

HARRY A. WILLIAMS BEYOND *SOUNDINGS*:
FINDING GOD THROUGH SELF-AWARENESS AND
DOUBT

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of Oxford

Michaelmas Term 2022

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| ABSTRACT (long) | 5 |
| ABSTRACT (short) | 9 |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS | 10 |
| | |
| I. INTRODUCTION | 12 |
| Structure | 23 |
| Methodology | 25 |
| | |
| II. WILLIAMS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY | 27 |
| <i>Some Day I'll Find You</i> as an autobiography | 27 |
| <i>Some Day I'll Find You</i> as a construct | 29 |
| A story of a conversion | 33 |
| <i>Some Day I'll Find You</i> as a religious autobiography | 35 |
| Williams and Augustine | 36 |
| Rousseau, Wordsworth, Green, Nouwen | 45 |
| Conclusion | 52 |
| | |
| III. CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, UNIVERSITY YEARS, TRAINING FOR PRIESTHOOD (1919-1943) | 54 |
| Early childhood (1919-1924) | 54 |
| Evangelical mother | 56 |
| The French years (1924-1928) | 57 |
| Back to England (1928-1938) | 61 |
| Childhood in England and adolescence (1928-1938) | 62 |
| Discerning a High Church vocation | 64 |
| Undergraduate at Cambridge (1938-1941) | 69 |
| Ordinand at Cuddesdon (1941-1943) | 73 |
| | |
| IV. CURACY IN LONDON, CHAPLAINCY AT WESTCOTT HOUSE (1943-1951) | 81 |
| Deacon in Pimlico (1943-1945) | 81 |
| 'The Sunday Theatre' at All Saints', Margaret Street (1945-1948) | 86 |
| Westcott House (1948-1951) | 95 |
| <i>Jesus and the Resurrection</i> (1951) | 99 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| V. BACK TO TRINITY; <i>SOUNDINGS</i> | 107 |
| Lecturer at Trinity College (1951-1962) | 107 |
| Breakdown | 110 |
| Dean of the Chapel at Trinity (from 1958) | 116 |
| <i>God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross</i> (1959) | 119 |
| <i>The Four Last Things</i> (1959) | 122 |
| Cambridge in the 1960s | 124 |
| John Robinson | 129 |
| Alec Vidler | 132 |
| Emergence of <i>Soundings</i> (1962) | 133 |
| 'Theology and 'Self-Awareness' by Williams | 139 |
| The Mascall controversy | 155 |
| Other contemporary echoes | 159 |
| After <i>Soundings</i> | 166 |
| A look back at <i>Soundings</i> | 168 |
| VI. WILLIAMS'S CONTRIBUTION TO 'NEW MORALITY' | 172 |
| Controversial BBC interviews | 172 |
| Introducing the ' <i>Honest to God</i> ' controversy | 173 |
| 'The New Morality' | 178 |
| Subsequent discourse | 184 |
| A road to Britain's secularization | 187 |
| VII. STRUGGLING WITH HOMOSEXUALITY | 195 |
| Williams's sexual frustration | 195 |
| Liberation and renewal | 198 |
| Travels with the <i>Ramblers</i> | 203 |
| The uneasy path to Wolfenden | 208 |
| Legalization of homosexual acts | 218 |
| VIII. WILLIAMS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS; <i>OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN BELIEF</i> | 221 |
| Williams and psychoanalysis | 221 |
| <i>Objections to Christian Belief</i> (1963) | 227 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| IX. ROAD TO MIRFIELD | 234 |
| <i>The True Wilderness</i> (1965) | 235 |
| <i>The God I Want</i> (1967) | 242 |
| <i>Sermons from Great St. Mary's</i> (1968) | 243 |
| Dissatisfaction with life | 245 |
| Monk at Mirfield | 254 |
| X. A MONK, A WRITER | 263 |
| 'What Freud and Jung mean for religion' (1970) | 264 |
| <i>True Resurrection</i> (1972) | 267 |
| <i>Poverty, Chastity and Obedience</i> (1975) | 276 |
| <i>Tensions</i> (1976) | 283 |
| <i>Becoming What I Am</i> (1977) | 294 |
| XI. THE LATE YEARS | 300 |
| <i>The Joy of God</i> (1979) | 300 |
| Michael Harding Memorial Address (1979) | 304 |
| <i>Some Day I'll Find You</i> (1982) | 310 |
| XII. CONCLUSION | 320 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 333 |

ABSTRACT (long)

‘Harry A. Williams beyond *Soundings*: finding God through self-awareness and doubt’

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This thesis examines the life and work of Harry Abbot Williams, CR (1919-2006), an Anglican priest and theologian, who was one of the most well-known Church of England clergymen of his time, exerting an influence well beyond the Church. His life was marked by a deep struggle of conflicting claims and tensions and his writings are infused with a profound psychological sense lending to them a compelling impact.

Williams was, for a time, an extremely popular writer for whom the dogmatism of Christian creeds was replaced by the quest for personal honesty, and the metaphysical understanding of God was set aside in the pursuit of the ‘real me’.

Educated at Cambridge and trained at Cuddesdon, Williams taught at Westcott House, before becoming lecturer and later Dean of Chapel of Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1962, he was a member of a group of theologians that produced *Soundings: Essays concerning Christian understanding*. These essays became a landmark in Anglican theological discourse through their critique of traditional Christian theology which stimulated a church-wide discussion. Williams’s essay was the most controversial and widely discussed text of the volume.

His concept of personally engaged faith understood not as a static state of belief, but rather as a lifelong journey of self-awareness and self-understanding, made it possible for him to formulate a fresh, credible and – most importantly – an honest expression of religious experience in a way that was novel in the context of the British theological discourse of the 1960s. In 1968, Williams found himself at an important juncture of his life when he left the comfort and prestige of his academic position to spend the rest of his life in a monastic community.

As a homosexual priest initially suppressing his sexual orientation, Williams suffered a mental breakdown which triggered feelings of profound guilt, disapproval and mental paralysis. This experience was for him pivotal; his public admission of homosexuality in his autobiography published in 1982 was one of the first examples of a prominent Anglican clergyman coming out.

On the basis of his personal painful experience resulting, in particular, from sexual frustration, Williams brought into the foreground human suffering and guilt, focusing on the tensions and fragmentariness of life, pointing at the possibility of transforming them into life-giving events which become revelations of authentic humanity. He therefore called for self-knowledge and self-awareness as a way to discover the ‘real me’ lying beneath the conscious.

To facilitate this process of self-discovery, an appeal was made to psychoanalysis, which Williams underwent for many years and which very much set the tone of his writings. As a result, psychological perspective is integrated into the very fabric of his writings where psychological and theological notions are freely blended and are both essential for his understanding of God as the 'real me'.

There is at present no monograph or critical study of the life and work of Williams, although he was frequently seen as one of the most popular, attractive and persuasive writers on personal religion in contemporary England. The thesis thus aims at an original contribution bridging a gap in an under-researched chapter of the history of 20th century Anglican theology.

The main argument of the thesis is that in a situation where, until the 1960s, academic discourse especially in theology was frequently dominated by an underlying conservatism, Williams and his contemporaries played a central role in defining the radical movement in the Church of England. They contributed significantly to the cultural revolution experienced in 1960s Britain: in the field of Anglican theology, a radically alternative framework for understanding Christianity and the contemporary world was being established, which refused to equate Christianity with conventional respectability.

The thesis further argues that together with his contemporaries, Williams contributed to the gradual secularization of the core concepts of Christian religion which resulted in the emergence of a novel understanding of traditional teachings which, while often regarded as unorthodox, was gradually accepted by many. The group of theologians with which Williams associated also called for a new understanding of Christian ethics to cope with the necessity of the changing understanding of the contemporary world. This included novel views on the moral equivalence of sexual relationships within and outside marriage with extramarital ones. The radical theological movement made an impact on general moral debate well beyond the Church of England, and, as a result, the official moral stance in many areas gradually changed; this process was accompanied by a slow foundational change which subverted ideas perceived until then as traditional, including the established outer forms of worship. This gradual shift of the focus of the Church of England from the central, traditional tenets of Christian faith to dealing with the issues and challenges of the contemporary society (a process which has been continuing until now) resulted in the legitimization of alternative theological and moral concepts.

The thesis deals with the life and the theology of Williams as contained in his books, sermons and contemporary correspondence, both published and, partially, unpublished (even though almost all his personal papers were burned before he joined the monastic community), and as attested by his contemporaries. For the first time, his unpublished private papers from Mirfield, held at the Borthwick Institute of the University of York, have been researched.

The primary purpose of the thesis is not to examine whether Williams's views remained within the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy but to situate them within the broader context of the Anglican theological discourse of the 20th century and his personal life. Drawing upon Williams's writings, sermons, lectures and other works, the thesis presents individual stages of Williams's life and thinking. The background of circumstances and phenomena which were instrumental for Williams and his ideas as they developed are described in greater detail, placing them into the contemporary context.

The thesis is structured primarily chronologically. The Introduction is followed by Chapter II, examining Williams's autobiography published in 1982 which remains the main – and far from unproblematic – source of information about his life and works. The thesis critiques the extent to which the autobiography is an arbitrary view of Williams's life, an apologia, an interpretation or perhaps also 'a story of conversion'. Parallels are identified in particular with Augustine's *Confessions* and with other writers of religious autobiographies. Chapter III describes Williams's childhood, university education and formation in the theological college at Cuddesdon. It describes his struggle with organized religion resulting from the strict Evangelicalism of his mother, and finding his priestly vocation.

The following Chapter IV deals with the disappointment of Williams's ministry in London as an assistant parish priest and his tenure as a teacher at Westcott House in Cambridge. Williams's return to Trinity College, Cambridge, as Lecturer and later as Dean of the Chapel, marks the beginning of a period in which he suffered a nervous breakdown which marked him and his work for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, this was also the period when he joined a group of prominent theologians, culminating in the publication of *Soundings* in 1962 – Chapter V describes this period in detail. The origins of the book are presented using unpublished materials from the archives, followed by an exposition of Williams's essay in the context of the essays by other contributors. Contemporary reaction is mapped and set out in its historical context, together with the subsequent disbanding of the group. The chapter argues that Williams managed to express the essential elements of Christian belief in a novel way, triggering a wide and controversial discussion not only in the Church of England, but also in the wider context of British public discourse.

This is followed by Chapter VI, which situates Williams's work in the framework of the 'New Morality' which marked the Anglican theological discourse in the 1960s. Given the connection of John Robinson's *Honest to God* with Williams's writing, a section has been included addressing the book and its reception. A section is also included on 'Situation Ethics', a concept developed by Joseph Fletcher, as background for a discussion of Williams's developing views on ethics. These are set in the context of the contemporary discourse on the role of 'New Morality' understood as an aspect of the broader process of the secularization of post-war Britain.

Since Williams's breakdown was closely related to his sexual orientation, Chapter VII examines the changing attitude of Williams to his homosexuality against the background of the gradual emancipation of homosexuals in England. In this context, the process of the gradual change of the approach to homosexuality in the Church of England and the wider British society is described as this is essential for the understanding of Williams's life and his gradual opening up about his private life. It is argued that while Williams was, unlike some of his friends, by no means on the forefront of the movement calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality, his later pronouncements sent an important signal within the Church of England.

One of the hallmarks of Williams's writing is a link between theology and psychology, as applied in psychoanalysis which helped him to overcome his crisis – Chapter VIII situates Williams's views within this framework. In this connection, the context of psychoanalysis in post-war Britain is examined and the claims of the founders of the two main schools pertaining to faith and religion are summarized. The thesis argues that Williams felt comfortable primarily within the Jungian, rather than the Freudian, school of analysis. It

concludes by showing that Williams remained critical of the limits of psychoanalysis and viewed its techniques as a useful tool in the discovery of the 'real me' and personal quest for God, while never providing a substitute for, or an alternative to, religious faith.

At the end of the 1960s, Williams felt his life needed a radical change; his dissatisfaction with the comfortable life as a Cambridge don and his move to the monastic community in Mirfield is the subject of Chapter IX. Chapter X addresses Williams's subsequent life as a member of the Community of the Resurrection in the context of the leadership changes at Mirfield. His rich theological output whilst a member of the Community of the Resurrection is documented, often using unpublished material from his personal papers. The thesis also notes his continuing interaction with English literary circles and aristocracy including the then Prince of Wales. The penultimate Chapter XI deals with Williams's writing and preaching activity in his late years which was accompanied by a shift towards a certain universalism.

In the Conclusion, Williams's contribution to theological, ethical and ecclesiastical discourse is summarized and evaluated. It is argued that, although his work remains necessarily a product of his time, and despite criticism accusing Williams of replacing Christian spirituality with psychological religiosity, his writings have provided help and guidance to countless readers. Unpublished testimonies of his readers are cited to show that many of his concepts remain largely transferable and that his exploration of the shared territory between theology and psychology continues to provide valuable insights based on a profound personal experience.

ABSTRACT (short)

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As a homosexual priest initially suppressing his sexual orientation, Williams suffered a mental breakdown which triggered feelings of profound guilt, disapproval and mental paralysis. This experience was for him pivotal; his public admission of homosexuality in his autobiography published in 1982 was one of the first examples of a prominent Anglican clergyman coming out.

There is at present no monograph or critical study of the life and work of Williams, although he was frequently seen as one of the most popular, attractive and persuasive writers on personal religion in contemporary England. The thesis thus aims at an original contribution bridging a gap in an under-researched chapter of the history of 20th century Anglican theology.

The main argument of the thesis is that in a situation where, until the 1960s, academic discourse especially in theology was frequently dominated by an underlying conservatism, Williams and his contemporaries played a central role in defining the radical movement in the Church of England. They contributed significantly to the cultural revolution experienced in 1960s Britain: in the field of Anglican theology, a radically alternative framework for understanding Christianity and the contemporary world was being established, which refused to equate Christianity with conventional respectability.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- Becoming What I Am* H. A. Williams, *Becoming What I Am: a discussion of the methods and results of Christian prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977)
- U.S. edition:
H. A. Williams, *The Simplicity of Prayer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977)
- God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross* H. A. Williams, *God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross* (London: Mowbray's, 1960)
- Jesus and the Resurrection* H. A. Williams, *Jesus and the Resurrection* (London: Longman's, 1951)
- Living Free* H. A. Williams, *Living Free* (London: Continuum, 2006)
- More Sermons from Great St. Mary's* Hugh Montefiore (ed.), *More Sermons from Great St. Mary's* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971)
- Objections to Christian Belief* Donald M. MacKinnon (ed.), *Objections to Christian Belief* (London: Constable, 1963)
- Poverty, Chastity and Obedience* H. A. Williams, *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience: the true virtues* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1975)
- U.S. edition:
H. A. Williams, *True Christianity: The Oxford Cambridge Lectures* (Springfield: Templegate, 1974-1975)
- Sermons from Great St. Mary's* Hugh Montefiore (ed.), *Sermons from Great St. Mary's* (London: Collins, 1968)
- Some Day I'll Find You* H. A. Williams, *Some Day I'll Find You: an autobiography* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1982)
- Soundings* A. R. Vidler (ed.), *Soundings: Essays concerning Christian understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962)
- Tensions* H. A. Williams, *Tensions: necessary conflicts in life and love* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1976)
- The Four Last Things* H. A. Williams, *The Four Last Things* (London: Mowbray's, 1960)

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| <i>The God I Want</i> | James Mitchell (ed.), <i>The God I Want</i> (London: Constable, 1967) |
| <i>The Joy of God</i> | H. A. Williams, <i>The Joy of God</i> (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1979). |
| <i>The True Wilderness</i> | H. A. Williams, <i>The True Wilderness</i> (London: Constable, 1965) |
| <i>True Resurrection</i> | H. A. Williams, <i>True Resurrection</i> (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1972) |
| <i>True to Experience</i> | H. A. Williams and Eileen Mable (ed.), <i>True to Experience: an anthology of the words and teaching of H. A. Williams</i> (London: Mitchell Beazley, 1984) |
| <i>Vidler Papers</i> | East Sussex Record Office, Vidler Papers, ACC 5020/2/36 |
| <i>Williams Papers</i> | Borthwick Institute for Archives, University of York, Mirfield Papers MIRF, Williams Papers |
| <i>KJV</i> | King James Version (Authorized Version) |
| <i>RSV</i> | Revised Standard Version |

I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the life and work of Harry Abbot Williams, CR (1919-2006), an Anglican priest and theologian. Williams was one of the best-known Church of England clergymen of his time, exerting an influence well beyond the Church. His life was marked by a deep struggle of conflicting claims and tensions, and his writings are infused with a profound set of psychological questions which gives them a compelling quality. For Williams, the dogmatism of Christian creeds was replaced by the quest for personal honesty, and the metaphysical understanding of God was set aside in the pursuit of the 'real me'.

His life was a long and painful journey of self-exploration. There is much to be learned from his engagement with questions of human existence, his critique of the ecclesiastical establishment, and from his formulation of God's call upon every human being to realize their true self. Instead of presenting Church doctrines as ready-made truths, and without the use of a systematic theological argument, Williams aimed at bringing the readers to the truth about themselves. As is evidenced by numerous unpublished letters which Williams received from his readers, many felt compelled to respond to questions about their own existence.

Educated at Cambridge and trained for the ministry at Cuddesdon, Williams taught at Westcott House in Cambridge, before becoming lecturer and Dean of Chapel of Trinity College, where he suffered a breakdown in his mental health which led to his encounter with depth psychology. This represented a watershed moment for both his life and work. In 1962, he contributed to *Soundings: Essays concerning Christian understanding*, a volume produced by some of the leading English theologians of the day, and which is reflected in the title of this thesis. These essays became a landmark in

Anglican discourse through their critique of traditional Christian theology and stimulated a church-wide discussion, even if the volume suffered from the negative publicity and the sensationalism associated with John Robinson's (1919-1983) *Honest to God*, published a year later. Williams's essay was the most controversial and widely discussed text of the volume. In 1968, Williams found himself at an important juncture of his life when he left the comfort and prestige of his academic position to spend the rest of his life in the monastic community at Mirfield. His memoir *Some Day I'll Find You* published in 1982 has become a spiritual classic. It was a conscious attempt to retell (and interpret) his past.

His writing unsettles many readers as it pierces a comfortable, often even complacent veneer of religiosity: for Williams, becoming Christian was an arduous, never-ending task. His writing style proved highly attractive. Without claiming spiritual superiority, he produced prose in a very readable, engaging and consummate style, revelling in surprising paradox. His register of voices is very broad, and includes serious expositions as much as witticisms, sarcasm, self-deprecation and frivolity. Williams's language remains evocative, seeking to illustrate, rather than exhaustively describe, his views. As an advocate of clarity, he believed that 'the ultimate test of a theologian is his ability to communicate with the people who aren't [theologians]'.¹

Williams's writing is further marked by a rejection of theological literalism, although he often refers to the Scriptures and uses them to support his conclusions. His thought remains highly coherent and consistent throughout his life; indeed, his core ideas, although they mature gradually, can be traced right to the beginning of his publishing.

¹ H. A. Williams, 'Address delivered at the memorial service for John Burnaby at Trinity College Chapel on 29 April 1978', *The Cambridge Review*, 2 June 1978, 176.

Nevertheless, there remain certain elements of his thought which are in apparent tension with one another.

Throughout his work, there is a deep mistrust of authoritarian religion, of the extrinsic character of God, and of the idea that religion comes from outside the human condition. While Williams was not necessarily the most original of writers, standing within the broader tradition of thinkers who rebelled against the established beliefs of the Church and who placed the self in the centre of their discourse, his synthesis of ideas and the clarity of his writing made him highly influential.

As will become clear, genuine faith requires for Williams the courage to find the infinite reality of God within the finitude of oneself, where the Eternal Word of divine truth is transpersonally inherent, awaiting discovery. His ontology is based on God's immanence in the 'truest self' (the 'real me') of all human beings where God grasps individuals through a power working within them. These encounters result in new, contemporary experiences which become a way of participation in the events of the Cross and the Resurrection.² It was within the mystical tradition of Christianity that Williams found the primary source for his way of encountering the infinite within the constraints of human finitude: Williams's favourite line 'My me is God, nor do I know my selfhood save in Him' attributed to St Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510), can be found throughout his writings. In finding God intuitively within the depths of personal existence, Williams was also close to Eastern Orthodoxy, in particular to Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) for whom God was not 'wholly other' from man and who insisted that humans had in them 'a godlike element' which was 'indelible'.³

² Throughout the thesis, these terms are capitalized when relating to Jesus Christ. Williams, however, mostly chose not to capitalize them; this is reflected in verbatim citations.

³ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End* (London: G. Bles, 1952), 234.

That said, by his own admission throughout his writings, Williams interacted most closely with Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Paul Tillich (1886-1965), whose influence remains substantial, although necessary differences remain. Unlike Tillich, however, yet in some senses similar to Kierkegaard, Williams was not a systematic theologian and had an outspoken aversion to theology as a system of infallible truths. In his works, we do not find anything resembling an attempt at a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine, any formal exposition of the Trinity, and little by way of formal eschatology. Nevertheless, Williams remains rather a theological thinker, relentless in his exploration of the meaning of God for human existence, and focusing on the subjective meanings of Christian doctrine in the particular circumstances of human lives.

Similarly, he never tries to construct logical arguments or propose a series of rational arguments to support his views. The details of his theological understanding emerged piecemeal over several decades in various sermons, articles and books. Williams was not primarily interested in contributing to academic theological scholarship; accordingly, his writings often lack formal structure and sometimes read more as devotional literature. This lack of systematic approach also coincides with the fact that although he was a Western-trained theologian and an Anglican priest, Williams's writing was often closer in style to the Eastern Orthodox tradition than that of Western Christianity.

Williams repeatedly refused to equate religious faith with intellectual belief, and religious experience was for him never limited to the Church; in fact, he often struggled to find it in organized worship. Like Kierkegaard, he was not satisfied with how many of his contemporaries thought that they were Christian simply by being a part of a

Christian society. Williams understood religious faith in ways that drew on Tillich who saw it as the manifestation of the ‘ultimate concern’ for that which determines our being or non-being, a manifestation of a most profound search for true being. This ultimate concern should be distinguished from the institution of religion, which – as Tillich claimed – may pose a danger to religious life, tending to become unquestioning, mechanized, and rigid.⁴ Following both thinkers, Williams constantly warned his readers of the dangers of living under the illusion that Christianity comes as pre-packaged concepts offered by the Churches.

Like Kierkegaard who argues that ‘subjectivity is truth’,⁵ Williams views truth as the way of authentic human existence, being true to oneself, to the other and to God: objectivity is ‘a funk-hole’⁶ and nothing literal could be said about God. Like Tillich, who claims that God is not a being, but rather ‘an experienced reality’,⁷ Williams refuses to understand the human relationship to God as a relation to a ‘God out there’ or a ‘Father’, finding such approaches pathological. Instead, he turns to human nature, understood as grounded in the divine.

What matters to all three thinkers is the individual’s existential response to Christ: the individual’s understanding of the core elements of Christian faith is always expressed in terms of the existential challenge and opportunity it presents. Again, following Kierkegaard, Williams is not ready to subject God to the limits of human – and ecclesiastical – conceptuality. Nor is he interested in theoretical metaphysical conclusions. Similarly, he is concerned with the truth of Christianity not in terms of

⁴ Cf. Chana Ullman, *The Transformed Self: The Psychology of Religious Conversion* (New York: Springer, 1989), 169.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 271.

