexuality, this would have been a controversial contribution to moral discourse. Anyone who discusses these dangers is 'overly anxious about sex', he suggests, and therefore, by inference, prurient, or immature. The grown-up rest may make their own lifestyle decisions.

[d]ecisions about sexual lifestyle, the ability to identify certain patterns as sterile, undeveloped or even corrupt, are . . . decisions about what we want our bodily life to say, how our bodies are to be brought in to the whole project of 'making human sense' for ourselves and each other.<sup>2</sup>

For the future Archbishop, then Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Oxford University and a trustee of The Institute for the Study of Christianity and Sexuality, sexuality is a matter of personal choice – exactly the opposite of what St Paul meant when he said 'You are not your own'.<sup>3</sup> *The Body's Grace* subtly and movingly explores the gamut of sexual love – but in a way that ultimately excludes not just the conventionally married, but those whose marriages are not sexually successful, and more especially those who must live in dignity without sex at all, through circumstance or choice.<sup>4</sup> Least included at all it seems to me are those who take the Bible at face value.

The essay begins with an exegesis of Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*. Far from critiquing the irony of Sarah Layton's disgrace, Williams uses her post-coital sense of having 'entered her body's grace', as the foundation for his theological treatise. Like most men, there is a part of Williams' instinctual nature that assumes that any spinster who experiences sex will be thankful for it, no matter

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<sup>1</sup> *The Body's Grace*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *The Body's Grace* The 10th Michael Harding Memorial Address. 1989

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:19.

<sup>4</sup> I was surprised to hear that a married friend felt as excluded by this essay as I did myself. Indeed, I found myself in tears after reading the essay, and my response to it here comes after trying to understand the pain of my own involuntary reaction, rather than as a contribution to the discourse on homosexuality of which this essay was a part.

how beastly the encounter. It is precisely this attitude that encourages the less cultured mind to couple chastity with eccentricity, turn date rape into a sport and consign the Christian sex ethic to the dustbin.

Williams builds his own sexual ethic upon 'the processes of bodily desire and delight in their own right'. To be wanted is to be human as God intended. To be desired sexually, and to explore this desire, is to come close to the meaning of God in creation. In the novel, Sarah Layton comes out to India to stay with her mother and tries hard to live generously and authentically, despite feeling a misfit. She is seduced by the womanizing Clark, becomes pregnant and undergoes an abortion. According to Williams, she is – somewhat bizarrely - the better for this. He writes:

Nothing in this drainingly painful novel . . . suggests that the moment of 'the body's grace' for Sarah was a deceit. Somehow she has been aware of what it was and was not: a frontier has been passed, and that has been and remains grace: a being present, even though this can mean knowing that the graced body is now more than ever a source of vulnerability.

Until then, Sarah 'is present fully to no one and nothing', says Williams. She represents a civilization that kept itself aloof from intimacy. Now the modern generation wants to engage, to be like everyone else; to end the difficult, laborious, effort of restraint and social improvement. But why engage in sex? Why not subject yourself to being hit over the head by a half-brick. It's the same body.

Williams seems to miss the point that the post-Raj generation that Sarah represents – eager, generous, out-going - is nonetheless just as empty, alone and 'not present to life'. No longer able to live with the ambivalences of empire, nor yet able to connect with the emerging reality, Sarah, like England itself, simply falls prey to an ersatz 'love', a democratization of aspiration that in fact leaves her – and it - in chaos, degraded and doubly void. Scott's is a hopeless vision, because unredeemed by Christian hope. But Williams misses this. He construes Sarah's 'fall' as in fact hopeful, missing the irony of Scott's usage. The body's grace is *dis*-grace. After she is seduced by Clark, the 'void has been filled, she has experienced grace, and entered into some different kind of identity', says Williams. Actually it is nothing of the sort. Sarah remains empty – except for the bitter aftertaste of physical and emotional violation. She is forced to evacuate her womb, the price for evacuating her principles – for nothing. And England evacuates India – in a humiliating and hasty embrace of a new world order that is merely an absence of any kind of relatedness or mutual obligation; indifference, in a word.

With due respect to an essay rich in cultural allusion and deeply read, this is nonetheless surely a misreading of a state of mind that is more to do with spiritual and cultural bankruptcy than a search for identity. As Lord Devlin, former Master of the Rolls has written: 'History shows that the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of [social] disintegration' – which was Scott's point.<sup>5</sup> For Williams, however, in thrall to fashionable post-authoritarianism, even loveless sex bestows grace. It leads logically to his extraordinary view that 'rape, paedophilia, bestiality' are merely 'asymmetrical sexual practices' rather than the outrage they really are. He cites the philosopher Thomas Nagel who, he says:

. . . makes . . . a number of interesting observations on sexual encounters that either allow no 'exposed spontaneity' because they are bound to specific methods of sexual arousal – like sadomasochism – or permit only a limited awareness of the embodiment of the other because there is an unbalance in the relation such that the desire of the other for me is irrelevant or minimal – rape, paedophilia, bestiality. These asymmetrical sexual practices have some claim to be called perverse in that they leave one agent in effective control of the situation – one agent that is, who doesn't have to wait upon the desire of the other. (Incidentally, if this suggests that, in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is a 'perversion' – well, that is a perfectly serious suggestion . . .)6

Williams, eager to ingratiate himself with his unconventional audience, falls into his own trap of moral relativism. Conventional morality is actually the problem, he says; it absolves us from the difficulties we meet in deciding our sexual lifestyle, 'because the question of human meaning is not raised.' If God made us for physical rather than spiritual joy, then we have a *moral* duty to attempt the risky experience of 'the body's grace', he implies. Any attempt to avoid risk in sexual activity, rather than being commended as either common sense or biblical obedience, is dismissed as 'heterosexist' – and worse. The only 'perversion is sexual activity without risk . . . Distorted sexuality is the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person's perception.' Our very identity for Williams is being constructed in the relations of bodies. We belong with and to each other. There is '*no alternative to the discovery of the body's grace*' (italics mine). Those who withdraw their *sexual bodies* from the enterprise of human beings making sense in collaboration, in community – as indeed the biblically chaste have struggled to do for centuries – are the really distorted personalities. There is no other way to become a person than through sex. Their sexuality is more akin to the 'pathology of the torturer' (p. 6) than the prescriptions of the Torah.

Richard Kirker, Chief Executive of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement was 'astonished' in 2006 when Williams attempted to downplay this lecture. In an interview with a Dutch newspaper, Williams had said it 'did not generate much support'. Yet Kirker cites Williams' promotion to Archbishop of Canterbury (2002) 'in the full knowledge by the appointing bodies that he stood by the lecture' as evidence that the opposite was the case. Even a *Sunday Telegraph* Poll of Anglicans in the pews in 2006 produced a majority in favour of having a partnered gay priest in the Vicarage, indicating the 'benign influence he has had up to now and how much of an inspiration 'The Body's Grace' will continue to be regardless (or because) of subsequent events.' Kirker adds that the Archbishop of Canterbury could not now pretend that the past twenty years had not seen a 'largely beneficial sea change in thinking on human sexuality issues and that he was, to his abiding credit, in the vanguard of this transformation.'<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Body's Grace* p. 4f.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Kirker, 'The Body's Grace by Rowan Williams', 27 August 2006, <http://www.lgcm.org.uk/html/AngText03.html>