⁶ *The True Wilderness*, 20.

⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 172.

Christian doctrine, but instead tries to show how to be a true Christian (or rather a true human being) who has an authentic and faithful relationship with God.

For both Kierkegaard and Williams, the most authentic part of the human person remains invisible and inward. But where Kierkegaard embraces the Protestant understanding that our innermost being is hidden from everyone except God who alone acts as judge, Williams finds God himself in the depths of human beings: the truth of Christianity is found in the honest and authentic truth belonging to one's individual existence. Accordingly, the task of theology and organized religion, he claims, is to relate to particular human experiences and to find in them the infinite reality of God. This rejection of inauthentic attitudes led Williams to a formulation of his relationship with God that was understood primarily as a tool for, and expression of, self-understanding. On this basis, Williams was ready to proclaim the Christian truth only to the degree that it expressed his own identity: the living reality of God could be for him apprehended only through one's immediate experience.⁸

In his personal experience, another element played a key role: as a homosexual priest who for decades suppressed his sexual orientation, Williams suffered a mental breakdown which triggered feelings of profound guilt, disapproval and mental paralysis. This experience was pivotal; although his friends and students were aware of Williams's homosexuality, a public admission came only in his autobiography published in 1982: 'By orientation I was homosexual, and therefore the licensed release of sexuality in marriage wasn't available to me.'⁹ This statement was one of the first examples of a prominent Anglican clergyman coming out.

⁸ *Objections to Christian Belief*, 37.

⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 163.

This painful personal experience which particularly resulted from sexual frustration brought human suffering and guilt into the foreground of Williams's writings, focusing on the tensions and fragmentariness of life, and pointing beyond, towards the possibility of transforming them into the kinds of life-giving events which become revelations of authentic humanity.

The self-knowledge and self-awareness which this required were for Williams ultimately the way to discover the 'real me' laying beneath the conscious. He follows Tillich, for whom self-integration involved renewed knowledge of oneself, or what he called 'return to oneself'.¹⁰ Williams maintains that only such an authenticity can bring one to self-reflection and facing up to what others may prefer to keep concealed. In such an understanding, the right relationship with God does not mean doing what God – or the Church – tells us, but in recognizing God as the source of all things.

Williams's 'real me' is not something independent that can relate to God alone; rather, its essence is God himself. Williams called for Kierkegaardian and Tillichian authenticity – not understood as a unity between the object and its idea – but rather as a correspondence between the 'real me' and human actions. At the same time, however, given the lack of an external authority, such an identification of God with the 'real me' necessarily brings with it the dangers of subjectivism and solipsism.

To facilitate the process of self-discovery, Williams appeals to psychoanalysis, which he underwent for many years and which very much set the tone of his writings. As a result, a psychological perspective is integrated into the very fabric of his writings and psychological and theological notions are freely blended. While psychology became a staple ingredient of his writings, it was also an ingredient which he used rather too

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; London: Nisbet, 1951-1963) II, 8.

generously. In his transition from conventional religion to faith as self-awareness, Williams also gave a positive role to doubt, which he understood as a tool for avoiding religious claims that were for him all too often simply forms of evasion and self-deception. In the end, doubt had become an essential companion to his faith.

Williams's late writings were marked by a radical departure from the traditional modes of Christian reflection towards a more universal understanding of God, which suggested certain reservations about the historical particularity of Jesus Christ: 'Our freedom to travel culminates in our travelling inwards to the great discovery of our oneness with Life universal.'¹¹

Nonetheless, the key building blocks of Williams's writings kept re-emerging with variations throughout his writings. His concept of a personally engaged faith understood not as a static state of belief, but as a lifelong journey of self-awareness and self-understanding, made it possible for him to formulate a fresh, credible and – most importantly – an honest expression of religious experience in a way that was novel in the context of the British theological discourse of the 1960s.

Yet, questions remain as to whether the figure of Williams as presented in his writings was indeed his 'real me', or whether it was instead the product of a carefully-curated attempt to reconstruct his life following his intentional destruction of his papers in 1968 prior to leaving for the Community of the Resurrection.

A man of undoubtedly high intelligence, Williams was also one who throughout his life avoided relationships – or, more accurately, who was unable to enter into them. While many found him loveable, he could be rather difficult and exasperating. He seldom

¹¹ *Living Free*, 15.

found his relationships with other people to be satisfying; the relationship with his mother, for instance, was clearly very complicated, as she was not the source of unconditional love that he felt he needed. Williams's eloquent description of his life in *Some Day I'll Find You* is replete with imagery and ideas that, in the end, reveal a fragile self.

With the notable exception of one of his late sermons published posthumously,¹² Williams only rarely demonstrates sympathetic insight into marriage, bearing and raising children, or sharing one's love for another person. Throughout his writings he is an excellent raconteur and relates to his readers with short stories; yet, almost without exception, their protagonists are men. He remains predominantly *homosocial*, never mentioning friendships with women, and his condescending comments about his mother indicate if not a deep-rooted misogyny, then an inner hostility or fear, of which there is too much evidence to ignore.

It is possible that for Williams, finding God in his 'real me' was a substitute for finding love in a relationship with another human being. Merging God with his 'real me' offered an opportunity for a relationship that circumvented human demands: God became a transcendental subject as a substitute life partner, which catered to Williams's somewhat egotistical self whose wishes could not be gratified in the ways in which he might have wished. He was also a man preoccupied by his appearance and status, longing for the admiration and recognition of others, seeking for others' approval to validate his self-esteem. Throughout his life, there are elements of self-absorption, snobbery, and a preoccupation with how he came over to others. He often exhibited a

¹² *Ibid.*, 166.

need to attach himself to the patterns of the British establishment, which would seem to be in marked contrast with his theological liberalism.

There is at present no monograph or critical study of the life and work of Williams. This may come as something of a surprise given that he was frequently seen as one of the most popular, attractive and persuasive writers on personal religion in contemporary England. Despite his fame, neither does the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* include an entry. This thesis is an attempt to fill the gap in an under-researched chapter of the history of twentieth-century Anglican theology. By presenting Williams's life chronologically as an intellectual biography, it reveals a life deeply shaped by the contexts in which he – often deliberately – found himself.

This thesis demonstrates that in a situation where, until the 1960s, academic discourse (especially in theology) was frequently dominated by an underlying conservatism, Williams and his contemporaries played an important role in a radical, iconoclastic movement in the Church of England and beyond. His oeuvre, like that of many of his fellow theologians, was fundamentally shaped by contemporary German theology, which was being translated and introduced into Britain after the Second World War. Writing at a time when the Church of England still occupied an important position in British public discourse, these theologians were able to bridge theology with ethics to address the rapidly changing circumstances of the contemporary world. In doing so they made full use of the framework of Anglican thinking, which was traditionally more flexible than that of other churches, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. The thesis argues that in this rapidly-changing context, Williams's original contribution can be found in particular in his novel method in which established Christological concepts were psychologized and made more contemporary.

The movement of which Williams was a part contributed significantly to the cultural revolution experienced in 1960s Britain: in the field of Anglican theology, a radically alternative framework for understanding Christianity and the contemporary world was being propounded, which refused to equate Christianity with conventional respectability. At the same time, and along with a number of his contemporaries, Williams contributed to the gradual secularization of the core concepts of Christian religion.

This radical movement greatly contributed to a gradual shift of the Church of England from the central, traditional tenets of Christian faith to dealing with the issues and challenges of contemporary society, a trend which has been continuing until the present day. In the end, this movement resulted in the legitimization of alternative theological and moral concepts, which – in the view of some historians – also contributed to a certain decline of the Church of England (in her traditional understanding of herself).¹³ As examined in Chapter V, where some historians¹⁴ have attributed these changes to the external environment, others see the seekers for a new vision of the Church among the primary internal impulses of this process.¹⁵

As an advocate of situation ethics, Williams shocked his contemporaries with novel views on the moral equivalence between sexual relationships within and outside marriage, and later on homosexual relationships. Living (perhaps out of necessity) a respectable, closeted life, he never became a gay rights activist and it would not be fair to try to paint him as such; his permissive views on homosexual acts were voiced only

¹³ Mark Chapman, 'English Bonhoefferism and Secular Anglicanism', in *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives*, ed. by Jane Garnett (London: SCM Press, 2007), 100.

¹⁴ Callum Brown, 'What was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?', *Journal of Religious History*, 34 (2010), 468–79, 471.

¹⁵ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, 'Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain, 1963-1967', *The Historical Journal*, 60 (2) (2017), 519-46.

after the relaxation of the legal framework for homosexual sexual activity in England. Although Williams held that mutual respect between sexual partners was indispensable, his liberal opinions on sexual relations could be easily misunderstood and may have contributed to a certain general laissez-faire attitude which resulted in cases of sexual and mental abuse in the Church, emerging only decades later.

Structure

The thesis is structured primarily chronologically. This Introduction is followed by Chapter II, examining Williams's autobiography published in 1982 which remains the main – and far from unproblematic – source of information about his life and works. Parallels are identified in particular with Augustine's *Confessions* and with other writers of religious autobiographies. Chapter III describes Williams's childhood, university education and formation in the theological college at Cuddesdon. It addresses his struggle with organized religion resulting from the strict Evangelicalism of his mother, as well as finding his priestly vocation. The following Chapter IV deals with the disappointment of Williams's ministry in London as an assistant parish priest and his tenure as a member of staff at Westcott House Theological College in Cambridge. Williams's return to Trinity College, Cambridge, as lecturer and later as Dean of the Chapel marks the beginning of a period in which he suffered a nervous breakdown which marked him and his work for the rest of his life, but which nonetheless was the period when he joined a group of prominent theologians, culminating in the publication of *Soundings* in 1962 – Chapter V describes this period in detail. The origins of the book are presented using unpublished materials from the archives, followed by an exposition of Williams's essay in the context of the essays by other contributors. Contemporary reaction is mapped and set out in its historical

context, together with the subsequent disbanding of the group. The chapter argues that Williams managed to express the essential elements of Christian belief in a novel way, triggering a wide and controversial discussion not only in the Church of England, but also in the wider context of British public discourse.

Chapter VI goes on to situate Williams's work in the framework of the 'New Morality' which marked the Anglican theological discourse in the 1960s. Given its close connection with Williams's writing, John Robinson's *Honest to God* and its reception are discussed as is 'Situation Ethics', a concept developed by Joseph Fletcher, as background for a discussion of Williams's developing views on ethics. These are set in the context of the contemporary discourse on the role of 'New Morality' understood as an aspect of the broader process of the secularization of post-war Britain. Given that Williams's breakdown was closely related to sexual orientation, Chapter VII examines Williams's changing attitudes to his homosexuality against the background of the gradual emancipation of homosexuals in England. While Williams was, unlike some of his friends, by no means on the forefront of the movement calling for the decriminalization of homosexuality, his later pronouncements sent an important signal within the Church of England.

One of the hallmarks of Williams's writing is a link between theology and psychology, particularly as he experienced it in the psychoanalysis which helped him to overcome his crisis – Chapter VIII situates Williams's views within this framework. In this connection, the context of psychoanalysis in post-war Britain is examined and the claims of the founders of the two main schools pertaining to faith and religion are summarized. It is argued that Williams felt comfortable primarily within the Jungian, rather than the Freudian, school of analysis.

At the end of the 1960s, Williams felt his life needed a radical change; his dissatisfaction with the comfortable life of a Cambridge don and his move to the monastic community in Mirfield is the subject of Chapter IX. Chapter X addresses Williams's subsequent life as a member of the Community of the Resurrection in the context of the leadership changes at Mirfield. His rich theological output whilst a member of the Community of the Resurrection is documented, often using unpublished material from his personal papers. The chapter also notes his continuing interaction with English literary circles and aristocracy including the then Prince of Wales.¹⁶ The penultimate Chapter XI deals with Williams's writing and preaching activity in his late years which was accompanied by a certain shift towards universalism. In the Conclusion, Williams's contribution to theological, ethical and ecclesiastical discourse is summarized and evaluated. It is argued that, although his work remains necessarily a product of his time, and despite criticism accusing Williams of replacing Christian spirituality with psychological religiosity, his writings have provided help and guidance to countless readers. Unpublished testimonies of his readers are cited to show that many of his concepts remain largely transferable and that his exploration of the shared territory between theology and psychology continues to provide valuable insights based on a profound personal experience.

Methodology

In discussing Williams's life and thought, the thesis draws on his books, sermons and contemporary correspondence, both published and unpublished (even though almost all his personal papers were burned before he joined the monastic community), as well as

¹⁶ St James's Palace confirmed that their archives contain correspondence between Williams and the then Prince of Wales. However, it would not be made available for privacy reasons.

accounts from his contemporaries. For the first time, his unpublished private papers from his time at Mirfield, held at the Borthwick Institute of the University of York, have been researched.¹⁷ As an intellectual biography, the thesis follows the development of Williams's ideas, character and personality as he progresses through time and is exposed to various differing environments.

Williams's thinking reflects many of the features of his day and age, and is at times also critical of characteristic features of that day and age. Understanding Williams's intellectual milieu is therefore an essential step in understanding the course of his life and ideas. As this thesis is written from the point of view of a church historian, its purpose is not principally to examine whether Williams's views remained within the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy but to situate them within the broader context of the Anglican theological discourse of the 20th century. However, given that he exerted a powerful influence on many figures including, for instance, the then Prince of Wales, correlations of his views with similar discourses in classical and modern theology have been identified.

The most significant methodological issue, however, in trying to reconstruct Williams's life and thought is that his autobiography, *Some Day I'll Find You*, published in 1982, remains practically the sole resource on his early life. Since it obviously tells the story from a particular perspective, the chapter that follows seeks to examine the genre of the book in greater detail, viewing it both as a testimony of a religious conversion *sui generis* and a conscious construct of a life, situating it in the tradition of autobiographies with a strong religious component.

¹⁷ Given that the papers contain private letters which were never intended to be published, where they contain private and sensitive information (such as an indication of the sexual orientation of the correspondent), these letters have been anonymized.

II. WILLIAMS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Some Day I'll Find You as an autobiography

Once he became a member of the monastic community at Mirfield, Williams felt that he should explain his life-long struggle with the Church and organized religion. The title of his autobiography, published in 1982, *Some Day I'll Find You*, seems to refer to both to God in his eternal glory and to Williams's own inglorious failure to find a lifelong partner. It is also an obvious allusion to Noël Coward's¹⁸ famous song, so rooted in the same world of discreet homosexuality from which Williams was emerging at the time. Agreeing with Martin Buber¹⁹ that nothing is apt to mask the face of God so much as religion, Williams set out to explain and revise his fundamental beliefs about his own religious identity, along with his convictions about God, truth, and goodness.

Is his book, however, a true autobiography? One can distinguish between an autobiography and a reminiscence or memoir. Every autobiography contains personal experience, in chronological and reflective order, as well as memories of others, and memoirs necessarily also include autobiographical information: accordingly, the line between the two is very thin. According to Roy Pascal, there is a general difference in the direction of the author's attention. Where the focus of an autobiography proper is the self, the reminiscence or memoir focuses on others.²⁰ The core of Williams's book was found in 'his relentless, often painful self-examination', but he was also 'lavish

¹⁸ Noël Coward (1899-1973), playwright, composer, director, actor and singer. The song 'Some Day I'll Find You' features in his 1930 comedy of manners *Private Lives*.

¹⁹ Martin Buber (1878-1965), Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher. Cf. Daniel Murphy, *Martin Buber's philosophy of education* (Dublin: Irish Academic, 1988), 64.

²⁰ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (London: Routledge 1960), 5.

with warm, generous and sometimes hilarious portraits of the friends and colleagues who have enriched his life.²¹ Yet, these portraits are intended as mere illustrations which help to explain the background of Williams's own journey.

Some Day I'll Find You is therefore indeed an example of autobiography. However, within that genre, several varieties can be further distinguished. Although any particular autobiography reflecting the complexity of human life involves many different elements (including excuses, approvals, and rebuttals), John Barbour helpfully distinguishes between the concept of *confession* and that of *apology* and believes that they are mutually exclusive: he sees the starting point of writing an autobiography either in the 'moral rebuke (confession)' or 'vindication of the author's character (apology)'.²² At first, Williams's book seems to be more of an example of an *apologia*: in the tradition of the Greek *ἀπολογία*, he seeks to defend his past against criticism. In a manner similar to Plato's Socrates, Williams does not seem to be troubled by his conscience as he is generally convinced about the right course of his past actions. Although he recognizes human limitations and our propensity to make mistakes, he rarely asks for forgiveness. It may thus seem that Williams autobiography is not a 'confession' in the narrow sense of the word as he does not link his narrative to any sense of repentance, i.e. acknowledgment and regret, of his past actions. But if we understand 'confession' in another sense, namely as an assent, a declaration, an expression of thanksgiving and praise – then we can rightly use this term for Williams's book.

²¹ Stephen Brooke, 'H. A. Williams', *New Statesman*, 26 November 1982, 21.

²² John Barbour, *The Conscience of the Autobiographer: Ethical and Religious Dimension of Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 11.

This means that on this basis *Some Day I'll Find You* can be understood as an autobiography containing both an apologia for his life and a confession of his quest for true God, with strong elements of a memoir.

***Some Day I'll Find You* as a construct**

Williams's life story functions as the central point of reference of his autobiography. This is, however, only the first step: the author also aims at evoking, creating a certain image of himself; this necessarily requires omitting facts which would be at variance with the intended image and it is quite probable that some details may have been fabricated. The attention to detail testifies, on the one hand, to the evident seriousness with which he approached his autobiographical project and his unmistakable effort to say something of significance about his life and times – Williams appears to remember verbatim details of many conversations and brings up without hesitation that a particular hymn was sung in church on a particular day when he was a child. At the same time, however, it also suggests that Williams adopted a somewhat arbitrary view of his life; his perspective remained necessarily subjective, deriving its claim to authority from a presumed identity between author and the subject. In the light of these circumstances, there is the apparent risk of accepting everything Williams has written about himself and it is therefore prudent to be sceptical about the claim that the personal can ever guarantee authenticity. Given Williams's reputation as an amusing raconteur, he might be suspected of a certain willingness occasionally to sacrifice documentary truth for the imperative of telling a good story.

Scholars of life writing are acutely aware of these risks. Paul J. Eakin acknowledges that 'autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation'. This means that 'the self that is the centre of all

autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure'.²³ Similarly, Jeremy D. Popkin notes: 'History and autobiography may be fated to live together as members of the same extended family, but like many family relationships, theirs will continue to be fraught with tension and a certain amount of distrust.'²⁴ Accordingly, he claims that 'autobiographical memory is a creative artist'. He continues:

For historians, taking autobiographical writing seriously means acknowledging an alternative approach to narrating the past, one that cannot be simply dismissed as fiction; for autobiographers, recognizing that a first-person narrative will be read as history ... imposes a sense of responsibility that may not always be comfortable.²⁵

Similarly, as Laura Marcus, one of the most prominent scholars of life writing, has put it:

Autobiography is itself a major source of concern because of its very instability in terms of the postulated opposites between self and the world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object. In an intellectual context in which ... these are seen as irreconcilably distinct, autobiography will appear either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation.²⁶

Williams was indeed trying to reconcile his past with his present, while *reconstructing* those aspects which may not have fitted the story he was trying to tell. However, it is important to point out, with Roy Pascal, that this 'reconstruction of a life' is, in the end, an impossible task.²⁷ It involves the distribution of emphases, editing of the narrative, selection of anecdotes, choosing the right voice. Williams's book is an attempt at such a discriminatory reconstruction of his journey, in the actual circumstances in which he lived. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, which is necessarily

²³ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in autobiography: Studies in the art of self-invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 3.

²⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, *History, historians, & autobiography* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 32.

²⁵ Popkin, 12.

²⁶ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical discourses: Criticism, theory, practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 7.

²⁷ Pascal, 9.

presented so that through the book Williams's personality finds its desired shape. Furthermore, his autobiography is not merely a reconstruction of his past, but is also its *interpretation*, a judgement on his past from the point of view of the present. The result is what Pascal calls 'an interplay, a collusion, between past and present; its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past'.²⁸

Ultimately, Williams wishes to convince the reader that his experience has led to a greater integrity and maturity through his life – although he does not use these terms. Erik Erikson finds integrity in 'the ego's accrued assurance of its proclivity for order and meaning', as 'an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dearly paid for'.²⁹ Williams undoubtedly paid a high price to arrive at peace with himself and the surrounding world. However, in terms of maturity, Williams achieved this only partially, at least in terms of what Joann Wolski Conn defines as 'a matter of loving relationships and fidelity to one's personal call and gifts'.³⁰ While Williams surely followed his calling and brought his gifts to fruition, nevertheless, by his own admission, he failed at creating and maintaining a steady and romantic relationship (although his correspondence bears evidence of close friendships with a number of people).

As for many other writers, the very *act* of writing his autobiography was for Williams also a part of the process of maturing. In this sense, an autobiography can be understood not only as a book completed, a narrative of a journey, but its writing is a part of the journey itself. This remembering and reordering of memories is a highly creative act of mental exploration, with the primary motive that of reaching a new stage

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁹ E. H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), 268.

³⁰ Joann Wolski Conn, *Spirituality and personal maturity* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), 25.

of self-knowledge (and self-definition). It involves elements of personal pressure, a search for oneself – an act of conscience which wants to go beyond a mere exposition.

However, the process can be a painful one. For Williams, his ego stands at the very centre of his writing, since, by his own admission, instead of applying established Christian theology *to* the circumstances of his own life, his task became constructing theology *from* his personal experience.³¹ Placing the self into the centre of his writing was therefore an indispensable step.

This means that *Some Day I'll Find You* is also a testimony to Williams's obsession with himself, with his vanity and self-indulgence, even if such an obsession, in its best examples, may also be 'inspired by a reverence for the self, tender yet severe, that sees the self not as a property, but a trust.'³² Nevertheless, if Pascal's standard for an autobiography is that 'a cone of darkness' be found in those autobiographies that stand out as psychological documents,³³ Williams's description of his struggle with the dark forces of his self can be seen as meeting this criterion.

What this demonstrates is that evaluating the completeness and accuracy of Williams's autobiography need not be the interpreter's primary concern. Many of those who feature in Williams's stories had died many years earlier, and there is likely to be an element of fiction in many of his stories. It is highly likely that at least some of them contain passages that would not stand up to rigorous examination, and these have been identified in several instances. Nonetheless, *Some Day I'll Find You* remains relevant in what it says about Williams as a personality. As Pascal notes: 'autobiographies offer an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men. Even if what they

³¹ *The True Wilderness*, 8.

³² Pascal, 181.

³³ *Ibid.*, 184.

tell us is not factually true, or only partly true, it always is true evidence of their personality.³⁴

A story of a conversion

In his autobiography, Williams writes about shaking off the idol and finding true God: as a result, he attempted to live his life – and his sexuality – fully, although he ultimately failed with respect to the latter. *Some Day I'll Find You* can therefore also be read as an account of conversion. In his seminal work, William James defined conversion as ‘the process, gradual or sudden by which a self, hitherto divided, consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities’.³⁵ More recently, conversion has been defined with a focus on narrative as ‘a comprehensive personal change of religious worldview and identity, based on both self-report and attribution of others’.³⁶ At the same time, each conversion also encompasses a deconversion from the previous world view, a change of the perception of one’s experience. A conversion experience helps converts find new meanings in previous events, enabling them to re-construct the narrative of their lives. Correspondingly, in his autobiography, Williams is able to identify decisive moments of his life, give them particular emphases, and present his life to the reader in the light of his conversion experience. His personality, however, remains the same – we meet the same person who understands things in different ways.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid., 1.

³⁵ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London; New York: Longmans Green, 1902), 157.

³⁶ Henri Gooren, *Religious conversion and disaffiliation: Tracing patterns of change in faith practices* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

³⁷ This observation is confirmed by a number of studies which doubt that a conversion experience modifies one’s personality and assert that it merely changes the perception of one’s life: Cf. Raymond F. Paloutzian, James T. Richardson, and Lewis R. Rambo, ‘Religious Conversion and personality change’, *Journal of*

James further draws an important line between the ‘volitional conversion’ where one makes a conscious decision to convert, and a ‘self-surrender’, which involves allowing oneself to be converted.³⁸ In the case of Williams, we can speak first of an involuntary surrender, caused by his mental breakdown, followed by his determined conversion to a God he had newly found in his inner self. This means that Williams is not merely a passive subject, but an active agent seeking to develop his own ‘personhood’.³⁹

Williams was struggling with the traditional concept of God, in particular the legalistic perceptions instilled by his mother. He became a ‘seeker’, in the sense used by Arthur Greil for whom ‘those whose identities have been spoiled become “seekers” who search for a perspective to restore meaning’, since their current perspective is perceived ‘as not dealing with the problems that the individual encounters in individual life’.⁴⁰ Finding God in all aspects of life, Williams remained a ‘seeker’ also in the sense used by the sociologist Roger Straus, who described the process of ‘how a person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life.’⁴¹

Williams’s conversion can be further seen as an example of a ‘progressive’ experience as identified by Leon Salzman, who sees it as an antonym to a ‘regressive’ one.

Progressive conversions, Salzman argues, are prompted mostly by a conscious reflection and are more gradual and integrative than sudden ones:

Personality, 67 (6) (1999), 1047-79; James V. Downton, Jr. ‘An evolutionary theory of spiritual conversion and commitment: The call of Divine Light Mission’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 19 (4) (1990), 381-96; Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding religious conversion* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993).

³⁸ James, 169.

³⁹ Cf. James T. Richardson, ‘The active vs. passive convert: Paradigm conflict in conversion/recruitment research’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24 (2) (1985), 167.

⁴⁰ Arthur L. Greil, ‘Previous dispositions and conversion to perspectives of social and religious movements’, *Sociological Analysis*, 38 (2) (1977), 119-20.

⁴¹ Roger A. Straus, ‘Religious conversion as a personal and collective accomplishment’, in *Sociological Analysis*, 40 (2) (1979), 161.

This type of conversion frequently occurs in the course of real maturing, it takes place when the person after a reasoned, thoughtful search adopts new values and goals which he has determined to be higher than those he has abandoned. It occurs in reasonably normal persons and when it is a religious conversion represents the achievement of the ultimate in the humanistic religions – the positive fulfilment of one’s powers with self-awareness, concern for others and oneness with the world.⁴²

Williams’s gradual maturing and ultimate adoption of a new, more universalist attitude, freed from the tenets of traditional Christianity, can be seen as an example of this form of progressive conversion.

Nevertheless, for some authors, the word ‘conversion’ is not entirely fitting; after all, Williams’ reorientation is not a shift across religious systems, since he remains a Christian. We might therefore rather speak of a *reaffiliation* within the same religious tradition,⁴³ or, given the lack of a complete disruption of his previous identity, of an *alternation*.⁴⁴ Williams’s life also involved a process which has been called a *commitment*, an attempt at maintaining the consistency of his real self, or ‘the embracing of a master role’.⁴⁵

***Some Day I’ll Find You* as a religious autobiography**

Williams’s *Some Day I’ll Find You* is not a straightforward autobiography, but it is of a specifically religious kind. As a religious autobiography, its focus is not merely the description of Williams’s life events, but also seeks to describe his connection to the

⁴² Leon Salzman, ‘The psychology of religious and ideological conversions’, *Psychiatry*, 16 (1953), 178.

⁴³ Cf. Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the human side of religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 114.

⁴⁴ ‘Alternations are transformation to identities which are prescribed or at least permitted within the person’s established universes of discourse.’ Richard V. Travisano, ‘Alternation and conversion as qualitatively different transformations’, in *Social psychology through symbolic interaction*, ed. by G. P. Stone and H. A. Faberman (Waltham: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), 598.

⁴⁵ Clifford L. Staples and Armand L. Mauss, ‘Conversion or commitment? A reassessment of the Snow and Machalek approach to the study of conversion’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (2) (1987), 133-47.

transcendent, his spiritual experiences and the decisive moment of his spiritual conversion from the false idol of god to the real God.⁴⁶ John Barbour discerns in religious autobiographies in general ‘the expression of an ultimate concern, Paul Tillich’s definition of religious faith’, in the meaning of a conviction ‘about what is ultimately true and good, and a commitment to act in accord with such belief’.⁴⁷

Williams does not limit his understanding of the divine to the traditional religion, but finds it everywhere in life. In this sense, Williams’s autobiography can be rightly designated as a religious one as it contains, on the one hand, the necessary element of self-transcendence, and, on the other hand, it finds the intimate presence of immanent God in the depths of one’s innermost self.

Combining these elements, Williams stands in a tradition of prominent autobiographical writings with a strong religious or at least spiritual element. One can discern parallels in the life writings of a number of authors, despite some significant differences. In particular, correlations with four authors living in distinct epochs, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Julian Green (1900-1998), and Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) are striking.

Williams and Augustine

Writing for *The Journal of the Gay Christian Movement*, the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch noted parallels with the Bishop of Hippo and found it ‘the autobiography of a man whose vanity and self-concern is more disarming than any humility; the effect is similar to that of St. Augustine of Hippo writing a weekly column in *Punch*’.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 133ff.

⁴⁷ Barbour, 180.

⁴⁸ Diarmaid MacCulloch, ‘Review’, *Journal of the Gay Christian Movement* (November 1983), 34.

Augustine's meditation on his life and its course is *the* classical work of religious and spiritual autobiography. His *Confessions* is richly textured and its account of a personal struggle and quest for God remains unparalleled after centuries. Like Augustine, Williams wishes to show his spiritual evolution as he describes the coming-into-being of his full personality, by 're-collecting' out of memory the scattered pieces of his personality.⁴⁹ Both authors show a similar attitude towards writing from the reality of their lives, viewed as the only means for understanding the ultimate reality.⁵⁰

Augustine admits: 'what lies within is for the most part hidden unless experience reveals it'.⁵¹ Likewise Williams, in the introduction to *The True Wilderness* (1965), lays out his reference framework based on personal experience: 'I resolved that I would not preach about any aspect of Christian belief unless it had become part of my own life-blood.'⁵²

For both Williams and Augustine, the story of their lives begins with their parents, continues through their youth and adolescence, and culminates in the presentation of their respective theological and philosophical frameworks.⁵³ Remarkably, Williams takes no critical stance towards his memory; he describes the events of the past without any disclaimer. And unlike Augustine, he does not readily admit that remembering is greatly dissociated from the original feelings engendered by a particular experience.⁵⁴

Both Augustine and Williams remain selective, and decide to omit some of the things one might normally expect from their autobiographies. In much the same way that we

⁴⁹ Cf. Pascal, 22-23.

⁵⁰ Cf. Miles Hollingworth, *Saint Augustine of Hippo: An Intellectual Biography* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2013), 5.

⁵¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, X (xxxii) 48. All citations from Saint Augustine, *Confessions, a new translation by Henry Chadwick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵² *The True Wilderness*, 8.

⁵³ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), ix.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Confessions*, X.

learn nothing about Augustine's sister and next to nothing about his brother, Williams mentions only a few apparently unconnected episodes about his sisters. It is impossible to answer questions about their relationship. Were they close? Did they maintain contact? Augustine decides not to reveal the name of his best friend, nor his common-law wife.⁵⁵ Similarly, Augustine's father Patricius is another notable victim of Augustine's discretion: his description is limited to a few episodes. On the other hand, Augustine often lashes out at his relentless mother, who has no qualms about handling him sternly and is greatly distressed about his spiritual wellbeing. This bears a striking similarity to the evangelical mother of Williams, about whom (and her religion) he is dismissive; he rails against her moralizing. Similarly, we learn very little about Williams' father. Apart from a few anecdotes related to their stay in France, his father is merely present, with Williams remaining silent about their relationship – the reader never learns whether the two were close or not; neither do we learn whether either parent was supportive during Williams's breakdown; the death of both of his parents does not even deserve a mention.

Rather than presenting static portraits, both autobiographies present stories of a personal development. As Paula Fredriksen observed, Augustine's book is 'a theological reinterpretation of a past event, an attempt to render his past coherent to his present self'. It is 'a disguised description of where he stands in the present as much as an ostensible description of what occurred in the past.'⁵⁶ This can also be said of Williams's autobiography, for his view of God – and himself – changes gradually as the overall picture starts to emerge. Likewise, where Gary Wills sees in the *Confessions* a 'drama of sin and salvation, in the form of a journey toward God', and does not

⁵⁵ Garry Wills, *Augustine's Confessions: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 22.

⁵⁶ Paula Fredriksen, 'Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self', *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986), 24.

hesitate to use the term ‘spiritual psychodrama’,⁵⁷ Williams’s book shares many of these characteristics, even if it is written in accessible and fluent prose.

Both writers present their own conversion narratives, although one has to penetrate under the surface of their writing to identify them. It is important to note with Samantha Thompson that it is a common misconception that ‘Augustine was transformed from a carnally motivated sinner (thievery and fornication are two of the famous sins to which Augustine confesses) into a chaste, spiritually minded Christian’,⁵⁸ for, as Gary Wills has observed,⁵⁹ the transgressions of the adolescent Augustine were hardly sensational by Roman standards. Indeed, many are actually quite trivial.⁶⁰ The real conversion in the *Confessions* is thus elsewhere: it is a conversion from false ideas to the true philosophy, and therefore ‘from false gods (or false goods) to the one true good, God himself’.⁶¹ Augustine’s contempt for idols, not only material ones carved in stone or wood, but the idols of the mind, resonates not just in the *Confessions*, but throughout his writings.⁶² Something similar is also at the core of Williams’s conversion – throughout his books, he turns away from the idol, the false god, to find the true God, whom he ultimately finds inside, in what he calls the ‘real

⁵⁷ Ibid., 22, 25.

⁵⁸ Samantha Thompson, ‘The Confessions of Saint Augustine: accessory to grace’, in *Autobiography as Philosophy: The philosophical uses of self-presentation*, ed. by T. Mathien and D. G. Wright (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 41.

⁵⁹ Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine* (New York: Viking, 1999), xvii.

⁶⁰ Many writers of autobiographies show a tendency to make the confession of guilt the basis for a hidden claim of virtue; for example, Max Heirich notes that converts tend to exaggerate their past sinfulness to increase the power and value of their conversions. Cf. Max Heirich, ‘Change of heart: A test of some widely held theories about religious conversion’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 83 (3), 653-80.

⁶¹ Thompson, 42.

⁶² Cf. Augustine, *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, XIX, 1: ‘And if now at length idols have been cast down from their own temples, how much more ought they to be cast down from Christian minds!’ (Cf. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 7, ed. by Philip Schaff, trans. by John Gibb (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888), and *Enarrationes in psalms*, LXXV, 11: ‘You ought not to paint in your heart God, as it were, circumscribed with a human form, lest though the temples are shut up, you forge the selfsame images in your hearts.’ (Cf. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 8, ed. by Philip Schaff, trans. by J. E. Tweed (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing, 1888)).

me'. Both authors share the view that estrangement from ourselves renders us unable to understand who we truly are.⁶³

Their respective accounts are both in some sense retrospective (i.e. shaped by later concerns) and apologetic (i.e. containing a defence of oneself), whereby each represents 'a condensed, or disguised, description of the convert's *present*, which legitimates through his retrospective creation of a past and a self.'⁶⁴ The lives of both theologians are sequences of episodes that develop towards a culmination, yet they also plunge beneath the surface of their experience. They both move outward towards God, but also inward towards their self.

Their journeys are documented by a series of encounters and scenes, which are primarily recounted not simply because they occurred, but because of their impact on the spiritual development of each writer. Compared to Augustine, Williams is substantially more descriptive, anecdotal, preferring to introduce the reader to the atmosphere of the places in which he lived and the personalities he met. Unlike Augustine, he also wants to entertain the reader, although under the surface, there is also a much deeper point to be made. Brian Stock suggests that Augustine tells his life story 'to encourage [readers] to try his method of conversion for themselves';⁶⁵ this seems to be equally applicable to Williams.

Neither writer aims at proving some narrow point, instead wishing to affect the reader on a more profound, universal, level: the Renaissance poet Petrarch was perhaps the first to notice that *Confessions* was not only the story of Augustine, but also the story

⁶³ Cf. Hollingworth, 4.

⁶⁴ Fredriksen, 33.

⁶⁵ Brian Stock, *After Augustine: The Meditative Reader and the Text* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 3.

of Adam and Eve, and hence the story of all human beings.⁶⁶ Augustine and Williams write in order that their readers might learn from their experience – this meets Jean-Paul Sartre’s maxim that the position which an autobiographer has reached ‘must disqualify in our own eyes some episodes of our lives.’⁶⁷ Unpublished correspondence of Williams bears testimony to the fact that many readers were able to appropriate his experience, which in turn helped them to change their own lives.

Accordingly, in both books, the central theme can be found in the overcoming of the human alienation from their true self and from God. Both authors realize that they have lost their roots and are inherently unstable, vulnerable to being pulled into a number of false directions. This lack of unity makes them initially unable to see beyond the surface of life, and their mind is closed to its true spiritual meaning. In his description of Augustine’s journey, Carl Vaught uses language remarkably similar to Williams’s: ‘the most crucial episodes of [Augustine’s] life occur within the depths of his soul’. He ‘makes the interplay between the soul and the *ground of the existence* possible, pointing upward toward God and pointing downward to his fruitless attempts to flee from his presence’.⁶⁸ Elsewhere, Vaught sees in *Confessions* ‘a microscopic expression of a macroscopic theme: in a single life the relation between God and the soul unfolds as a sustained encounter between an individual and the *ground of its existence*’.⁶⁹ Using Tillichian terms to describe Augustine’s attempt to transcend his limitations, and his desire to relate with ‘the source of power that creates and sustains him’, Vaught further speaks of ‘a response to a divine command that he surrender his will to a source of

⁶⁶ Francesco Petrarca and James Harvey Robinson, *Petrarch the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters, a Selection from His Correspondence* (New York: Putnam, 1898), 316-18.

⁶⁷ J. P. Sartre speaking on his autobiography, *The Listener*, 6 June 1957, 15.

⁶⁸ Carl G. Vaught, *Access to God in Augustine’s Confessions* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2006), 5 [emphasis added]. Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), ix.

⁶⁹ Carl G. Vaught, *The Journey toward God in Augustine’s Confessions* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2003), 1 [emphasis added].

power that transforms his life'. However, while Paul Tillich expressly locates himself within the Augustinian tradition,⁷⁰ Williams does so only implicitly, by locating himself as a follower of Tillich by the contents of his writings.

Where Augustine is both tired of living and scared of dying,⁷¹ he confesses 'As I became unhappier, you came closer'.⁷² Realizing that the corrosion of the human heart lies deep, he confesses to God that 'without you, it is evil for me, not only in external things but within my being'.⁷³ Williams similarly observes that 'the true God manifests Himself only gradually, and, in the early stages especially, there is with the true much that is untrue and illusory'.⁷⁴ Augustine sets out the theme of the ultimate unity in the most quoted verse of the *Confessions*: 'You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'⁷⁵ which finds a certain parallel in Williams's description of his unity with God as 'the ocean of which I am a wave, as the sun of which I am a shaft of light, as the tree of which I am a branch'.⁷⁶ And so in the end, Augustine – like Williams centuries later – finds God 'in the heights and in the depths of his soul.'⁷⁷

Samantha Thompson observes, using modern psychological terms, that Augustine can be interpreted as a writer wishing to inspire his readers 'to undertake self-therapy through self-examination';⁷⁸ she stands in the line of scholars who have attempted to

⁷⁰ Cf. Paul Tillich, 'Two Types of Philosophy or Religion' in *Theology of Culture*, ed. by Robert C. Kimball (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 10-29.

⁷¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, IV (vi) 11.

⁷² *Ibid.*, VI (xvi) 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, XIII (viii) 9.

⁷⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 164-65.

⁷⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, I. (i.) 1.

⁷⁶ *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience*, 24.

⁷⁷ Vaught, *Access to God*, 6.

⁷⁸ Thompson, 34. However, she also notes that the words 'self' and 'therapy' are used noticeably by twentieth-century commentators, and see it perhaps as 'a sign their own preoccupations'. [*Ibid.*]

discuss *Confessions* from the point of view of human psychology writings.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, in the end, Augustine ascribes his startling change to a Divine intervention. Williams, conversely, attributes his coming to maturity to the external help of therapy and to his own powers. Only later in his life was he prepared to attempt a reconciliation between psychotherapy and religion.⁸⁰

Both writers also share a positive attitude to life and beauty. Augustine is certainly not a puritan, and sees no reason why love, especially love of beauty, should make anyone feel guilty, for God himself is the *summa pulchritudo*, the supreme loveliness.⁸¹ Rather than just being the supreme Judge who sets out moral duties, Augustine's God desires enjoyment, as long as it is reserved for good ends, and does not deem enjoyment corrupt or wicked.⁸² The same sentiment is shared by Williams who always loved beauty, especially as found in the arts as well as in good food and wine – even following his retreat to the monastic community. A whole volume – *The Joy of God* (1979) – was dedicated to the topic. And where Williams advocates the beauty of sex, this is not to be measured by the approval of the union by the public or the Church, but by mutual respect, consent and lack of abuse of the parties involved. (Augustine, it should be noted, would disapprove).

For Williams, the starting point for Christology is not the question of what can be said about Christ, but rather what Christ says about us and our condition. This is notable already in Williams's first book, *Jesus and the Resurrection* (1951), written prior to his

⁷⁹ Many scholars have also attempted to discuss *Confessions* on psychological terms. They sometimes gave Augustine an Oedipal complex related to the fixation to his mother, sometimes even a homosexual orientation. Characteristic examples of this approach are the works of Werner Achelis, *Die Deutung Augustins* (Prien: Kampmann, 1921), Charles Kligerman, 'Psychoanalytic Study of the Confessions of St. Augustine', *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, 5 (1957), 469ff., and R. Braendle and W. Neidhart, 'Lebensgeschichte und Theologie', *Theologische Zeitschrift*, 40 (1957), 157ff.

⁸⁰ W. A. Williams, 'What Freud and Jung mean for religion', *The Times*, 20 June 1970, 12.

⁸¹ Cf. Augustine, *De quantitate animae*, 44.

⁸² Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 95.

breakdown and subsequent conversion – or reaffiliation. His life-long actualization and contemporization of the events of Jesus’s life mirror a similar attempt by Augustine, although the latter related them to another biblical figure. Paula Fredriksen observes that Augustine finds a new understanding of himself by developing his understanding of the Apostle Paul.⁸³ Gradually he discovers a different Paul, ‘not the Christian philosopher, nor the staunch defender of free will, but the sinner inexplicably redeemed from his former life by the unmerited gift of God’s grace’.⁸⁴ The term Fredriksen uses is ‘autobiographical exegesis’, which she understands as a self-conscious presentation of one’s personal history. She does not hesitate to claim that Augustine ‘presents his personal history as the model for his theology’ and, in a sense, ‘demonstrates the truth of orthodoxy’s claims ... through his public application of (the Catholic) Paul’s story to his own past.’⁸⁵ Williams’s approach bears similar features: throughout his writings: he relates distinct moments of Jesus’s life to his own experience, and arrives at a novel Christological exegesis with strong autobiographical elements.

Despite these many similarities, however, there remains at least one fundamental difference between Augustine and Williams. The Bishop of Hippo, in line with mainstream Christian theology, desperately seeks to abandon his own willfulness which he finds standing in opposition to the will of God. Although he does not view sexuality as inherently negative, it remains for him a clear example of destructive willfulness. Augustine is painfully aware of the bondage of his will, and describes it openly: he tells the reader that ‘by servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to

⁸³ Fredriksen, 3-34. At least one scholar published a refutation of Fredriksen’s concept of Augustine’s appropriation of Paul’s conversion story; cf. Felix Baffour Asare Asiedu, ‘Paul and Augustine’s Retrospective Self: The Relevance of Epistula XXII’, *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 47 (2000), 145-64.

⁸⁴ Fredriksen, 24.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

which there is no resistance becomes necessity'⁸⁶. For him, sexual desires remain something to be overcome, as he views them as an addiction that will cause the will to degenerate into willfulness; the will loses its ground in God which leads to idolatry. Williams's attitude could not be more different: when he finds God in his innermost self, and identifies God primarily with love, he finds himself unable to regard sexuality as a stain on one's life, but rather – in the absence of any abuse – an expression of its fulfilment, although that love may have a form which contemporary society is not ready to sanction. If, in the end, Williams becomes a member of a religious community and resigns himself with respect to sexual fulfilment, it is not because he shares Augustine's concerns, but because he is unable to find a permanent partner.

Rousseau, Wordsworth, Green, Nouwen

Williams's autobiography also stands in the line of another book of *Confessions*, that by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau's autobiography also goes beyond an exposition, a description of his life, and is a chronicle of the quest for a true self – so far it resembles Augustine's. However, he goes further: firstly, Rousseau is a writer who, like Williams, is ready to share with his readers his neurotic pressures and obsessive recollections. Secondly, Rousseau goes significantly beyond his predecessor in his emphasis on subjectivity, for he does not accept the relevance of an external authority, such as the teaching of the Church, and his quest remains on a purely subjective level. For Rousseau, autobiographical truth simply means the demonstration of the sincerity of his present, subjective feelings as he writes: 'I have only one faithful guide on which I can count; the succession of feelings which have marked the development of my being, and thereby recall the events that have acted upon it as cause or effect...'⁸⁷ The

⁸⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, VIII. (v.) 10.

⁸⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. by J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953), 262.

relevance of personal experience and sincerity to one's self, one's 'real me', is similarly the main thread of Williams's oeuvre. Given this emphasis on subjectivity, Rousseau's autobiography remains an important warning that adherence to historical truth is a matter of honesty with the reader and also with oneself. Otherwise the writer is at the constant danger of self-delusion.

John Barbour observes that 'Rousseau is an incorrigible self-deceiver when it comes to judging himself',⁸⁸ which should act as a reminder that Williams's account of his own life also needs to be examined vigilantly. Jean Starobinski goes further with regard to Rousseau arguing that he introduced a new concept of autobiographical truth, namely his stress on present emotional states: 'What is of primary importance is not historical veracity but the emotion experienced as the past emerges and is represented' so that 'the truth that Rousseau wishes to communicate is not exactitude of biographical act but accuracy in depicting his relation to the past.'⁸⁹ Williams may be guilty of a similar attitude as he tries to reinterpret his life. Similarly, as was the case with Rousseau, he may have found himself to an extent trapped in a solipsistic world. That said, it is unlikely that truthfulness eludes him to the same extent as it did Rousseau, for where the Frenchman could safely rely on the fact that there were no witnesses or no evidence that might cast different light on his version of truth ('alternative facts', *avant la lettre*), Williams lived in the twentieth century and wrote his memoir at the time when many of the personalities depicted were still alive or were remembered by many of his contemporaries.

⁸⁸ Barbour, 20.

⁸⁹ Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 19.

In addition, there is a discernible difference in genre: Rousseau's book is more an apologia, for he is haunted by his past (he had charged a servant with a theft of which he was himself guilty) and had to confess his guilt. Williams, on the other hand, remains blissfully guilt-free – regretting only the moments when he still adhered to the traditional teaching of the Church on sexuality and accordingly advised his parishioners, or his sister who was about to marry a divorcé.⁹⁰

In the English-speaking world, the Romantic poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850) followed on from Rousseau and emphasized the supreme importance of private experience in *The Prelude* (14 volumes published in 1850 after his death). He may have been the first autobiographer who realized the importance of what happens *beneath* one's will and consciousness; Wordsworth's writing is thus not merely an account of his life, but a true attempt at a construct of a self. His 'projection of the real self'⁹¹ is not dissimilar to Williams's presentation of his 'real me'.

Williams's autobiography also bears a conspicuous similarity with that of his contemporary, the French-American writer Julian Green.⁹² As with Williams, religion occupies a central position in Green's narrative, being his primary concern as a young man, and the catalyst towards his further spiritual development. The relationship between religion and Green's art may not be as direct as it is recounted in his compelling writing; and, like Williams, Green may be accused of having fabricated parts of his life. However, it is primarily the frankness and exactitude of his writing which is like that of Williams. The role of religion is partially determined as much by

⁹⁰ Cf. *Some Day I'll Find You*, 124, 95.

⁹¹ Thompson, 45.

⁹² Julian (Julien) Green (1900-1998). His autobiographical *Memories of Happy Days* (London: J. M. Dent, 1944) was Green's only book written in English. The *Journals*, spanning the years from 1926 and published in several separate volumes, contain his reflections on God and mortality. Another four volumes of autobiography were published between 1992 and 1996 covering the years 1900-1929.

the beliefs he held at the time of the events described, as much as by the beliefs he was holding while writing his autobiography, which contains the elements of a *Bildungsroman*, and interprets his past from his later, more mature perspective. Unlike Williams, however, Green is ready to admit, notably in his essay about his religious history, *Ce qu'il faut d'amour à l'homme*, that his remembrances have been shaped by contemporary concerns.⁹³

For Green, as for Williams, his mother, a devout Protestant, was the agent of his first encounter with faith and the narrative is shaped to a large extent by her memory. On the one hand, unlike Williams, who is generally dismissive of his mother, Green views his mother as a source of knowledge and love. Nevertheless, Green is ready to admit that it is his mother who is to blame for the antagonism he felt about his homosexuality. Williams never goes as far and is not ready to draw a direct connecting line between his mother and his suppressed sexuality, preferring to blame the idol of god for his condition. Nonetheless, given that this idol has been instilled by his mother, the result is for both writers very similar.

Where Williams falls in love with a young man named Stavros, Green develops a close bond with a fellow student by the name of Mark. Both writers realize that they are unable to repress their sexual desires completely. Green remains convinced about their wrongness and finds that Protestantism could not provide him with the solace he needed. Where Williams parted his ways with the idol of (a largely Protestant) god and embraced the God of love, Green found his new mental framework in Catholicism, a religion – in his understanding – vastly different from the legalism and literalism of his mother's faith. For a while, like Williams, Green was even considering becoming a

⁹³ Julian Green, *Oeuvres complètes*, 8 vols, ed. by Jacques Petit (Paris: Gallimard, 1972-1998) 6, 887.

monk, yet his motivation was the belief that embracing God and religion in a monastery would be a means of avoiding temptation. This was not the case for Williams who would have preferred to find a life partner and live a life which would fulfil him both in terms of companionship and sexual desires – his retreat to Mirfield was far more a move that made a virtue out of a necessity.

Last but not least, the life of the Roman Catholic priest and author Henri Nouwen (1932-1996) deserves a mention. He remains one of the most influential modern spiritual writers, and like Williams was tormented by his homosexuality. Nouwen, too, went through a period of emotional breakdown and had a profound interest in psychology (which, unlike Williams, he studied formally). After some twenty years of teaching, Nouwen also decided to resign from his university post: although he tried twice to find solace in a monastery, in contrast to Williams he realized that he was not fit for a life in seclusion. His fulfilment was finally found in a community for the mentally handicapped in Canada where he spent the last ten years of his life. While there is no evidence that he ever broke his vow of celibacy, Nouwen felt a suppressed sexual feeling towards one of his co-workers there. His writings disclose an undisguised vulnerability and a number of other poignant self-disclosures. Nouwen's works include more than 30 books on topics resembling those of Williams. In particular, *The Road to Daybreak*⁹⁴ is an intimate diary recording his time in the community, exploring his struggles and doubts, and is rich in inspiring anecdotes. There is no indication that Williams was familiar with Nouwen's work, but there remain conspicuous parallels in their lives and styles of writing.

⁹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989).

Williams's autobiography was widely reviewed and discussed. In the Church of England, Archbishop Robert Runcie⁹⁵ described the autobiography as 'an amazing document', noting that it 'has created great scandal because [Williams is] so open about his homosexuality'.⁹⁶ Archbishop Michael Ramsey⁹⁷ said about the book: 'Yes, yes, yes, yes. It's funny – Harry seems to think highly of aspects of himself which I don't think much of, and to play down aspects of himself which I think are really rather good.'⁹⁸ Williams's autobiography was also acclaimed as 'a great antidote to too much Christian triumphalism and prosperity theology.'⁹⁹ Others noted its 'combination of profound sincerity and lightness of touch' that 'never fails.'¹⁰⁰

In his review in *Theology*, the Scottish theologian and Anglican priest George Newlands¹⁰¹ wrote that while reading Williams's autobiography 'can damage your psyche, not to say your sex life', 'it is a most remarkable book, brilliantly funny, moving and perceptive'. Newlands found in the book 'the classic combination of minute attention to psychological detail and theological reflection' which 'certainly stands the test of time', updated 'with a generous measure of slightly vintage psychiatry'. Given Newlands's liberal, affirmative, and inclusive stance, the whole book was for him 'in a sense, a meditation leading to the appreciation of "the Christ reality"'.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Robert Runcie (1921-2000), Principal of Cuddesdon College (1960-1970), Bishop of St Albans (1970-1980), Archbishop of Canterbury (1980-1991).

⁹⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, *Robert Runcie: The Reluctant Archbishop* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1996), 109.

⁹⁷ Michael Ramsey (1904-1988), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (1950-1952), Bishop of Durham (1952-1956), Archbishop of York (1956-1961), Archbishop of Canterbury (1961-1974).

⁹⁸ Benedict Green, 'Harry Williams CR: 1919-2006', *CR Quarterly* (2006) 413.

⁹⁹ Michael Ball, 'Reviews', *The Fraternal* (October 1989), 14.

¹⁰⁰ Gerard Slevin, 'Book Review', *Doctrine and Life* (September 1989), 31.

¹⁰¹ George Newlands (b. 1941), Scottish theologian, ordained Minister of the Church of Scotland and a priest in the Church of England, noted for his affirmative and inclusive views.

¹⁰² Georg Newlands, 'Book Review', *Theology*, 714 (November 1983), 470-72.

Alan Webster¹⁰³ wrote in *The Times Literary Supplement* that the book was ‘a rare triumph, a profound and yet entertaining book about prayer and faith, set against the normal muddles of life in England today’. He found the last pages of the book ‘among the most rewarding accounts of personal belief to have been published in England in our generation’, for the book is ‘a liberating plea for a mystical approach to faith through argument or better organization of the institution or more attention to the claims of tradition’ in which Williams ‘allows us to share his own costly commitment to the religious search’.¹⁰⁴ The review in *The London Review of Books* was more critical and argued that while ‘Williams makes great play throughout of being the enemy of churchiness, but really this can keep you going only if you have a large stock of churchiness – as he had – to begin with’.¹⁰⁵

In a rather balanced review for *The Sunday Times*, John Whale found the book ‘a bruisingly candid tract against zeal in religion’, yet ‘unprofitably discursive’, ‘over-respectful of psychoanalysis’ and ‘a little strong on the kind of high camp which its Coward title hints at’. Although ‘the theology at the end is skimped’, the book’s attempt at total honesty ‘compels admiration’.¹⁰⁶ Somewhat predictably, for *The Daily Telegraph*, there were ‘elements in his personal history which many will adjudge better left undisclosed’.¹⁰⁷ From a different perspective, the reviewer in *The Observer* found that the book was ‘an *Apologia pro vita sua* from the most anti-clerical of clerics’ who by ‘abandoning ecclesiasticism has not abandoned theology’. On the orthodoxy of the writer, it was noted that ‘it appears that he holds to the Trinity: also to the Incarnation

¹⁰³ Alan Webster (1918-2007), Anglican priest, at the time of writing the review Dean of St Paul’s in London presiding over the wedding of the then Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer where Williams was reading prayers.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Webster, ‘The agonies of belief’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 February 1983, 154.

¹⁰⁵ C. H. Sisson, ‘Priests’ Lib’, *London Review of Books*, 29 December 1982, 24.

¹⁰⁶ John Whale, ‘Christian confessions’, *The Sunday Times*, 14 November 1982, 31.

¹⁰⁷ D. W. Gundry, ‘Kindly mystic’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 20 January 1983, 16.

and the Resurrection, although non-committed if not dismissive on their historicity – as well as on any demand for evidence and logic’. Nevertheless ‘he still resembles the other “demythologisers” who substitute metaphors of their own, and who extract God from Christianity like a vitamin – only to restore him by some synthetic process’.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

There are good reasons for not being dismissive of Williams’s autobiography. Joyce Appleby notes that while historians are taught to be suspicious of self-representations, ‘autobiographies can be an unparalleled source of clues about sensibilities – the most evanescent of cultural phenomena – as well as of the values and interpretations that constructed reality for a given generation.’¹⁰⁹ When placing Williams into the context of the contemporary theological discourse, it is perhaps more important to focus on how he structured his narrative, the themes he emphasized, the style in which he wrote, and the reflections he made, rather than how accurate his self-portrait is.

In conclusion, it is hard to disagree with Fredriksen’s conclusion that

‘what *actually* happened, what the convert actually thought or experienced at the time of his conversion, is ... not accessible to the historian. He must frame his questions differently, for he knows that he cannot know – any better, perhaps, than can the convert himself – what was perceived at the “moment of conversion”. The historian works with the available evidence, the conversion narrative; and that narrative can reveal to him only the retrospective moment, and the retrospective self.’¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Kathleen Nott, ‘Shoring against the ruins’, *The Observer*, 19 December 1982, 22.

¹⁰⁹ Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the revolution: The first generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), viii.

¹¹⁰ Fredriksen, 34.

Accordingly, Williams's conversion narrative contained in his autobiography and other writings still provides the main source – with the appropriate critique, caveats and reservations – available to a historian.

III. CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, UNIVERSITY YEARS, TRAINING FOR PRIESTHOOD (1919-1943)

Early childhood (1919-1924)

In his autobiography, Williams presents a comprehensive account of his childhood. This description, however, should not be taken at face value. Childhood is necessarily a period when one's character is exposed to a number of various influences and experiences coming from a variety of directions; it is a formative period, yet not all remembered events fit into the homogenous image which the writer singles out later when creating the account of his life. The memories which Williams presents seem to be often dissociated and the whole period of childhood is reinterpreted from the point of view of his later knowledge and intentions.

Harry Abbot Williams was born into a family with a maritime tradition, in Rochester in Kent on 10 May 1919 and baptized at St Margaret's Church. Williams admits that his childhood was, at times, miserable. He remembers many moments with apparent pleasure, yet there was also pain: 'There was plenty of light as well as plenty of shade, plenty of fun as well as unhappiness, a great deal of love, as well as a lack of it.'¹¹¹

Although the moments of misery are described in great detail, Williams hastens to add that this would be 'far from the full truth' as there was also 'much happiness, laughter and love', in spite of his questioning as to whether his mother loved his father at all.¹¹²

Throughout Williams's writing, his father (born 1870) is barely mentioned. He died in 1954 at the age of 84, when his son was already a Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. Although women do not make many appearances in his autobiography, his

¹¹¹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 4.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 68.

maternal grandmother, familiarly known as Nana, is one of the strong characters whom Williams wishes to single out. The focus of her life was rather on her son, Williams's uncle George, who was also an officer; she was disapproving of Williams's father and made her daughter feel an encumbrance.¹¹³ Her husband was also in the Navy and was killed in an accident. Williams suspected that the incident involved alcohol and would account for his mother's 'fanatical teetotalism'.¹¹⁴ But the reader never learns her name, nor the name of Williams's other grandmother: they are used only for the purpose of telling funny anecdotes about silly women of the Victorian era. Likewise, his nursemaid Alice, remains 'a brute'.¹¹⁵ The truth is that for the rest of his life, Williams would never be able to bond with women, who remained for him merely useful characters, described mostly in belittling and condescending ways when he needed to make a particular point. He never treats them as his equals, which leads to the implicit misogynistic (and perhaps even gynophobic) undercurrent of his writings.

Williams had two sisters, Joan (1911-1993) and Helen (1914-1987). Helen must have later married a clergyman, as he writes of her as of a 'self-respecting vicar's wife'.¹¹⁶ The sisters almost disappear from the account of Williams's life; we never learn whether he had a relationship as uncle to their children or kept any correspondence. His carefully curated personal possessions from Mirfield do not contain a single letter or any other memory associated with any member of his family. Together with his parents, who gradually disappear from the narrative as Williams gets older, the sisters seem to be mere illustrations contributing to the self-image he sets out to create.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 18.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 30.

Evangelical mother

The description of Williams's childhood clearly focuses on his mother and her influences. Born in 1887 as Annie Abbott, she was 'immensely attractive', with Williams claiming 'her attraction lay in her vivacity'. He describes her uncharitably as a person who was 'academically a dunce', but who possessed also 'a large streak of disarming *naïveté*' so that 'her imagination was quickly stirred so that her feelings overflowed'.¹¹⁷ One of the reasons of the prominent position which she occupies in the description of his childhood is her strong Evangelicalism.

In Rochester, where the family lived until Williams was four, she was targeted by neighbours who were extreme Evangelicals who were able to get 'their religious claws firmly' into her flesh.¹¹⁸ Williams does not hesitate to call his mother 'a prime target for any religious bird of prey'.¹¹⁹ He recounts that his mother went through a severe nervous breakdown which foreshadowed Williams's own problems later in his life. With hindsight, Williams later believed she needed psychotherapy, 'but it wasn't available in those days or even thought of.'¹²⁰

The religion of his mother is closely linked to Williams's earliest memory of any idea or thought of God which is, characteristically, presented in a story.¹²¹ Williams recalls that, when he was about three or four years old, his mother read to him a story from a pious storybook about a boy who was perhaps eight or nine. This boy, having done something bad, remained silent, and in consequence, the gardener's son got the blame. But the boy's actual crime was that he had forgotten God, his Creator, and he heard a

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹²¹ Ibid., 4.

voice repeating to him, several times, ‘*Remember thy Creator*’. The boy then ran to the nearest church which he found, to his surprise, filled with angels and archangels. This earliest account of God was already intrinsically linked with the notions of guilt and punishment: clearly alluding to Augustine, Williams recalls that that very morning he had stolen an apple,¹²² was informed on by his sisters, and as a result was spanked by the mother (although not remembering ‘slightest physical pain or discomfort’). In his own words, the story left its mark for a very long time; it is no coincidence that the chapter about Williams’s childhood in his autobiography opens with the ominous words: ‘He was guilty.’¹²³

Williams was to interpret this early experience as one of his main quarrels with traditional Christianity: he found that it does not try ‘to exorcise [...] guilt from people, but plays upon it’.¹²⁴ Thanks to his mother, Williams’s lasting image of Christian faith was one of impressing ‘guilt upon people ever more savagely so that it might then graciously offer them the free gift of salvation’, if they ‘took the trouble to buy it’.¹²⁵ A few years later he found this trick being copied by the advertisers: ‘frightening you with bad breath for which the product advertised is the only reliable cure’.¹²⁶

The French years (1924-1928)

The family was relatively well travelled – Williams recalls family visits to Venice and Rome.¹²⁷ In 1924, the family travelled to France, first for a couple of months, but in the end they stayed for four years. The main impetus was to change the setting because of

¹²² Augustine writes about his stealing of pears in *Confessions* II, ix-xiv.

¹²³ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

the emotional breakdown of his mother, but Williams also believed that his father perhaps ‘wanted to get her away from the religious vultures’.¹²⁸ His sisters were left behind at a boarding school in Middlesex. In France, the Williams family rented a seaside house in Paramé in Brittany. The particular seascape which Harry could see from his window later became ‘a part of him’ as he realized when he revisited.¹²⁹ Williams was taught to read in both English and French at the same time.¹³⁰ As a result – but also quite typically for his generation – Williams frequently uses French allusions and citations in his writings.

In France, Williams also encountered organized liturgy for the first time. The village had an Anglican church of its own with a full-time Anglican Chaplain. Here, Williams attended his first service of Holy Communion, although the family would normally come only for Mattins. The theology in the family remained typically low-church: on one occasion, when his parents went up to receive the sacrament, he asked his sister Helen what it was: ‘Bread soaked in water,’ she replied.¹³¹ Later, Williams remained quite fond of this middle-of-the-road church; recalling an incident when their French landlady described Anglican faith as *catholique protestant*, he writes with appreciation of the ‘essential genius of the *Ecclesia Anglicana*’, describing it as ‘the delicate poise, the historical compromise, the looking-both-ways of the Church of England.’¹³² His oeuvre indeed remains a testimony to the open-minded character of Anglicanism which he first encountered in France.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 20. Among Williams’s cherished possessions was a postcard of Paramé (Williams Papers).

¹³⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹³¹ Ibid., 30.

¹³² Ibid., 33.

Williams's mother appeared to show a strong puritan streak: she would even refuse to sing certain verses of hymns on religious grounds or to listen to dance or opera tunes. At one point, Williams recalls having found her weeping and longing to go home, longing to die and be with Jesus. He admits that this activated in him 'a misery equal to her own', for he thought his heart 'would burst with grief.'¹³³ On another occasion, an evangelical lady told Williams a story about a girl who 'understood so deeply how fond Jesus was of her that she told her mother that Jesus was not merely in her room but actually with her in bed'. 'Wasn't that wonderful?' adds Williams with typical irony.¹³⁴

It was also in France that Williams sensed an initial interest in religious vocation: he played one whole afternoon at being a lay-reader.¹³⁵ It was also here that he encountered for the first time some elements of Catholicism: through his French nursemaid, Léonne, whom he described as 'kind and considerate', Williams was told of the Virgin Mary and the Pope who were 'figures hitherto unknown' to him; his parents were apparently not pleased and the nursemaid was no longer allowed to speak about religion.¹³⁶

In France, the family life of the Williamses was disrupted by an unexpected development: at the age of forty, Williams's mother fell in love with a young man called (in the autobiography) Clifford, a twenty-seven-year old son of family friends. Although Williams believed that their physical intimacy did not cross a certain line, the parents of the young man severed the connections between the two families. Describing his mother's feelings about her affection for Clifford, Williams writes of her deep guilt. He claims that to cope with it, she decided to embrace Evangelicalism even more

¹³³ Ibid., 40.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 25.

fervently. While his father hoped that his wife's love for the young man would pass, he was also concerned about her taking to religion in such a fanatical way.

Writing about this period, Williams does not hesitate to brand his mother as belonging to 'her own fanatical brand of religion'.¹³⁷ She went as far as to forbid her children from eating confectionery in the shape of the Holy Family that was popular in Brittany. She also disapproved of putting anything on top of the Bible, an act which was 'a piece of sheer ritualism' as the Bible had come 'to rank with Jesus as an object of worship.'

Even after the return from France, Williams's home was not a happy place. The atmosphere at home was both 'explosive' (because of his mother's 'hysterical fits') and chilly (because the parents' relationship was 'at times below zero').¹³⁸ The main problem was his mother's continued Evangelicalism. Sabbath rules were increasingly tightened, allowing only for sacred music to be played on the piano or gramophone. His mother regularly attended a mission church characterized by an uncompromising biblical fundamentalism and became a member of various evangelical organizations.¹³⁹ She also took children to house parties organized by an evangelical military and naval group; when a party was over, children had an opportunity for 'a mild kind of necking'. Williams found this 'easy mixing of sexes' and a certain degree of physical familiarity extremely reassuring: 'Preach as much and as loudly as you like, it seemed to say, human beings will still, thank God, be human beings. It was my first vague intimation that God was to be found much more in non-religion than in religion.'¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 76.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 78.

Williams's major reaction to the unfortunate state of domestic affairs was what he called 'an unconscious bid for attention and love', which took the form of a psychosomatic illness, a nervous disorder. Christmas was perhaps the only time when religion would make the Williams family 'more human instead of less'.¹⁴¹

Back to England (1928-1938)

Upon the family's return to England, his mother continued to see Clifford who, to the horror of his parents, expressed the wish to become a clergyman. Although his parents did not succeed in deflecting him from this path, they 'were able to persuade him at least to become a clergyman properly and go to Oxford', Williams writes, displaying degree of disdain for evangelical ministers.¹⁴² Fortunately, Williams's mother's religious zeal began to recede once Clifford got married. She became less unhappy and 'a sort of swan song of affection' developed between her and her husband.¹⁴³ Williams later wrote that the last period of his parents' married life seemed to be a happy one.¹⁴⁴

The evangelical experience of his childhood appears to have triggered a kind of disentanglement, a counter-reaction, and the adolescent Williams gradually felt attracted to the world of high Anglicanism. It seems to have been a necessary step of individuation in his spiritual journey, separating him from his mother, and helping him to achieve autonomy and independence.

Writing his autobiography, Williams labels his mother's evangelical awakening as her 'coming out', asking: 'Why should the phrase be reserved exclusively for gays?'¹⁴⁵ The

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴² Ibid., 39.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 41.

use of this phrase also suggests that, eventually, Williams started recognizing his mother as a subject in her own right, rather than just an object. In the autobiography, he devotes a few pages to the description of her positive influence (admitting that she was quite well read in terms of Dickens and other authors) and he even claims that thanks to his frequent absences at school he learnt ‘infinitely more from her’ than he would have done at school.¹⁴⁶ Nevertheless, he remained too preoccupied with himself to try to paint a more balanced picture of her.¹⁴⁷

Childhood in England and adolescence (1928-1938)

After their return to England in 1928, the family lived first in a London flat in Carlisle Place, near Westminster Cathedral which, as Williams recalls, he preferred to Westminster Abbey for the atmosphere appeared to him ‘warmer and more homely’.¹⁴⁸ The family’s church was St Andrew’s, Ashley Gardens, built by Gilbert Scott,¹⁴⁹ which was bombed in the war and never rebuilt. Worship there gave Williams the first taste of what he later called ‘the West End religion’ and which he continued to like.¹⁵⁰ In his memories, religion also continued to reveal its darker side, as he was experiencing ‘first the shadow and then the hand of religious blackmail’, when his grandmother disapproved of his going to see a film as something for ‘lower middle-class nonconformists’, and his mother forced him to give away one-tenth of the money he was receiving from his relatives to foreign missions.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹⁴⁷ The American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin offers an insightful study of the ‘structure of gender domination’ that undergirds Western rationality and psychology where the mother’s presence is often viewed as a mere cognitively perceived object rather than a vitally real presence of her own. Likewise, she analyses the reluctance of many mothers to assert their own subjectivity. Cf. Jessica Benjamin, *The bonds of love: psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of domination* (London: Virago, 1990).

¹⁴⁸ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 46.

¹⁴⁹ Sir Gilbert Scott (1811-1878), English Gothic revival architect.

¹⁵⁰ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 47.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 48.

The family then bought a house in Cranleigh in Surrey on the Sussex border, which was to be sold when Williams's father died in the 1960s. Williams paid the last visit to the site with his sister Joan in around 1980 when the house had been pulled down; although he felt that something of their identity had been destroyed, he also realized it was a house, in which they both, in different ways, had a 'great deal of unhappiness'.¹⁵²

After having his tonsils removed, Harry had a difficult recovery; as a result he was not sent to a boarding school, but attended a local preparatory school. Although he 'needed badly to get away from the increasingly guilt-ridden atmosphere of home',¹⁵³ he found the Senior School at Cranleigh a happy place, despite David Loveday the headmaster being a stern disciplinarian.¹⁵⁴ Loveday had studied at Magdalene College, Cambridge, in the early 1920s while A. C. Benson¹⁵⁵ was Master and may have introduced Williams to the idea of selecting Cambridge, rather than Oxford, for his studies.

Williams praised the eccentric Loveday highly as a person who 'hated cant above all things' and was 'the last person to sow any seeds of destructive guilt', recalling, among others, Loveday being rather 'amused' when he caught his pupils masturbating.¹⁵⁶ This must have come as something of a relief compared to the rigid religious atmosphere at home – although Williams never mentions any conversation with his parents about sex.

Williams was very bad at games and sport. Fortunately, this was of no importance since the headmaster Loveday had made the school, which under the previous headmaster had had a reputation for rugby, 'a place of civilised atmosphere'¹⁵⁷ in

¹⁵² Ibid., 49.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 55.

¹⁵⁴ David Loveday (1896-1985), Headmaster of Cranleigh School (1931-1954), Archdeacon of Dorking and Bishop of Dorchester (1957-1972).

¹⁵⁵ A. C. Benson (1862-1925), author and academic.

¹⁵⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 82.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 83.

which academic ability and achievement were prized. According to Williams, Loveday's teaching was 'simple and profound – the very fruit and flower of Anglicanism'.¹⁵⁸ Loveday also became fond of Williams and would visit him later while he was deacon in Pimlico.

Discerning a High Church vocation

At school, Williams was frequently exposed to religion. Arthur Winnington-Ingram, Bishop of London,¹⁵⁹ would come regularly to preach.¹⁶⁰ At the same time, Cranleigh also had a new vicar, Charles Lyttelton¹⁶¹ who introduced new liturgical practices, including praying through the Virgin Mary and Compline. He was succeeded by Hugh Johnston,¹⁶² former curate at St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, who had pioneered the daily morning religious service on the wireless.¹⁶³ Williams found Johnston's prayers 'full of happiness' (which he later found to be a reaction against Johnston's father¹⁶⁴ who was successively Principal of two theological colleges). Johnston proved popular, his former parishioners later recalling that they were grateful for the 'sound basic education' in religion they received at Cranleigh.¹⁶⁵ Williams also recalled having met for the first time (John) William Wand,¹⁶⁶ the Bishop of London, and his wife Amy, both of them described as 'marvellously kind and warm-hearted'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Winnington-Ingram (1858-1946), Bishop of Stepney (1897-1901), Bishop of London (1901-1939).

¹⁶⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 83-84.

¹⁶¹ Charles Frederick Lyttelton (1887-1931), cricketer and clergyman.

¹⁶² Williams recalls his name as 'Hugo Johnstone'; this testifies to the fact that his memory was not always reliable.

¹⁶³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 74.

¹⁶⁴ John Johnston (1852-1923), Principal of St Stephen's House (1881-1884), Principal of the theological college at Cuddesdon (1895-1913).

¹⁶⁵ Muriel Longhurst, *Cranleigh Life and Times: Two Centuries of Everyday Life in a Village* (Cranleigh: U3A, 1999), 69.

¹⁶⁶ John William Charles Wand (1885-1977), Bishop of London (1945-1955).

¹⁶⁷ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 74.

However, the main stimulus towards religious vocation came from a rather unpredictable direction: thanks to his mother's continuing obsession with the young Clifford, Williams joined her to visit Oxford on several occasions between 1928 and 1931. Williams recalls a number of events from these days; his most lasting recollection was a University Sermon by William Temple,¹⁶⁸ then the Archbishop of York. Although Williams admits that he could not understand a word Temple said (one of the reasons being that they sat in the gallery of the packed St Mary's), he was fascinated by 'the sight of an archbishop in convocation robes uttering a ceaseless stream of words in a rotund style and fruity voice'. From that moment he knew he wanted to be a clergyman, though by his own admission, 'it was nothing to do with piety'. Instead, 'it was the glamour'.¹⁶⁹ Williams's mother wished to attribute his newly found sense of religious vocation to her own efforts; nevertheless, she remained rather sceptical about the prospect of academic instruction in Christianity, since she thought the lecturers in theology at Oxford 'a bunch of men misguided by their own cleverness into a pit of unbelief'.¹⁷⁰

By becoming very High Church, Williams was reacting to the Evangelicalism he despised. While he believes this reaction was 'an unconscious bid for attention and love,' it was accompanied by a strong psychosomatic illness, involving 'spasms of convulsive twitchings'.¹⁷¹

There were likely to have been other reasons for Williams's conversion to High Church religion. Although he never speaks about the connection between Evangelicalism and

¹⁶⁸ William Temple (1881-1944), Bishop of Manchester (1921-1929), Archbishop of York (1929-1949), Archbishop of Canterbury (1942-1944).

¹⁶⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 56. On the aesthetic appeal of Catholic and High Church liturgy, see Chapter IV.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

sexuality, Evangelical Christianity has been known for its uncompromising attitude to homosexuality. For years, English Evangelicalism was dominated by a ‘biblicist-crucicentric’ conservative hegemony.¹⁷² This Biblicism took its toll: as Mark Vasey-Saunders observes, ‘the scandal of evangelicals and homosexuality ... is creating a highly charged and violent atmosphere’ where Evangelicalism ‘contains an implicit rhetoric of violence towards gay people (and more widely towards those identified as liberals) that is at odds with and acts to subvert this explicit rhetoric of love and welcome.’¹⁷³ By the time of Williams’s adolescence, he had in all likelihood encountered the respective passages of the Bible purporting to admonish homosexuality; and although his mother may have never raised the topic at home, her literal understanding of the biblical text would have left Williams in no doubt about how she would react to his emerging sexual feelings.

Writing about religious conversion, Chana Ullman draws on the concept of identity developed in 1950 by the developmental psychologist E. H. Erikson,¹⁷⁴ who claimed that adolescents may find in a religious conversion a certain remedy for the identity crisis: ‘Exploring new expectations, ideologies, and values, the adolescent may temporarily “try out” the identity supplied by membership of a new group.’¹⁷⁵ On this basis, the newly found submission to the High Church world view provided Williams with a new male-centred model of identity which offered a way out from his engulfment by his mother, and a new set of values through which he would be finally able to define himself as separate and independent from his parents. It may have also

¹⁷² Cf. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁷³ Mark Vasey-Saunders, *The Scandal of Evangelicals and Homosexuality: English Evangelical Texts, 1960–2010* (London: Routledge, 2015), 5-6.

¹⁷⁴ E. H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

¹⁷⁵ Ullman, 115.

provided a substitute 'father' for the real father who often absent and somewhat ineffectual in providing a role model. At the same time, this embracing of a new religion revealed a certain fragility and instability in his own sense of self: for Williams's new assumed identity was an identity primarily designed by someone else.

Finally, there was also another important aspect in the new identity. What the American scholar in the field of gender studies Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes about Roman Catholicism can be applied also to the Anglo-Catholic world: it 'is famous for giving countless gay and proto-gay children the shock of the possibility of adults who don't marry, of men in dress, of passionate theatre, of introspective investment, of lives filled with what could, ideally without diminution, be called the work of the fetish'.¹⁷⁶ This may explain why Williams had begun to spend long hours devouring the catalogues of *Mowbray's*, then a High Church supplier, publisher, and bookseller near Oxford Circus in London. The underlying sexual dimension comes to the surface when Williams writes that the pictures of Anglo-Catholic paraphernalia had for him 'a compulsive attraction as if they were a kind of ecclesiastical pornography'.¹⁷⁷ He fondly describes buying things from local junk shops, using the dressing table in his bedroom as an altar, manufacturing a censer by punching holes into a tin and attaching wires to it. Similarly, a silver ashtray became a paten for him, and a silver sugar bowl a chalice. Ice cream wafers would serve as altar bread and a red liquid called *Parish's Food*, a tonic supposed to provide children with iron, became communion wine. For vestments, Williams would borrow his mother's old nightgown, supplemented by ribbons and some embroidery. This experience resembles elements of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*; when he explores the High Church, he embarks on a journey leading to

¹⁷⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 140.

¹⁷⁷ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 63-64.

spiritual hedonism: ‘For these treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne.’¹⁷⁸

Although Williams was to stay in the Anglo-Catholic world for many years, he never found true happiness there. This is apparently a reason why, in his autobiography, he hastens to add that Anglo-Catholicism was for him just a passing phase during his childhood. He tries to convince his reader that ‘the ecclesiastical craze died a natural death soon to be replaced by the model construction system, fretsaw work, stamp collecting and other pursuits. ... I am glad that I got through my Anglo-Catholic fixations so young. Some people continue hooked on them for life.’¹⁷⁹ His theology, nevertheless, was to embrace Anglo-Catholicism for many years to come and he spent his last years in an Anglo-Catholic monastic community. This prolonged gravitation towards the Anglo-Catholic was also fuelled by Williams’s emerging intellectual snobbery and elitism. To a certain degree he seems to have been unconsciously attracted by the Anglo-Catholic elitist sense of superiority and rebellion against the prevailing culture in the Church of England and its Protestant values and morals, as well as by the intellectual and social ethos of the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England: almost all its leaders shared a common background of public school and were Oxbridge graduates.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1981), 140.

¹⁷⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 65.

¹⁸⁰ Cf. Arthur Michael Ramsey, *From Gore to Temple: The Development of Anglican Theology between Lux Mundi and the Second World War, 1889-1939* (London: Longmans, 1960); Roy Philip Flindall, *The Development of Anglo-Catholicism from Lux Mundi to Essays Catholic and Critical* (M. Phil. thesis, University of London, 1972).

Williams was confirmed by John Macmillan,¹⁸¹ Bishop of Guildford, but the service did not make ‘much impression’ on him.¹⁸² Williams left Cranleigh for Cambridge ‘in a religiously divided state’: the impression of God as taught by his mother was clearly too deeply rooted. Alluding to Apostle Paul,¹⁸³ he writes that he believed that with his mind he served Loveday’s religion, but with his flesh (‘my conditioned and perverted subconsciousness’) he served his mother’s religion: ‘I felt the sweet and attractive reasonableness of sober Anglican piety, but somewhere I had a sneaking feeling that only people out and out for Jesus were really Christians. It was a conflict I was to live with for fourteen years until, thank God, it broke me up completely.’¹⁸⁴

Undergraduate at Cambridge (1938-1941)

Arriving in 1938 at Trinity College as an undergraduate, it was the beginning of Williams’s long relationship with the college. Tellingly, his description of his undergraduate years at Trinity is not too detailed, as it had been overshadowed by the second period when he came back ten years later – and stayed for nineteen years. Although Williams was the only student from Cranleigh, he found Cambridge a homely place, where he felt at ease and soon made friends. Williams kept, until his death, among the few possessions he brought with him to the monastic community in Mirfield, the unpublished letter he received upon being admitted to Cambridge: ‘You are the first Cranleighian to win a scholarship at Trinity, Cambridge – a distinction to be added to what is already a great achievement.’¹⁸⁵

¹⁸¹ John Macmillan (1877-1956), Bishop of Dover (1927-1934), Bishop of Guildford (1934-1949).

¹⁸² *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 85.

¹⁸³ Allusion to Romans 7.25: ‘*So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.*’ (KJV)

¹⁸⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 85.

¹⁸⁵ S. J. Broad, letter to Williams, 8 January 1938 (Williams Papers).

Williams claims he was never as happy as during his undergraduate years at Cambridge. It was for him ‘a religion-free interlude’, for the academic study of theology at Trinity was treated ‘as an intellectual discipline with no connection with devotional piety’, a space ‘devoid of the feeling of guilt’ where ‘intellectual integrity was valued instead of dogma and warm companionship instead of zeal’.¹⁸⁶ As the initial glamorous appeal of Archbishop Temple from St Mary’s Oxford was dying away, becoming a priest gradually appeared to Williams rather a ‘down-at-heel and threadbare sort of existence’. Although he still intended to pursue Holy Orders, he decided ‘to have nothing to do with any religious concern’, apart from attendance at college chapel on Sundays. Williams’s religious observance was thus put ‘in a state of hibernation’, and he perceived Sunday services as ‘the breathing of the hibernated animal’.¹⁸⁷

During Williams’s undergraduate years, the Dean of the Chapel¹⁸⁸ at Trinity was the hospitable and friendly H. F. Stewart.¹⁸⁹ Much of his preaching, Williams recalls, was in French as he was an authority on Blaise Pascal, quoting frequently from his *Pensées* and *Lettres à un Provincial*. Williams was taught by John Burnaby¹⁹⁰ whom Williams found ‘most stimulating’¹⁹¹ and whom he was to meet as a colleague, years later, over *Soundings*, and to eventually succeed as the Dean of the Chapel. Williams’s moral

¹⁸⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 88.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

¹⁸⁸ The post of the Dean of Chapel was created in 1923, for a Fellow in Holy Orders, as a function separate from the Dean of College.

¹⁸⁹ H. F. Stewart (1863-1948), theologian, literary critic, Dean of Chapel at Trinity College, Cambridge, from 1923 to 1943.

¹⁹⁰ John Burnaby (1891-1978), lecturer and later Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. Dean of Chapel Trinity College, Cambridge (1943-1958).

¹⁹¹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 88.

tutor was the archetypal bachelor don Patrick Duff,¹⁹² an expert in Roman law, and ‘a devout Christian whose piety consisted chiefly of doing good by stealth’.¹⁹³

But there was another person who left a much more lasting impression on Williams: G. M. Trevelyan,¹⁹⁴ the Master of Trinity, who had succeeded Joseph Thompson.¹⁹⁵

Trevelyan, a person of great influence on Williams, became a Fellow in 1893, but first left Cambridge in order to write, becoming one of the most popular historians of his day. He returned to Cambridge to become Regius Professor of History in 1927.

Described by others as ‘intellectually intimidating’, yet ‘kindness itself’,¹⁹⁶ Williams remembered him ‘presiding over jokey teas that seemed to go on for ever’.¹⁹⁷ For Williams, Trevelyan remained a man who had ‘a leonine quality of ferocious honesty’.¹⁹⁸ His contemporaries recall that ‘a kinder, more modest man could hardly be conceived. He was only silent because he acted on the Victorian principle that when you can think of nothing worth saying you ought not to talk.’¹⁹⁹ Williams also notes that Trevelyan was a staunch defender of the European civilisation.²⁰⁰

Trevelyan, in his autobiography, mentions that ‘the call-up of young men soon reduced the College to little more than a third of its numbers during peacetime’,²⁰¹ which is confirmed by the statistics: between 1939 and 1945, the number of undergraduates at Cambridge declined, although not as much as during the previous war: while there

¹⁹² Patrick Duff (1901-1991), Tutor at Trinity College, Cambridge, Regius Professor of Civil Law at the University of Cambridge and Warden of Winchester College.

¹⁹³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 88.

¹⁹⁴ G. M. Trevelyan (1876-1962), historian, Regius Professor of History at the University of Cambridge, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge.

¹⁹⁵ Sir Joseph (‘J. J.’) Thompson (1856-1940), physicist, Nobel Laureate.

¹⁹⁶ Laura Trevelyan, *A Very British Family: The Trevelyans and their World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 185.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹⁸ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 90.

¹⁹⁹ D. S. R. Kitson Clark, ‘The Macaulay Tradition’, *The Trinity Review*, 1976, 13.

²⁰⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 89.

²⁰¹ G. M. Trevelyan, *An autobiography and other essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1949), 49.

were 1658 male students at Cambridge during Michaelmas 1914 (and, because of the Great War, only 825 graduated from Trinity in 1915), there were 2575 men studying there in 1941, reaching 2875 in 1944.²⁰² On the other hand, the interest in theological matters was increasing compared to the 1930s; a series of lectures was given on Sundays in 1940 by prominent theologians including Charles E. Raven,²⁰³ J. S. Whale,²⁰⁴ Walter Matthews,²⁰⁵ H. H. Farmer,²⁰⁶ C. H. Dodd,²⁰⁷ and H. G. Wood,²⁰⁸ which proved extremely popular among the students.²⁰⁹ John Robinson²¹⁰ remembered those years fondly, writing about ‘a steady and enthusiastic audience’ at these lectures.²¹¹

When Williams sat the first part of the Theological Tripos in 1941, he was one of twenty-five male students – compared to only nine women. He was among only three students who received a First. His examiners²¹² included C. E. Raven, F. S. Marsh,²¹³ P. Gardner-Smith,²¹⁴ W. L. Knox,²¹⁵ and Henry St John Hart.²¹⁶ The records of the University attest that Williams received his BA in 1941 and was awarded his MA in 1945, being a member of the Senate and a senior scholar.²¹⁷ Trevelyan’s letter

²⁰² Vivian Green, *Religion at Oxford and Cambridge* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 371.

²⁰³ Charles E. Raven (1885-1964), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

²⁰⁴ J. S. Whale (1897-1997), Mackennal Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Oxford.

²⁰⁵ Walter Matthews (1881-1973), Professor of Theology at King’s College, London.

²⁰⁶ H. H. Farmer (1892-1981), Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster College.

²⁰⁷ C. H. Dodd (1884-1927), Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

²⁰⁸ H. G. Wood (1879-1963), Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham.

²⁰⁹ Green, *Religion at Oxford and Cambridge*, 353-54.

²¹⁰ John Robinson (1919-1983), Bishop of Woolwich (1959-1969), Fellow and Dean at Trinity College, Cambridge.

²¹¹ J. A. T. Robinson, ‘The Religious Foundation of the University’, *The Cambridge Review*, 20 January 1945, 12.

²¹² *The Historical Register of the University of Cambridge, Supplement 1941-1960* (Cambridge: University Press, 1952), 182.

²¹³ F. S. Marsh (1886-1953), Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

²¹⁴ P. Gardner-Smith (1888-1985), University Lecturer in Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

²¹⁵ Wilfred L. Knox (1886-1950), Warden of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, Fellow and Chaplain of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

²¹⁶ Henry St John Hart (1912-2004), Assistant Lecturer and Lecturer in Divinity, Dean of Queens’ College, Cambridge.

²¹⁷ *The Cambridge University Calendar for the year 1946-47* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1946), 1511.

congratulating Williams on his senior scholarship remained another treasured possession of Williams.²¹⁸

Ordinand at Cuddesdon (1941-1943)

After Trinity, Williams sought a change of scene, and to get away from his Cambridge contacts – or perhaps he wanted to taste the life at Oxford too. He opted for Cuddesdon Theological College, which lay just outside Oxford, to train for ministry.²¹⁹ When the Second World War came, Williams had been declared to be in the medical category C3 ('only suitable for sedentary work') because of his bad eyesight. The Government gave ordinands the choice either to volunteer for national service or to continue their training (in case of those who were selected as ordinands before the war). Williams chose the latter. There were, however, very few students at Cuddesdon when he arrived. The former bishop's palace at Cuddesdon and the college building had been requisitioned by the Office of Works and the office of Queen Anne's Bounty²²⁰ moved to the palace; in 1942, most of the College buildings were in use as a hostel for women munition workers.²²¹

From its foundation in 1854, the theological college at Cuddesdon had always played a prominent role in the theological education of Anglican clergy. Before Williams arrived, an American observer noted that it was 'the most famous of [English theological colleges]' numbering among its alumni 'one-tenth of the episcopate of the whole Anglican Communion'.²²² Williams was not the only Cambridge graduate

²¹⁸ G. M. Trevelyan, letter to Williams, 17 June 1941 (Williams Papers).

²¹⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 92.

²²⁰ A scheme established in 1704 to support the poorer Anglican clergy, in 1947 amalgamated with the Ecclesiastical Commissioners.

²²¹ Robert T. Holtby, *Eric Graham, 1888-1964: Dean of Oriel, Principal of Cuddesdon, Bishop of Brechin* (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 70.

²²² Bernard Iddings Bell, 'English Theological Training', *The Living Church* (December 1934), 745.

training at Cuddesdon as the link between Cuddesdon and Cambridge was strong. Eric Milner-White²²³ would plead that graduates from King's, his Cambridge college, be admitted to Cuddesdon even when the theological college was full. He would clearly indicate to potential ordinands in Cambridge that Cuddesdon was *the* theological college, noting that 'the depth and discipline at Cuddesdon is [the ordinand's] supreme necessity'.²²⁴

The Principal was Eric Graham²²⁵ who was intellectually widely respected; on top of that, during his tenure, the atmosphere at Cuddesdon was described as 'spontaneous friendliness'.²²⁶ It was indeed a place where the Principal had considerable powers and his relations with students were close to a degree that would be impossible in larger colleges. Graham's biographer, the theologian and historian Robert Holtby, observed that the 'immediate and subsequent influence of the College on a man's life and ministry could largely be explained in terms of what the Principal taught'.²²⁷ With the outbreak of the war, while he did not seek to discourage ordinands from undertaking military or other service, he hoped that they would continue their training, bearing in mind the additional need for the ministrations of clergy in wartime.²²⁸

At the same time, Graham managed to maintain the distinctive Anglo-Catholic character and traditions of the College. Anglo-Catholics remained a consciously defined party which was often in conflict with the diocesan and national establishment. As the theologian John Gunstone later observed, in many dioceses Anglo-Catholic

²²³ Eric Milner-White (1884-1963), Founder of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd, Dean of King's College, Cambridge (1918-1941), Dean of York (1941-1963).

²²⁴ Eric Milner-White, *A Memoir* (King's College, Cambridge: 1963), 9.

²²⁵ Eric Graham (1888-1964), theologian, Fellow and Dean of Oriel College, Oxford, Principal of Cuddesdon (1928-1944), Bishop of Brechin (1944-1959).

²²⁶ Harald Anson, *T. B. Strong: bishop, musician, dean, vice-chancellor* (London: SPCK, 1949), 72.

²²⁷ Holtby, 28.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

congregations were ostracised and reprimanded for doctrinal and liturgical disobedience: in return they viewed the ‘official diocese ... with indifference, suspicion, or even hostility’.²²⁹ It was fortunate for Anglo-Catholics, that during Williams’s training, the Bishop of Oxford was Kenneth Kirk.²³⁰ Unlike his predecessor Thomas Strong,²³¹ who was averse to the wearing of vestments and wished that Cuddesdon retain its theological breadth,²³² Bishop Kirk was an Anglo-Catholic who followed the direction of Charles Gore,²³³ and who was a contributor to *Essays Catholic and Critical* (1926).

Many found Cuddesdon too Anglo-Catholic, as is reflected in the exchange of letters between Graham and A. C. Headlam²³⁴ who accused Cuddesdon of being ‘a party college’ claiming that any one studying there would be brought into contact only with the theology of one particular school of thought in the Church of England; the College would impose that form of piety ‘which is not the piety of the great majority of people’.²³⁵ He considered the ordinands ‘rather unfit for work in an ordinary English parish’; they would, however, be very good in ministering in specifically High Church parishes, although ‘even in those Parishes it is only a section of the people they appeal to’.²³⁶ Yet, in another letter, Headlam was ready to admit that Cuddesdon had been always ‘better than most of the party colleges because of its close connection with the University of Oxford’ and because it was ‘in the hands of the most intelligent section of Anglo-Catholicism’.²³⁷ Certain idiosyncrasies at Cuddesdon were noticed even by

²²⁹ John Gunstone, ‘Catholics in the Church of England’ in *Catholic Anglicans Today*, ed. by John Wilkinson (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968), 188.

²³⁰ Kenneth Kirk (1886-1954), Bishop of Oxford (1937-1954).

²³¹ Thomas Strong (1861-1944), Bishop of Oxford (1925-1937).

²³² Holtby, 25.

²³³ Charles Gore (1853-1932), founder of the Community of the Resurrection, Bishop of Worcester (1902-1905), Bishop of Birmingham (1905-1911), Bishop of Oxford (1911-1919).

²³⁴ A. C. Headlam (1862-1947), Bishop of Gloucester (1923-1945).

²³⁵ Holtby, 52.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang,²³⁸ a former student, who retired in 1942 and was devoted to Cuddesdon, visiting frequently.²³⁹

Despite such suspicions, however, the college managed to provide the necessary specialist training for clergy with the examination system ensuring ‘at least a basic knowledge, and provision for a careful study’ of the Bible.²⁴⁰ Williams found Cuddesdon sufficiently Anglo-Catholic, but in ‘a rather restrained and sober Anglican way’.²⁴¹ There was no incense used during liturgy, no devotions to the Reserved Sacrament, and no prayers to the Virgin Mary – for Williams, Cuddesdon was an example of what he called ‘Prayer Book Catholicism’.²⁴²

In Graham’s time, the liturgical life of the College had been undergoing a gradual change: he commissioned the revision of the office book and designs for a new chapel. The revision was undertaken by Milner-White which served to reinforce the Catholic trend in liturgy.²⁴³ Williams recalled that while the Book of Common Prayer was necessarily used for the service of Holy Communion, ‘it was monkeyed about with’: the Prayer of Oblation, set after the Communion of the people, was recited before it, immediately after the Prayer of Consecration, ‘thus completely ruining the structure of the service designed by Cranmer’.²⁴⁴

Williams was apparently one of the students who found the discipline at the College too inflexible and who considered it to be more suited to the adolescent rather than to

²³⁸ Cosmo Gordon Lang (1864-1945), Bishop of Stepney (1901-1909), Archbishop of York (1909-1928), Archbishop of Canterbury (1928-1942).

²³⁹ Holtby, 43.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 26.

²⁴¹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 92.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Philip Pare and Donald Bertram Harris, *Eric Milner-White, 1884-1963: A Memoir* (London: SPCK, 1965), 42-43.

²⁴⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 92-93. There were historical attempts to modify the BCP liturgy, in particular under William Laud (Archbishop of Canterbury 1633-1645).

university graduates.²⁴⁵ Ordinands were not just encouraged, but ‘bludgeoned’ into the practice of sacramental confession which brought, in Williams’s case, an entirely destructive result: ‘It led me to try and build up an artificial ideal self which excluded over three-quarters of what I was’.²⁴⁶ Although Williams maintained that he was not in principle against sacramental confession, he could not agree with ‘the artificial simulation of a bogus need in order that a certain place of ecclesiastical machinery may be employed and the priest feel useful’.²⁴⁷

Throughout his training, Williams stayed in touch with his former headmaster; Loveday wrote to him: ‘Don’t let the mephitic atmosphere of the seminary clothe you quite.’²⁴⁸ It did not. Before Williams’s ordination, his father wrote for the required baptismal certificate to Canon Wheatley who had baptized Harry back in 1919. Wheatley expressed his hope that Williams’s being at the theological college at Cuddesdon had not unduly exalted his churchmanship. Williams noted in response that he did not need to be worried.²⁴⁹

This ‘Cuddesdon religion’ – which Williams also called ‘a sort of sophisticated fundamentalism’ – allowed one to employ a critical approach to the Bible, although in practice such researches were not supposed to contradict Anglo-Catholic theology and the ‘apparently free and unfettered criticism’ had to support the structure of Prayer Book Catholicism.²⁵⁰ Williams attributed the doctrinal rigidity of the Principal to the fact that the Anglo-Catholic party felt threatened by the contemporary proposal of

²⁴⁵ Holtby, 84.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 94-95.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 95.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

unification with of the divided churches of South India²⁵¹ and the related potential loss of the apostolic succession.

But there was more to ‘Cuddesdon religion’: it was not just the secluded character of Cuddesdon in the countryside near Oxford and the enclosed character of its community life which encouraged, in some men, ‘a disproportionate interest in matters of ceremonial and ecclesiastical custom’,²⁵² at the expense of sound learning and true religion. Critics deplored elements of Anglo-Catholic sacerdotalism and ritualism, often regarding it as essentially decadent and effete, representing a feminine style of religion.²⁵³ This is confirmed by the account of the historian Owen Chadwick who claims that soon after the foundation of Cuddesdon by Bishop Samuel Wilberforce in 1854,²⁵⁴ rumours emerged among the country clergy of the Oxford diocese that curates were who trained at Cuddesdon were ‘unmanly, and that their semimonastic life bred effeminacy’. Wilberforce himself was allegedly not happy about the lack of ‘vigour, virility and self-expressing vitality’ of the college.²⁵⁵ In his examination of Anglo-Catholicism, the historian Geoffrey Best writes that ‘the existence of a continuous current of homoerotic sentiment would appear to offer a plausible explanation of a

²⁵¹ The Church of South India Scheme was an attempt to bring together four different church traditions into a single Church: Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational. The theological basis for the union of these Churches, which emerged as a result of the missionary activities from the 18th century onwards, was the Chicago-Lambeth Quadilateral, adopted at the meeting of the House of Bishops of the American Episcopal Church in Chicago in 1886 and at the Third Lambeth Conference in 1888 as well as the Lambeth Appeal of 1920. The proposed scheme for reunion called for a recognition of all current ministers in a uniting Church while at the same time insisting that new ordinations would be made solely by bishops of the united Church who stood in the historic succession. Cf. Cecil D. Horsley, *Some problems connected with the proposed scheme of church union in South India*. (London: SPCK, 1943); Lesslie Newbigin, *The reunion of the church: A defence of the South India scheme* (London: SCM Press, 1948).

²⁵² Holtby, 73.

²⁵³ Geoffrey Best, ‘Popular Protestantism in Victorian Britain’ in *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clark*, ed. by Robert Robson (London, G. Bell, 1967), 124-26.

²⁵⁴ Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873), Dean of Westminster, Bishop of Oxford (1845-1869) and Bishop of Winchester, known also for his opposition to Darwin’s theory of evolution.

²⁵⁵ Owen Chadwick, *The Founding of Cuddesdon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 92-93. The existence of homosexual interests among young Oxford-educated Anglo-Catholic clergymen in the 1850s is strongly implied in the autobiographical novel by the Victorian writer Samuel Butler (1835-1902), *Ernest Pontifex or The Way of All Flesh* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1903), chapters 51-59.

great deal of otherwise mysterious behaviour and comment'. The atmosphere in Cuddesdon may have not been openly homosexual, but it was undeniably homosocial, providing a safe refuge for many young men who were attracted to other men.

Although Williams originally came to Cuddesdon 'to brace [himself] up' and 'take religion seriously',²⁵⁶ in the end, the life at the college only served to increase his personal insecurity and his awareness of his sexual identity which he wanted to remain hidden. It was to be some ten years later that Williams came to the conclusion that the Anglo-Catholicism taught at Cuddesdon was essentially the same as his mother's extreme Evangelicalism – it was just another extreme expression of Christian faith and Williams disliked extremes of any kind. Although there was an apparent contrast of emphasis, for Williams, 'it was still the same old apparatus for producing religious results by whipping up guilt feelings and branding people for life with neurotic compulsions, sold as the voice of God'.²⁵⁷ That said, there were also things of value for which he remained grateful, particularly the combination of study and prayer, but he recalled his Cuddesdon experience primarily as 'the small minded, dehumanising, guilt-producing instruction and practices' sold 'as the Catholic Faith'.²⁵⁸

Williams was in fact never able to identify fully with the spirit of the priestly formation at Cuddesdon. For this reason, the Cuddesdon years only deepened what he had felt already before when he had gone up to Cambridge: he regarded himself as developing 'a kind of religious voyeurism' where he was joining a religious service with only one part of his being, while the other part remained a spectator, 'bored, amused, angry, disgusted or absolutely terrified'.²⁵⁹ What Williams never admitted was that this lack of

²⁵⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 92.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 86.

readiness to fully commit and engage, to let go, was symptomatic not only of his relationship with organised religion, but it was also to remain the underlying cause of his loneliness and inability to enter into a relationship with any life companion.

IV. CURACY IN LONDON, CHAPLAINCY AT WESTCOTT HOUSE (1943-1951)

Deacon in Pimlico (1943-1945)

Williams was ordained deacon at St Paul's Cathedral by Geoffrey Fisher,²⁶⁰ Bishop of London, on 20 June 1943. A year later, he was ordained priest.

As Bishop of London from 1939, Fisher inherited from his predecessor Arthur Winnington-Ingram a situation of deep conflict between various factions of the Church of England, and Williams found himself standing in the midst of the partisan conflict. For different reasons neither Anglo-Catholics nor Evangelicals were willing to conform to the Book of Common Prayer or even the Deposited Book of 1928;²⁶¹ through the 1920s Anglo-Catholics had increasingly followed their preferred ways of celebrating and administering Holy Communion, also rapidly adopting the practice of reservation of the Blessed Sacrament and the ritual of Benediction. London saw a decline in loyalty to parish churches and an increase in liturgical individualism, centred around individualistic gathered congregations.

When looking for his curacy, Williams maintains that he was more interested in the person of the Vicar than in a particular sort of church or parish, although there is no doubt he sought out an 'advanced' Anglo-Catholic parish. For this reason, he claims to have chosen St Barnabas Pimlico,²⁶² because he felt that its Vicar, Hugh Edmund

²⁶⁰ Geoffrey Francis Fisher (1887-1972), Bishop of Chester (1932-1939), Bishop of London (1939-1944), Archbishop of Canterbury (1945-1961).

²⁶¹ In 1928, a revised version of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, approved by the Church Assembly in 1927, was rejected by Parliament.

²⁶² Founded by William Bennett (1804-1886).

Worlledge²⁶³ was ‘a saint’.²⁶⁴ Williams may also have chosen a Pimlico church because he was familiar with this part of London as it was close to the former flat of his parents.

Worlledge was one of those priests whose theology saw the Incarnation as fulfilled in every human activity, a theology which led many Anglo-Catholic clergy in the direction of Christian Socialism, embracing the ideal of a society based upon mutual cooperation and brotherhood, as expressed by the Christian sacraments.²⁶⁵ As a result, he not only continued the ritualistic tradition of the church which had pioneered the architectural and liturgical realisation of the Oxford Movement, but under his leadership he also saw St Barnabas become an important centre for social work in the community, encompassing a boys’ school, an orphanage and a refuge for former prostitutes.

Upon his arrival, Williams was to find the Vicar somewhat disillusioned with the Anglo-Catholicism he had inherited. Worlledge replaced the High Mass on Sundays, attended by ‘the rich from various parts of London’, with a Parish Communion at an earlier time; this was considered, by other Anglo-Catholic clergy, as ‘selling the past’, although Williams – sceptical about Anglo-Catholicism anyway – never understood why. The Vicar also stopped using the English Missal²⁶⁶ and refused to wear lace.²⁶⁷ This must have been in a sharp contrast with the previous practice, as the church, under the previous incumbent, used to be accused of ‘Pimlico Popery’ and extreme

²⁶³ Hugh Edmund Worlledge (1891-1966), clergyman.

²⁶⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 101.

²⁶⁵ E. R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770-1970: A Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 246-50, 318-23.

²⁶⁶ Published for the first time in 1912, the English Missal was frequently used by the liturgically traditional movement in the Anglo-Catholic tradition.

²⁶⁷ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 105.

ritualism.²⁶⁸ Williams admired Worlledge as a man of practical action who gave his own funds to various worthy causes supporting the underprivileged.²⁶⁹

But perhaps most importantly, Williams appreciated that he could relate to Worlledge's style of religion as an affirmation, not a denial of his vicar's humanity.²⁷⁰ It is also likely that he saw in Worlledge a soulmate of a certain kind: Worlledge was one of the unmarried Anglo-Catholic priests who lived together in clergy houses. At that time, some more extreme Anglo-Catholics even viewed matrimony as a betrayal of the traditional role of a priest and an expression of the lack of loyalty to fellow celibate priests.²⁷¹ Although Anglo-Catholic clergy were free to marry, the Roman Catholic ideal of clerical celibacy, which many clergy voluntarily adopted, provided the opportunity to hide their homosexual orientation at a period when homosexual acts were illegal.²⁷² In addition, celibacy was often frowned upon by Evangelical clergy which was yet another reason for Williams to embrace it: the stigma of celibacy represented a revolt against the Evangelicalism of his mother and he happily enjoyed the resulting same-sex sociality among his fellow unmarried clergy. Williams was to remain, throughout his life, a 'homosocial' man, attracted to male company.

Worlledge was by no means the only Anglo-Catholic character in Pimlico. Although Williams never mentions it, Pimlico was the haunt of other well-known Anglo-Catholic clergy such as the bon viveur Maurice Child, who between the wars, was the incumbent of St Mary's Pimlico. Nicknamed 'the Playboy of the Western Church',

²⁶⁸ The Vicar William Bennett was forced from the parish in the winter 1850-1851 as the result of a series of riots.

²⁶⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 101.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ Cf. Colin Stephenson, *Walsingham Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1970), 127-28, 225-29; Colin Stephenson, *Merrily on High* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972), 77-78.

²⁷² Cf. Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Child lived with his male companion at a succession of fashionable addresses, throwing glittering parties. He was nevertheless a very skilled priest, and after his death in 1950, he was remembered as a cleric whose ‘greatest forte was with young men’.²⁷³

The congregation of the parish was formed mainly of people living in Westminster City Council flats and, according to Williams, there was a deep sense of community: ‘It was, in fact, one of London’s many villages, and very conscious of its identity.’²⁷⁴ The parish was also the place where Williams learnt for the first time about the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield as it had been the home of Mollie Raynes, sister of Raymond Raynes,²⁷⁵ then Superior of the Community.

At the time when the Church of England was still maintaining many substantial and often beautiful properties to house her clergy, Williams was living with his Vicar in an attractive house which survived from the times when Pimlico was still a rural area, close to Chelsea Barracks.²⁷⁶ Despite this he was by no means affluent: a fairly typical stipend in the 1950s was about £400 a year, plus the collections on Easter Day, and occupation of a vicarage, although priests usually had to find all their expenses.²⁷⁷

The curacy coincided with the war which meant that Williams often found himself spending nights in the church in the company of his Vicar and his parishioners. He was also an Air Raid Precautions warden (ARP)²⁷⁸ and served on fire duty. Five of Williams’s parishioners died in air raids, but rather typically, his memoirs contain only

²⁷³ Sydney Dark, *Not Such a Bad Life* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1941), 205-6; Desmond Morse-Boycott, *They Shine Like Stars* (London: Skeffington and Son, 1947), 260-62; Mark Amory (ed.), *The Letters of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 544.

²⁷⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 103.

²⁷⁵ Raymond Raynes (1903-1958), member of the Community of the Resurrection, Mirfield. In 1932 assigned to their establishment in South Africa. In 1943 recalled to become the Superior of the Community. Cf. Nicolas Mosley, *The life of Raymond Raynes* (London: The Faith Press, 1961).

²⁷⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 101-3.

²⁷⁷ Trevor Beeson, *Round the Church in 50 Years* (London: SCM Press, 2007), 12.

²⁷⁸ Air Raid Precautions (ARP) were organised to protect civilians from the danger of air-raids.

the story of a school headmaster who, as a result of a bomb blast, ended covered with custard ‘as in the best slapstick film’.²⁷⁹

Williams was also teaching boys and girls of ten and eleven of from the top form of the local church school twice weekly; his snobbery and a sense of elitism are obvious from the confessions in his memoirs that he found the biggest challenge to be the different levels of intelligence on the class: he was tempted to concentrate on the brighter ones while ignoring the rest.²⁸⁰ But the school also became the environment where he would successfully attempt to use familiar stories as something children could listen to and which most of them would be able to understand. Throughout his life, Williams would continue to use stories as illustrations in his sermons and writings.

Williams was far from confident when it came to his pastoral abilities, as well as mission and evangelism.²⁸¹ His fundamental lack of belief in mission always made his attempts at missionary work sound rather artificial.²⁸² At a general level, he believed he did not possess the passion for changing people and loving their souls which he saw as belonging to the heart of every zealous clergyman. Instead, to his distress Williams found himself liking people as they were and did not want them to be different.²⁸³ It appears that an important motivation for becoming a priest remained the sense of prestige and social status which, at that time, were still attributed to Holy Orders, together with a possibility of living a single life without too many questions being asked.

²⁷⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 105.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 107-08.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

As a curate, Williams came to see that goodness, and God, could be found in all sorts and conditions of people, and often more clearly outside the church than within it.

When Williams was writing his autobiography, even though it was no longer fashionable to talk with Bonhoeffer of ‘religionless Christianity’,²⁸⁴ Williams was to claim that he had found it among the ‘dustmen, charwomen and road-sweepers’ who lived in the Westminster City Council flats and never came to church.²⁸⁵ He found his parishioners more Christian than ‘those Anglo-Catholic pundits too obviously full of hatred for those sponsoring or supporting a plan to reunite separated Christians in South India’.²⁸⁶ Williams later asked, adopting the tone of his later writings: ‘Why do people imagine that in order to have God you must also have all this kind of nonsense? It is because ... religion is to a large extent what people do with their lunacy: their phobias, their will to power, their sexual frustrations.’²⁸⁷

‘The Sunday Theatre’ at All Saints’, Margaret Street (1945-1948)

In his autobiography, Williams claims that when he was offered a place at All Saints’, Margaret Street, he was neither familiar with its rich Anglo-Catholic history nor its famous clergy. This is almost impossible to believe as the church has been one of the cornerstones of Anglo-Catholic worship in London. Ever since, it has been a self-styled ‘cathedral’ of Anglo-Catholicism, with its prominent Sunday High Mass and Solemn Evensong.

²⁸⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), Lutheran pastor and founding member of *Bekennende Kirche*, executed by the Nazis. He believed that ‘we are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are simply cannot be religious any more’. Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, ed., *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 278.

²⁸⁵ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 109.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

Sermons took at least twenty minutes and on Sundays, the church was packed to capacity. Williams attributed this not only to the quality of preaching and the general boom in churchgoing towards the end of and after the war, but also to the fact that petrol was still rationed so that people could not go away at weekends.²⁸⁸

Williams's new Vicar was Cyril Tomkinson²⁸⁹ who hastened to advise Williams that clergymen at All Saints had to show 'a certain degree of sophistication': 'Holiness is necessary, but it is not enough.'²⁹⁰ Style was, however, just the expected addition to the contents of worship, and not their replacement – and Tomkinson could be critical: when Williams delivered a sermon concentrating excessively on style, he observed that Williams 'gave ... quite a good meal, but it was served in such elegant old silver as to be slightly cold' which resulted in 'a miserable performance'.²⁹¹ In the end, Williams found Tomkinson to be a man of prayer and profound spirituality who 'hated cant' and was 'always pricking the bubble of bogus piety'.²⁹²

Music and liturgy at All Saints' was of the highest standard.²⁹³ The congregation at All Saints' was eclectic and included many celebrities, among them the actors Alec Guinness²⁹⁴ and his wife, and Hugh Sinclair.²⁹⁵ Guinness later remembered All Saints' as the centre of High Church Anglicanism in West London and Tomkinson as 'very perceptive, very snobbish, delighting in the famous, the rich, the beautiful or the

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 118.

²⁸⁹ Cyril E. Tomkinson (1886-1968), Vicar at All Saints 1943-1951, author of *The Stations of the Cross* (London, SPCK, 1938, reprinted 1957).

²⁹⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 115.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 119.

²⁹² Ibid., 115.

²⁹³ William Richard Morris, 1st Viscount Nuffield (1877-1963), philanthropist and motor car manufacturer.

²⁹⁴ Sir Alec Guinness (1914-2000), actor, later converted to Roman Catholicism. In his autobiography, he makes a number of references to Tomkinson: 'He opened me up to a new world – the world of Hooker, William Law, Bishop Gore, Archbishop Temple; and the wide world of St Augustine and Newman.' Cf. Piers Paul Read: *Alec Guinness: The Authorized Biography* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 114.

²⁹⁵ Hugh Sinclair (1903-1962), actor.

talented',²⁹⁶ and, at the same time, 'witty, eccentric, rather old-maidish in a naughty way, and with an absorbing passion for Jane Austen and Dr Johnson'.²⁹⁷ Tomkinson's eccentricity was apparent; Williams recalled that his Vicar jokingly wondered that his predecessor Father Mackay 'didn't introduce make-up' and light-heartedly proposed to raise additional money for the church by hiring out 'opera-glasses at the back of the nave'.²⁹⁸

Although Williams does not use the word, the humour of Tomkinson can be described as 'camp', which is not to denigrate the place of the holy. Hanson observes that the queer mode of expression can be not just 'a potentially subversive form of humour' but also 'a backhanded mode of worship'.²⁹⁹ Ecclesiastical campiness has, to be sure, found its defenders: in her famous essay on the subject, Susan Sontag recognised camp as a genuine devotion and appreciated that 'the ecclesiastical camp springs to the defence of the Church'.³⁰⁰

It was in these excesses of devotionism and refined aesthetic expression that Williams was to find comfort, a space for an alternative lifestyle, and a safe haven from the strictures of the mainstream forms of devotions geared around the nuclear family. Here again there was a kind of aestheticism which was, at the very least, decadent (if not abhorrent) for many in the majority culture. Anglo-Catholicism had long been criticised not just for its dangerous affinity with Rome but also for a certain softening of manners and even sexual irregularities. Following the trial of Oscar Wilde, Catholic

²⁹⁶ Read, 113.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 83.

²⁹⁸ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 116.

²⁹⁹ Henson, 137.

³⁰⁰ *Susan Sontag, Notes on Camp, A Susan Sontag Reader* (New York: Vintage, 1983), 117-18.

ritual remained for many associated with sodomy.³⁰¹ This queer aestheticism has been observed by a number of historians: Gordon Westwood observed in his seminal study of homosexuality in Britain that ‘it is not difficult to understand that the services with impressive ceremony and large choirs are more likely to appeal to homosexuals’.³⁰² Similarly, David Hilliard remarked that ‘there are grounds for believing that Anglo-Catholic religion within the Church of England has offered emotional and aesthetic satisfactions that have been particularly attractive to members of a stigmatised sexual minority’. There was, he claimed, an ‘apparent connection between Anglo-Catholicism and the male homosexual subculture in the English-speaking world’.³⁰³ Hugh McLeod similarly remarked that while emphasising tradition, dogma, and visible beauty of worship, many homosexual men found in Anglo-Catholicism a religion ‘freed from the respectability and the puritanism of the churches in which they had grown up’.³⁰⁴ In the words of the historian Diarmaid MacCulloch, ‘the gay male Anglo-Catholic ghetto in Britain long provided a reasonably safe and sympathetic area of male homosociability and emotional release in a nation which up to the 1960s had one of the most repressive attitudes towards homosexuality in all Western Europe’.³⁰⁵

All Saints’ was not just an isolated phenomenon. Many men found in Anglo-Catholic worship a high degree of same-sex sociality and, according to Ellis Hanson, possibly even ‘a lost world in which homosexual and sacramental practices can co-exist not as mutually exclusive options but as versions of aesthetic possibility that mutually evoke

³⁰¹ Cf. Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), Chapter Five: *Saint Oscar*.

³⁰² Gordon Westwood, *A Minority: A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain* (London: Longmans, 1960), 54-55.

³⁰³ David Hilliard, ‘UnEnglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality’, *Victorian Studies* 25 (1982), 181-210.

³⁰⁴ Hugh McLeod, *Clan and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London: Croom Helm, 1974), 249.

³⁰⁵ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 189.

each other'.³⁰⁶ Hanson goes on to suggest that Anglo-Catholicism, with the importance attached to the visual form of liturgy and vestments, acquired even a certain 'gender-bending extravagance and exoticism within the context of Victorian puritanism', creating 'an atmosphere of homoerotic exuberance unprecedented in the history of Christianity' so that 'by the 1920s, the notion of Anglo and Roman Catholicism as a magnet for homosexuals had passed from a running joke to a simple fact.'³⁰⁷ For many homosexuals, Anglo-Catholicism was indeed 'a theatre for the articulation of homosexual desire and identity through faith and through ritual'.³⁰⁸ Countering the commonplace assertion 'that gay people turn to the Church to hide from their desire', he suggests instead 'that they are searching for a suitable stage on which to perform it'.³⁰⁹ And 'Sunday theatre' is indeed the designation which Williams gave in his autobiography to the high liturgy at All Saints'.³¹⁰

Hanson further notes that Catholic liturgy offers 'a performance of spiritual devotions that subordinated the internal forum, the realm of Protestantism's "born again" conversion, to the liturgical external forum'. This meant that where 'Protestant moralism required a strict and abiding congruence of word and deed, Catholicism admitted incongruities'.³¹¹ This is another element of Anglo-Catholic worship which must have attracted Williams: where the Evangelicalism of his mother was unforgiving, Anglo-Catholics seemed to prefer grace to condemnation.

Last but not least, the theological and liturgical structures of Anglo-Catholicism could be seen as escapist in providing many believers with a safe haven, and a refuge from

³⁰⁶ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 73.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 20, footnote 2 there.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 22, 24.

³¹⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 121.

³¹¹ Hanson, 21.

the turmoil of the world. Patrick Allitt's astute observation about Roman Catholicism also applies to its Anglican variety:

Catholicism was attracting some converts in the same way that communism attracted others. Both offered a complete philosophical system and a rich intellectual tradition. Each claimed to have an answer for every human dilemma and each stood in judgment over a world in crisis. Each possessed a set of venerated texts that, taken in the right spirit at the right time, had a transforming effect on readers...³¹²

Nevertheless, while Williams happily embraced Anglo-Catholic aesthetics, he never seems to have toyed with the idea of becoming a Roman Catholic. Although his writings do not contain much criticism of Roman Catholic theology, he always remained an independent thinker who was unwilling to submit to an external ecclesiastical authority.

Much of the real work of the parish, however, was done in the backstage of the 'theatre': with individuals on weekdays, in the confessional or in private meetings.³¹³

It would thus be unfair to dismiss Anglo-Catholicism as merely ritualistic: there was an ongoing emphasis on theology, good preaching and work for the salvation of souls.

Anglo-Catholicism has maintained its conservative theology, based primarily on the Roman Catholic catechism and emphasizing the importance of sacraments and personal holiness. Ritualistic aestheticism coexisted with deep spiritual devotion: for many, a ritualised set of prescribed practices simply helped to offer remedy for deep inner tensions.

In spite of being able to help his parishioners a little every now and then, Williams thought he was 'in such a muddle' himself that he probably 'did more harm than

³¹² Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Converts: British and American Intellectuals turn to Rome* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 323.

³¹³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 121.

good'.³¹⁴ This remark is a typical example of Williams's writing style in his autobiography. Like Augustine, he reinterprets events which happened many years previously from a contemporary perspective, with an eye to how he wishes to present them to his readers. He also claims that he tried to label his parishioners as particular instances of general types, and attempted to sort out everything neatly at the intellectual level. The result was that he was, by his own admission, no more than 'a lecturer in theology masquerading as a pastor'.³¹⁵ This apparent security conferred by intellectual tidiness led Williams to treat people 'as if they were machines' – something he would later preach against in *True Resurrection* – but, in the end, he was trying to help people by trying to dehumanize them.³¹⁶ It remains, of course, an open question whether this is a genuine description of Williams's feelings at that time or whether he attempts to present a view shaped from a distance, at the time of writing his autobiography, that merely masquerades as reportage of his contemporary feelings.

Williams was becoming increasingly critical of many aspects of Anglo-Catholic beliefs and practices, especially those suggesting a vested interest in guilt; among them were the views regarding the official policy banning the use of contraceptives. Although the Anglo-Catholic teaching in moral theology textbooks was perhaps less legalistic than in the Roman Catholic Church, it was equally rigorous.³¹⁷ Even after the modification by the 1930 Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Church's traditional opposition to artificial birth control, the mainstream view among Anglo-Catholics was unchanged: the prevention of conception was never justified. In a gradual departure from the

³¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 124.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Francis George Belton, *A Manual for Confessors: Being a Guide to the Administration of the Sacrament of Penance for the Use of Priests of the English Church* (London: Mowbray's, 1931), 179-86, 204-05.

traditional stance of the Roman Catholic Church, the Lambeth Conference of 1958 finally gave its unreserved blessing to their use among the married.³¹⁸

Similarly, Anglo-Catholic teaching on homosexuality was substantially identical to the Roman Catholic position and homosexual acts were judged to be intrinsically sinful, although Anglo-Catholic priests were more often ready to discuss homosexuality without open hostility, under the seal of the confessional and without reporting to the police. According to a widely used manual for Anglo-Catholic confessors, ‘for true homosexuals, the only treatment lies in the strengthening of the will to resist temptation’.³¹⁹ Tomkinson’s successor, Kenneth Needham Ross,³²⁰ was the author of a tract entitled *Letter to a Homosexual* (1955) where he publicly presented the view that was shared by many Anglo-Catholic clergy that homosexual feelings (devoid of acts) were not in themselves sinful, although they should be disciplined, controlled, and channelled into the service of others: ‘You cannot help being homosexual: nor can you help it if your sexual feelings are very strong. That is a matter of natural endowment. ... So it is much better to reconcile yourself to the fact that you are homosexual in outlook and make the best of it. I would go further: I say that your homosexual bias is to be used for the glory of God.’³²¹

In this situation Williams, a young man unable to live out his sexuality, sought counsel from Raynes, an experienced confessor, who nevertheless confirmed the official Church line. Years later, when writing his autobiography, Williams said that he felt wretchedly guilty at going against the received Anglo-Catholic position,

³¹⁸ In 1958, the Lambeth Conference gave a guarded approval to family planning and contraception, having already opened up the possibility in 1930.

³¹⁹ Reginald Somerset Ward, *A Guide for Spiritual Directors, by the Author of “The Way”* (London: Mowbray’s, 1957), 33.

³²⁰ Kenneth Needham Ross (1908-1970), the eighth Vicar of All Saints (1951-1969).

³²¹ Kenneth N. Ross, *Letter to a Homosexual* (London: SPCK, 1955), 5.

acknowledging that it was not easy to live with this conflict of the spirit (his God-given humanity) against the flesh (his conditioned subconscious with its irrational guilt and phobias).³²²

Although Williams faced psychosomatic issues from his early childhood, his first recorded testimony of a case dates back to the beginning of his curacy.³²³ It was also during this period that Williams met a female psychiatrist (allegedly well-known, although Williams decided to withhold her name) who spoke about him to her colleague whose patient Williams was to become later in Cambridge: ‘There is a young clergyman preaching at the church I go to in London who knows much more than he can take. Sooner or later he will break down.’³²⁴ If Williams’s memory can be trusted, these were truly prophetic words.

With hindsight, Williams realised that at that time he increasingly felt that his relationship with God was one of ‘contract’. As he put it crudely, his life was based on the tacit assumption that God would scratch his back on condition that he scratched God’s: by saying the offices and by celebrating, or at least attending, Holy Communion every day.³²⁵ All this was ‘calculated’ – Williams stresses the literal use of the word – to keep God in a good mood. Williams referred to himself as having been enslaved as God’s ‘blue-eyed boy’ or even his ‘lady companion’.³²⁶

This God he thought he was serving had a double identity: partly the true God, but partly somebody Williams projected upon the heavens from his subconscious, an idol –

³²² *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 128.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 107.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-20.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

a recurring concept in his later writings.³²⁷ Like Williams himself, this idol felt unloved and insecure unless he was constantly the centre of attention: ‘And when he felt insecure he would take it out of you by refusing to speak to you until you had formally apologized to him by going to confession, and sometimes not even then.’³²⁸

Meanwhile, the ‘Anglo-Catholic fanciers’ continued to think that Williams might become someone of importance for them. But at the same time, a remark by Reinhold Niebuhr³²⁹ was reported to him: ‘The church can be the anti-Christ; and when it denies that possibility, it is the anti-Christ.’³³⁰ Williams could not agree more; and he wanted to remove himself from life in a parish.

Westcott House (1948-1951)

During his time at All Saints’, Williams was offered two jobs at theological colleges but he was not initially drawn to either of them. As he recalled later: ‘Religious establishments invariably give me the creeps. Their atmosphere chills and frightens me.’³³¹ However, at that time, Williams did not know yet that he was to spend his late years at one.

Despite these protestations, Williams claims that it was during this period that he for the first time also explored the possibility of becoming a monk. He had a conversation about this alternative with Raynes who advised Williams, that unless he entered ‘the

³²⁷ Ibid., 130.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), American Reformed theologian and ethicist. Williams adds no reference to the quote. Alan Wilkinson in his *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SPCK, 1978), 222, cites the same quote and says it’s from an unpublished lecture.

³³⁰ Cf. E. J. Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960). Cited in *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 133.

³³¹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 134.

Religious Life’, he would be in mortal sin.³³² Williams found this advice, at that time, ‘not only ridiculous but sinister’. While he did not think of it ‘as the expression of an infantile fantasy of omnipotence’, he nevertheless felt that ‘it was sick, and hence to be disregarded’.³³³ Williams was then given a contrary piece of advice by Charles Smyth³³⁴ who was a Canon of Westminster. He was allegedly told, ‘if you were a Religious you were in danger of becoming a Personage, with old women of both sexes and all ages making a fuss of you’.³³⁵ Smyth thought that becoming a monk would bring Williams an exaggerated sense of his importance as ‘a spiritual pundit’. On the other hand, the competition in Cambridge was ‘much too beastly’ to give one a sense of self-importance: ‘There would be scores of people very much cleverer and more able than you were, and hundreds who were your equal ... You could grow only by keeping a due sense of proportion about yourself, and Cambridge would do that for you automatically...’³³⁶

Consequently, when Kenneth Carey³³⁷ was appointed Principal of Westcott House, another prominent Anglican theological college, replacing William Greer,³³⁸ Williams accepted his invitation to go there with him as Chaplain. Westcott House at the time was described by Margaret Duggan as a ‘charm school’;³³⁹ its style had been set by B. K. Cunningham,³⁴⁰ and not much had changed under the new Principal. The Chairman

³³² Ibid., 137.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Charles Smyth (1903-1987), Rector of St Margaret’s, Westminster, and Canon of Westminster Abbey (1946-1956).

³³⁵ It should be noted that this recollection was written down when Williams was writing his autobiography, published in 1982, already a member of the religious community at Mirfield. As discussed in Chapter IX, Williams was initially not received too heartily by other monks, given his various privileges granted to him – which made him indeed a kind of ‘personage’.

³³⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 138.

³³⁷ Kenneth Carey (1908-1979), Principal of Westcott House (1948-1961), Bishop of Edinburgh (1961-1975).

³³⁸ William Derrick Lindsay Greer (1902-1972), Principal of Westcott House (1943-1947), Bishop of Manchester (1947-1970); cf. footnote 414.

³³⁹ Margaret Duggan, *Runcie: The Making of an Archbishop* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1983), 91.

³⁴⁰ Bernard Keir Cunningham (1871-1944), Principal of Westcott House (1919-1943).

of the Westcott Council was Charles Raven³⁴¹ and the post of the Vice-Principal was held by Alan Webster.³⁴²

Most of the students at Westcott House were war veterans who ‘had abandoned their wartime responsibilities to become students responsible for nothing’.³⁴³ In his autobiography, Williams enjoys recounting some anecdotes involving the upper-class background of most of the ordinands, but he also acknowledges that it would be ‘an extremely superficial estimate to describe Westcott House in those days as a snobbish place’.³⁴⁴ In the end, and many years later, he felt that it was ‘fair to say Westcott House was trying to be a place which was doing its work in enabling its inmates to find their real identities by prayer and study and brushing up against each other’.³⁴⁵

Carey’s appointment as Principal of Westcott House had been controversial as he got a Third; there was also ‘some kind of Anglo-Catholic vendetta’ against him because of his liberal theology.³⁴⁶ It was partly to counter these feelings that Carey recruited Williams who, at that time, represented the mainstream of the Anglo-Catholic wing and, unlike Carey, possessed a First-Class degree. Williams’s theological views at that time were marked by the time he spent in Anglo-Catholic parishes and, accordingly, the opponents of liberal theology viewed them as ‘very conservative and orthodox’.³⁴⁷ Hugh Montefiore³⁴⁸ recalled that when Williams came to Westcott House, he was not

³⁴¹ Charles E. Raven (1885-1964), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, Master of Christ’s College (1939-1950).

³⁴² Alan Brunskill Webster (1918-2007), Dean of Norwich (1970-1978), Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral (1978-1987).

³⁴³ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 138.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

³⁴⁸ John S. Peart-Binns, *Bishop Hugh Montefiore* (London: Quartet Books, 1990), 69.

³⁴⁹ Hugh William Montefiore (1920-2005), Bishop of Kingston (1970-1978), Bishop of Birmingham (1978-1987). In the 1950s, Fellow and Dean of Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge, and University Lecturer in Divinity.

yet ‘the radical don who set the theological world by the ears with *The True Wilderness*’, but rather ‘the high-church member of staff who had spent hours in the confessional in London’.³⁴⁹ Williams’s main job was to teach New Testament. His views were decidedly High Church, and Carey and Webster often disagreed with him. In his memoirs, Williams remembered Carey as a supremely good Principal. At the same time, he found him ‘far too sensitive’ and felt that even the mildest criticism could make him ‘stupidly stubborn’ in situations where wisdom would rather suggest flexibility. On the other hand, this sensitivity enabled him to be ‘an outstanding spiritual counsellor’. Later, Carey was to be the only clergyman who approved of Williams undergoing psychoanalysis.³⁵⁰ He was also described as a man who was ‘passionately interested in developments in Theology, and encouraged John Robinson and Hugh Montefiore and people like that.’³⁵¹ In the same context he was also described as ‘a snob’ which might explain why he and Williams were close. In the authorized biography of John Habgood, ‘Carey’s boys’ are remembered as young ordinands who found particular favour with him.³⁵² The Westcott bishops produced from among ‘Carey’s boys’ included Patrick Rodger,³⁵³ Simon Phipps,³⁵⁴ Victor

³⁴⁹ Hugh Montefiore, *Oh God, What next?: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1995), 69.

³⁵⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 140.

³⁵¹ Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 107.

³⁵² David Wilbourne, *Just John: The authorized biography of John Habgood, Archbishop of York, 1983-1995* (London: SPCK, 2020), 52.

³⁵³ Patrick Campbell Rodger (1920-2002), Bishop of Manchester (1970-1978), Bishop of Oxford (1978-1986).

³⁵⁴ Simon Wilton Phipps (1921-2001), Bishop of Lincoln (1974-1987).

Whitsey,³⁵⁵ Stephen Verney,³⁵⁶ Richard Hare,³⁵⁷ John Habgood,³⁵⁸ Kenneth Woolcombe,³⁵⁹ and Stanley Booth-Clibborn.³⁶⁰

Carey appreciated the balance to be found in Anglicanism and he expressed a concern that someone could become ‘an extreme Evangelical or an extreme Anglo-Catholic or an extreme Charismatic or something else equally inhuman.’³⁶¹ The broad character of the Church of England clearly mattered to both Carey and Williams greatly.

In this new environment, Williams felt increasingly unhappy within the constraints of Anglo-Catholic thought. Nevertheless, Williams knew well how to wear an outer mask: Runcie remembered him at Westcott as ‘very amusing in conversation, and the best of the three lecturers. You could say anything in Harry’s company and he’d laugh it off.’³⁶² But inside, he felt acutely lonely and unhappy and, in the end, stayed for only three years, later referring to his time as his rather bleak existence.³⁶³

Jesus and the Resurrection (1951)

1951, Williams’s final year at Westcott House, saw the publication of his first volume, *Jesus and the Resurrection*, written originally as the Bishop of London’s Lent Book and dedicated in Latin to Williams’s friend Charles Smyth. In the foreword, Bishop

³⁵⁵ Hubert Victor Whitsey (1916-1987), Bishop of Hertford (1971-1974), Bishop of Chester (1974-1981).

³⁵⁶ Stephen Edmund Verney (1919-2009), Bishop of Repton (1977-1985), Assistant Bishop of Oxford (1991-2009).

³⁵⁷ Thomas Richard Hare (1922-2010), Suffragan Bishop of Pontefract (1971-1992).

³⁵⁸ John Stapylton Habgood (1927-2019), Vice-Principal of Westcott House (1956-1962), Principal of Queen’s College Birmingham (1967-1973), Bishop of Durham (1973-1983), Archbishop of York (1983-1995).

³⁵⁹ Kenneth John Woolcombe (1924-2008), Bishop of Oxford (1971-1978).

³⁶⁰ Stanley Eric Francis Booth-Clibborn (1924-1996), Bishop of Manchester (1979-1992).

³⁶¹ ‘Principal of Westcott House’, *The Times*, 16 November 1943, 8; ‘Funeral: Canon B. K. Cunningham’, *The Times*, 14 September 1944, 12.

³⁶² Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 109.

³⁶³ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 163.

William Wand observed that ‘the book shows an astonishing maturity as well as an engaging freshness.’³⁶⁴

From the very beginning of his public ministry, ‘resurrection’ was for Williams ‘far from being just one doctrine among many’.³⁶⁵ Throughout his writings, Williams continued to attempt to broaden the historical meaning of the Resurrection beyond the conventional understanding which referred to the unique event related to Jesus. He was to draw a line connecting historical events with the present; contemporization (involving the elements of actualization and appropriation) was to become one of the recurring themes of his writings. The general concept of resurrection was thus to be permanently linked to the contemporary world and developed in connection with the seemingly banal situations of everyday lives which nevertheless had the power of bringing their agents closer to God. Williams returned to this concept in *True Resurrection* (1972).

This line of thought was already emerging in Williams’s only sermon which survives from the time of his London curacy, written in 1946.³⁶⁶ Williams appreciates that following Paul’s conversion, the miracle of resurrection ‘was being perpetually re-enacted throughout the process of the apostle’s ministry’.³⁶⁷

Jesus and the Resurrection was the first book which William which addressed this concept in detail. He opened it acknowledging the works which influenced his thoughts, most notably Westcott’s *The Gospel of the Resurrection* and *The Revelation of the Risen Lord*, and his collection of sermons published under the title *The Christian*

³⁶⁴ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, vii.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ H. A. Williams, ‘Despised and Rejected of Men: preached in All Saints’ Church on 24 February 1946’, in *Lenten Counsellors: A Catena of Lent Sermons for Devotional Reading* (London: Mowbray’s, 1951).

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

Life.³⁶⁸ Although the volume was largely concerned with Christian doctrine, Williams consciously avoided the use of technical terms, instead viewing Christian doctrine as ‘the report made by the Christian community of its corporate experience’, and as such ‘the means by which the members of the Church comfort one another and build each other up’.³⁶⁹ In this context, Williams quoted Westcott who had claimed that for Christians of New Testament days, the Resurrection ‘was not an article of their creed, but the life of it.’³⁷⁰

Williams resolutely stresses the centrality of the Resurrection for Christian faith: ‘Christianity is the Easter faith or it is not a faith at all.’³⁷¹ Many Christians view it, however, merely as an isolated event, an ‘unassimilated piece of doctrine’ which is ‘swallowed whole without being digested’.³⁷² He refuses to see it as an isolated event in history: ‘To become a Christian – that is the point – is to be caught in the wave of that divine creative energy.’³⁷³

In this book, Williams already begins to question some of the tenets of orthodox doctrine. He departs from the understanding of Jesus as a perfect man, seeing his

³⁶⁸ B. F. Westcott, *The gospel of the Resurrection: thoughts on its relation to reason and history* (London: Macmillan, 1866); *The Revelation of the risen Lord* (London, 1881); *The Christian life, manifold and one, six sermons* (London, 1869). Other books which remained formative for Williams’s future writing and which were mentioned include: O. C. Quick, *Essays in Orthodoxy* (London: Macmillan, 1961), *The Christian Sacraments* (London: Nisbet, 1927), and *The Gospel of the New World* (London: Nisbet, 1944); Nikolai Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1937); Evgenii Lampert, *The Divine Realm* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944) and *The Apocalypse of History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948); *Letters by R. M. Benson* (London: Mowbray’s, 1916); W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1948); R. M. Benson, *The Religious Vocation* (London and Oxford: Mowbray’s, 1939) – Williams incorrectly mentions W. F. Flemington as the author; J. B. Mozley, *Essays Historical and Theological* (London: Rivingtons, 1878); John Baillie, *And the Life Everlasting* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934); W. J. Sparrow-Simpson, *The Resurrection and Modern Thought* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911); L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ* (Westminster: Dacre, 1942); *Jesus and the Resurrection*, viii-ix.

³⁶⁹ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 1.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3; cf. Westcott, *The gospel of the Resurrection*, 111.

³⁷¹ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 1.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

strength instead in his human weakness and fallibility. Williams writes of Jesus using language suggesting imperfections and weaknesses which, for Williams, were ultimately a failure: he does not hesitate to suggest that too much of our thought and energy is taken up in the effort to achieve the kind of success which Jesus never achieved.³⁷⁴ As a consequence of Jesus's fallibility, Williams sees his death primarily not as victory but as 'the occasion of an ineffable self-surrender',³⁷⁵ changing its meaning and eliciting from it the possibility, and certainty, of resurrection: 'By means of death, therefore, He destroyed death. ... Evil was made instrumental to goodness.'³⁷⁶ And thus on Calvary, 'victory was achieved through apparent defeat'.³⁷⁷ Our union with Christ should be understood as a 'union with Christ in His dying weakness' or 'a union with Christ's self-dedication'³⁷⁸ where the whole of life for a Christian must be the realization of this union, and working out of one's death with Christ in baptism: 'We can live in Christ only to the degree in which we have first died with Him.'³⁷⁹

Williams further addresses the existence of the Devil, the presence of evil and the meaning of suffering. This follows on from his early encounter with Bertrand Russell who, shortly after Williams's ordination, challenged him about the existence of the Devil; Williams then admonished his disbelief by saying that for Christians, disbelief in the Devil would be regarded as one of the Devil's greatest triumphs.³⁸⁰ Williams confirms his belief that the contemporary world is characterized 'by various features

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 40.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 30.

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 33.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 34.

³⁸⁰ 'What the Devil?', *Sermons from Great St. Mary's*, 108.

which we know to be evil' and where the most common was self-interest as the sufficient motive.³⁸¹

Writing about the notion of sin, Williams first observes that at Calvary, the power of God converted evil into goodness, for 'God turned the deeds of wicked men into a mighty act of His saving love.'³⁸² Acknowledging that sin contributes to our knowledge and love of God,³⁸³ Williams agrees with the Russian theologian Evgeny Lampert³⁸⁴ that 'repentance is no denial of one's past: on the contrary, it is a moment of initiation by which the past acquires a new meaning'.³⁸⁵ As a result, 'what is given back is that which has been handed over. It is by means of death that we are granted the fullness of life.'³⁸⁶

On this occasion, Williams formulates for the first time his concept of the liberating force of suffering which was for Jesus the means by which he consecrated his manhood to the service of God: 'The sorrow is turned into joy – the joy of complete self-giving.'³⁸⁷ And so in us too 'the suffering, though overcome, will not be lost. It will remain as the utter joy of self-surrender.'³⁸⁸

Williams also invites his readers to think in terms of the gathering up of the whole universe into Christ, of which they would have the foretaste in Holy Communion.³⁸⁹ His explanation of the Real Presence has a degree of originality: he proposes that the gifts of Bread and Wine are 'transferred' into the new world where 'nature, recreated,

³⁸¹ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 15.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 71-72.

³⁸³ Williams sees in this the point of the parable of the two debtors in Luke 7.40-43.

³⁸⁴ Evgeny (Evgeniĭ) Lampert (1914-2004), Russian theologian and lecturer at the University of Oxford.

³⁸⁵ Evgeniĭ Lampert, *The Apocalypse of History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 66.

³⁸⁶ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 73.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁸⁹ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 19. Williams acknowledges here his debt to *The Divine Realm* by Lampert. Cf. Evgeniĭ Lampert, *The Divine Realm* (London: Faber and Faber, 1944).

is in the fullest sense the Body of Our Lord Jesus Christ because He fills it wholly and it is gathered up fully in Him'; they are 'a perpetual witness to the ultimate destiny of the physical universe' and 'a pledge to us that the promise will be fulfilled in regard to all things'.³⁹⁰ By using the term 'transfer' Williams departs from the doctrine of transubstantiation, which the majority of the Anglo-Catholics has been implicitly or explicitly adhering to, anticipating the later emergence of the concepts of 'transfinalisation' and 'transignification'.³⁹¹

Writing about the transitoriness of our lives, Williams acknowledged that the total recovery of what we give up upon death necessarily involves the resurrection of the body, yet the body is not 'a temporary cheap box encasing a permanently priceless treasure.'³⁹² Given that the particles of our bodies change continuously, we cannot speak of a material identity of the physical constituents; nevertheless, there is a principle of identity. Williams maintained that we are not asked to believe in a reconstruction of the body after the fashion which belongs to this mortal life but we do not understand the meaning of a reconstitution of our bodies in glory, partly because we do not yet understand the nature of matter.³⁹³

It appears that when writing his first book, Williams believed in the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. However, his understanding kept developing. A decade later, in 1960, he was invited to the BBC where in two forty-minute-long radio programmes he

³⁹⁰ *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 20. Cf. Revelation 21.5: 'Behold, I make all things new.' (KJV)

³⁹¹ On these concepts, cf. James Thomas O'Connor, *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 110 ff.

³⁹² *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 48-49.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

had the opportunity to unfold his beliefs to Ludovic Kennedy.³⁹⁴ The first programme was broadcast evening in Eastertide and dealt with the Resurrection of Christ. Williams warned that ‘faith does not mean believing what you know isn’t true’ and described the Resurrection using psychological terms of a *vision*: ‘The force of his presence upon his disciples was so terrific that they did in fact project it into a vision of himself. In the room where the disciples were sitting they saw the same physical particles which they had seen on the Cross.’³⁹⁵ Elaborating on the true nature of his belief in the Resurrection, he further said that it meant ‘having such confidence in this personal God that you can’t believe that death is the end’. His statements suggest that at that time, Williams no longer believed in the physical Resurrection of Jesus, but understood it in different psychological and allegorical terms.

Williams’s psychosomatic problems persisted. A number of issues gradually began to show him how much in the dark he was; he started noticing that something was wrong with him. While celebrating the Eucharist, the altar would sometimes appear to heave itself up before him and then fall back in place: ‘It was like being dead drunk.’³⁹⁶ Although he had three confessors, he felt giddy and frightened.³⁹⁷

During his last year at Westcott House, he had a nightmare which proved to be of fundamental significance, even if this eluded him for several years – he recounted it twelve years later in an open lecture at the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge:

I was in a theatre watching a play. Something made me turn around, and at the back of the theatre I saw a human monster, horrific and merciless, who was

³⁹⁴ Ludovic Kennedy (1919-2009), journalist and broadcaster, working for ITV and the BBC.

³⁹⁵ Ferris, *The Church of England*, 265; BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading.

³⁹⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 166.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

savagely hypnotizing the players on the stage. The players, though they were dressed elegantly in eighteenth-century costume and speaking in sober civilized tones, were in fact no more than the servile creatures of the monstrous all-powerful hypnotists. All they said and did was at his brutal bidding. Watching him at work frightened me so much that I woke up in a cold sweat.³⁹⁸

This image of the monster hypnotizing players on a stage kept returning in Williams's dreams. In the following years he spent at Trinity, he was to suffer a severe breakdown requiring psychological treatment which, nonetheless, opened for him a novel perspective of theology, culminating in some of the most acclaimed works of his output.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 147.

V. BACK TO TRINITY; *SOUNDINGS*

Lecturer at Trinity College (1951-1962)

After three years at Westcott House, at the age of 32, Williams was offered the chance to teach theology at Trinity College, Cambridge, a position he held between 1951 and 1962, when he became a Fellow. Until his death Williams kept the letter from G. M. Trevelyan offering him the Assistant Lectureship in Theology, ‘together with a promise of a Fellowship’.³⁹⁹

The Master of Trinity College at the time was Lord Adrian,⁴⁰⁰ whom Williams described as ‘the most attractive man’ he had ever met, ‘one of the last two-culture giants’ and a man whom he had almost hero-worshipped. Williams was later able to speak to him openly about his mental health issues. He found him to be a proficient Bible scholar, but also something of an agnostic.⁴⁰¹ The Vice-Master of the College was Patrick Duff,⁴⁰² who succeeded the historian Denis Winstanley.⁴⁰³

When Williams started teaching in the 1950s, the prevailing style of theology taught at Cambridge was the sort of biblical theology influenced by Edwyn Hoskyns who had been active between the wars.⁴⁰⁴ Hoskyns maintained that the Scriptures were self-authenticating and the only way of understanding them properly would be through the

³⁹⁹ G. M. Trevelyan, letter to Williams, 17 February 1952 (Williams Papers).

⁴⁰⁰ Edgar Douglas Adrian (1890-1977), physiologist and Nobel prize winner, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge (1951-1965), Chancellor of the University of Cambridge (1967-1975).

⁴⁰¹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 149-52.

⁴⁰² Patrick William Duff (1901-1991), Regius Professor of Civil Law, Vice-Master of Trinity College.

⁴⁰³ Denis Arthur Winstanley (1877-1947), Fellow and Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge since 1906, Vice-Master until 1940.

⁴⁰⁴ Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (1884-1937), Bishop of Burnley (1901-1904), Bishop of Southwell (1904-1925), Baronet of Harewood (1923-1925), clergyman and theologian.

prism of faith; in this, he was heavily influenced by Karl Barth,⁴⁰⁵ and had been the translator of his *Epistle to the Romans*. Along with Hoskyns, this school of theology also included, among others, Alan Richardson⁴⁰⁶ of Durham, Gabriel Hebert,⁴⁰⁷ and Lionel Thornton.⁴⁰⁸ Nevertheless, this approach to the biblical text solely from the perspective of faith was not to survive for much longer given the fast pace of the Biblical scholarship as well as the need to relate Christianity to science.

An important figure in Williams's circle was the philosopher C. D. Broad,⁴⁰⁹ who was one of the first prominent intellectuals to be openly gay when homosexual acts were still illegal. In March 1958, along with the literary critic A. E. Dyson,⁴¹⁰ the philosopher A. J. Ayer,⁴¹¹ the novelist J. B. Priestley⁴¹² and twenty-nine others, among them the Bishops of Exeter⁴¹³ and Manchester⁴¹⁴ and Bertrand Russell,⁴¹⁵ Broad sent a letter to *The Times*⁴¹⁶ which urged the acceptance of the recommendations contained in the *Wolfenden Report*. Williams also remembered that Broad's liberal positions were expressed in his wish for his memorial service to be 'Anglican but not Christian'.⁴¹⁷

Williams's friends at that time included also one of the most controversial figures in the Church of England, Mervyn Stockwood.⁴¹⁸ During his four years as Vicar of Great

⁴⁰⁵ Karl Barth (1886-1986), Swiss Protestant theologian, author of the seminal commentary on *Romans* (1919).

⁴⁰⁶ Alan Richardson (1905-1975), Canon at Durham (1938-1953), Professor at the University of Nottingham, Dean of York (1964-1975).

⁴⁰⁷ Arthur Gabriel Hebert (1886-1963), theologian, proponent of the Liturgical Movement.

⁴⁰⁸ Lionel S. Thornton (1884-1960), theologian, exponent of figural exegesis in Britain.

⁴⁰⁹ Charles Dunbar Broad (1887-1971), philosopher, epistemologist and historian of philosophy.

⁴¹⁰ A. E. Dyson (1928-2002), literary critic and lecturer.

⁴¹¹ A. J. Ayer (1910-1989), philosopher.

⁴¹² J. B. Priestley (1894-1984), novelist and playwright.

⁴¹³ Robert Mortimer (1902-1976), Bishop of Exeter (1949-1973).

⁴¹⁴ William Greer (1902-1972); cf. footnote 338.

⁴¹⁵ Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), philosopher, mathematician and public intellectual.

⁴¹⁶ 'Letter to the Editor', *The Times*, 7 March 1958, 11.

⁴¹⁷ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 158.

⁴¹⁸ Arthur Mervyn Stockwood (1913-1995), Vicar of Great St Mary's Cambridge (1955-1959), later Bishop of Southwark (1959-1980), Assistant Bishop of Bath and Wells (1981-1995).

St Mary's, Cambridge, he managed to make a great impact on his congregations which often reached a thousand. His life makes an interesting comparison with Williams; although he claimed to be celibate, he might have been a closeted homosexual. Unlike Williams, Stockwood was a strong supporter of gay rights after the publication of the Wolfenden Report.⁴¹⁹ As another unmarried man, Stockwood easily established a bond with Williams. They both loved being the centre of attention and enjoyed the finer things in life. Their lives fitted the stereotype of a homosexual without a partner and, accordingly, they felt the need to stick to institutional structures which provided them with a certain degree of stability and surrogate family. It was thanks to his friendship with Stockwood that Williams met Lady Elizabeth Cavendish.⁴²⁰

Williams also befriended Hugh Dickinson,⁴²¹ one of the Chaplains at Trinity College, as well as F. A. Simpson,⁴²² an ordained historian 'who could be persuaded to preach just once in six years'.⁴²³ Simpson was for Williams a man who 'had an enormous amount of vanity, but very little pride' and his sermons showed 'that preaching is a lost art'.⁴²⁴ In the Senior Common Room of Trinity, Williams would also befriend Jack Gallagher,⁴²⁵ appreciated for his 'combination of learning, wit and humanity',⁴²⁶ and Raymond Leppard⁴²⁷, the Director of Music; Janet Baker⁴²⁸ would sometimes come and rehearse in his rooms above Williams's.⁴²⁹

⁴¹⁹ Michael De-la-Noy, *Mervyn Stockwood: A Lonely Life* (London: Mowbray's, 1966), 94-95.

⁴²⁰ Lady Elizabeth Georgiana Alice Cavendish (1926-2018), the daughter of the 10th Duke of Devonshire, a childhood friend of the late Queen Elizabeth II, a lady-in-waiting to the late Princess Margaret and the long-standing companion and soulmate of the Poet Laureate, John Betjeman (1906-1984); cf. De-la-Noy, 85.

⁴²¹ Hugh Geoffrey Dickinson (b. 1929), Chaplain at Trinity College, Cambridge (1958-1963) and later at Winchester College. (1963-1969), Dean and Provost at Salisbury (1986-1996).

⁴²² Frederick Arthur Simpson (1883-1974), Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge.

⁴²³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 152.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 152-53.

⁴²⁵ John Andrew Gallagher (1918-1980), Dean and Vice-Master of Trinity, historian.

⁴²⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 161.

⁴²⁷ Raymond John Leppard (1927-2019), musician.

⁴²⁸ Dame Janet Abbott Baker (b. 1933), mezzosoprano.

⁴²⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 161.

It would be wrong to assume that Williams's circle was limited only to the academics in humanities or believers: there was also the Russian mathematician Abram Besicovitch⁴³⁰ whom Williams remembered as 'the sweetest old man', and who, in spite of being an atheist, had 'all the simplicity of a saint'. Another friend was mathematician John Littlewood,⁴³¹ a self-declared atheist, about whom Williams was nonetheless convinced that he had been 'in some way or other on the Damascus Road'.⁴³²

Not all relationships flourished; that between Williams and Montefiore was more strained. Although they were both passionate and honest men, they often argued in private, and sometimes in public. While Montefiore was more theologically earthed, Williams 'joined the unbeliever in the jungle where the writ of Christ was not recognized. It was a land of guilt complexes – something of an obsession with him.'⁴³³ Montefiore later confessed: 'I had a love/hate relationship with Harry Williams – I welcomed his psychological insights, but I abhorred his "sitting light" to the Gospels.'⁴³⁴

Breakdown

Trinity College was soon to become the scene of his mental suffering and encounter with the forces of destruction, even if it was also the place where he seemed most happy. His former student, the writer Susan Hill,⁴³⁵ recalled him then as 'a man everyone seemed to love and whose company entertained as well as inspired many', 'a

⁴³⁰ Abram Samoilovitch Besicovitch (Besikovitch) (1891-1970), Russian mathematician.

⁴³¹ John Edenson Littlewood (1885-1977), mathematician.

⁴³² *Some Day I'll Find You*, 158.

⁴³³ Peart-Binns, 113.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴³⁵ Susan Hill (b. 1942), novelist.

gin-drinking, party-loving, socialising sort of priest ... as well as one of deep faith'.⁴³⁶ Similarly, the broadcaster John Tusa⁴³⁷ fondly remembered 'gin and socialising' with Williams and even wondered whether those occasions would nowadays count toward 'contact hours' or even if they might be even interpreted as 'grooming'.⁴³⁸ Williams himself later recalled: 'I have never had such pleasant and congenial companions as I had during my eighteen years as a don. Trinity ... became my home, and in my feelings it always will be. Going back there is like going back home.'⁴³⁹ Nevertheless, the friendly and congenial atmosphere 'was piling up on him an increasing load of guilt', for, he later recalled, 'the sort of pleasant life' he was living was not the sort which his 'idol of a god could possibly approve of'.⁴⁴⁰ Sexual frustration and alcohol played an important role. Williams was going through an inner conflict; the most pressing reason for this was that he was no longer able to ignore his sexuality by keeping it strictly under control and living as if it did not exist. In 1952/1953, he finally broke down. As a result, Williams started leading a solitary existence; gradually he had to eat alone in his room and he could not even bear having a meal with his parents when with them. Public transport was a torture, and taking the Tube in London was out of the question as Williams was visibly shaking when taking an escalator. In the end, he was too frightened to go to a shop, a theatre or a cinema, and unable to attend church services,

⁴³⁶ Susan Hill, *Howards End is on the Landing: A Year of Reading from Home* (London: Profile, 2009), 45.

⁴³⁷ John Tusa (b. 1936), television and radio journalist.

⁴³⁸ John Tusa, *Making a Noise: Getting it Right, Getting It Wrong in Life, Arts and Broadcasting* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2018), 78.

⁴³⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 148.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

suffering from fibrositis.⁴⁴¹ The phobias would increase so that Williams gradually lost the use of his legs and when he had to see someone, he often took a taxi.⁴⁴²

His breakdown also triggered a crisis of faith. Peart-Binns maintains that during this period, Williams ‘joined the unbeliever in the jungle where the writ of Christ was not recognized’, in ‘a land of guilt complexes – something of an obsession with him.’⁴⁴³

Nevertheless, unable to face any kind of religion, Williams steered clear from both church services and private prayers: ‘I had had enough of God for the time being. It was an indescribable relief not to have this ghastly figure breathing with disapproval down my neck, and to tell him instead to fuck off.’⁴⁴⁴ As a consequence, for a period, Williams decisively turned his back on organized religion: ‘I began to pray like the old waiter in Hemingway’s short story: “*Our Nothing which art in nothing, Nothing be thy nothing; Thy nothing nothing.*”’⁴⁴⁵

As a result of his depressions, Williams had a medical check-up but it showed there was nothing physically wrong with him. He then went to see a priest who claimed to have some expert knowledge of psychology; Williams deliberately did not name him in his autobiography. Although Raymond Raynes told him how lucky he was to be obtain assistance from ‘so good a churchman’, much later Williams realized that seeing this clergyman was a fundamental mistake:

If you are in psychological difficulty, then go to a psychiatrist and not to a priest, just as you would go to a surgeon and not a priest if you had a poisoned

⁴⁴¹ Nowadays often designated as fibromyalgia, fibrositis is an older designation of the syndrome characterized by symptoms such as muscle pain, painful areas of the body called tender points, causing fatigue, accompanied by vegetative symptoms and psychological disturbances.

⁴⁴² *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 168.

⁴⁴³ Peart-Binns, 113.

⁴⁴⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 176-77.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 172-73. Cf. Ernest Hemingway, *A Clean Well-Lighted Place* (London, New York: Scribner, 1933), 6.

appendix. The priest, as priest, is no more capable of coping with your psychological difficulties than he is removing an appendix, though not a few priests suffer from the illusion that they are.⁴⁴⁶

The priest himself, Williams claimed, was in the process of disintegration, being ‘stubborn and aggressive, extremely doctrinaire in what he claimed was the pure milk of Freudian orthodoxy, though he had very little training and certainly no qualifications for psychiatric or analytic work’.⁴⁴⁷ He may have opened up Williams psychologically, but the sessions were far from gentle. This resulted in insufferable panic and Williams was no longer able to have dinner in the Hall.

Although the priest advised Williams not to seek further professional advice, his general practitioner arranged for a properly qualified consultant to see him. He had to be immediately transferred to a nursing home and put under narcosis for four days. Unable to sleep, injections of morphia had to be applied. Williams stayed at the nursing home for three weeks, his friends visiting him regularly, among them Jack Gallagher who had called him a ‘poseur’ a few weeks earlier.⁴⁴⁸ The visitors also included his former tutor Patrick Duff and the philosopher John Wisdom⁴⁴⁹ who had himself certain psychological difficulties and possessed considerable experience of psychoanalysis.⁴⁵⁰

With the exception of Ken Carey and John Burnaby, fellow clergymen were not of much help or support; they tried out ‘various pieces of ecclesiastical apparatus’, ‘choking’ Williams with Holy Communion, or trying to persuade him to make a good confession. When this did not work, they started being ‘shirty’ writing stern letters

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 167.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁴⁹ Arthur John Wisdom (1904-1993), philosopher and metaphysician, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge.

⁴⁵⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 173-74.

accusing him of malingering.⁴⁵¹ Soon afterwards, Williams was anointed by the Bishop of Ely, Edward Wynn,⁴⁵² but the confusion between true God and the agonising idol persisted:

What I did at Ely was to assuage my irrational and destructive guilt-feelings so that their power over me was maintained if not increased. It was like trying to cast out devils by Beelzebub. For what counts with each of us (to use Cardinal Newman's well-known distinction) are not the beliefs to which we give notional assent but those to which we give real assent. ... At Ely notionally I considered myself the child of God's love. In terms of real assent I was still the slave of a monster who was crushing and destroying me, and to whom I was once again bowing the knee.⁴⁵³

Later Williams was to admit that even in these difficult times, there nevertheless remained in him a Christian insight without which he could not have passed through the worst period of pain, agreeing with Yeats: '*Hatred of God may bring the soul to God.*'⁴⁵⁴

At that time, Williams was discussing with Michael Ramsey a project involving exposition of three sermons on sacrifice by Henry Scott Holland⁴⁵⁵ published in his *Logic and Life*. In the third sermon, 'The Sacrifice of the Redeemed', which made a deep impression on Williams, Scott Holland makes the point that

'it is the nature of human privations and sufferings of all kinds to feel like dead-ends. But human suffering, although it feels like a dead-end, is in fact an invitation to join in Christ's sufferings, and in Him to help bring life and light and healing and liberty to mankind. So the cruelly destructive and negative nature of suffering can be seen, if only in a glass very darkly, as charged with positive and creative possibilities'.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 170.

⁴⁵² Harold Edward Wynn (1889-1956), Vice-Principal of Westcott House, Bishop of Ely (1941-1956).

⁴⁵³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 171.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 177. Cf. William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works, 1: The Poems*, ed. by R. J. Finneran (New York: Simon & Schuster 1996), 286.

⁴⁵⁵ Henry Scott Holland (1847-1918), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford; cf. Henry Scott Holland, *Logic and Life: With other sermons* (London: Rivingtons), 1882.

⁴⁵⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 177.

This seemed like a possible way out and opened to Williams a new perspective which changed his life. The phobias persisted. During a walk in Baynards Park on the Surrey-Sussex border, Williams again recalled Holland: ‘I am now eating Christ’s broken Body and drinking his outpoured Blood. The Service of Holy Communion in church is only a rehearsal, like military manoeuvres. But this I am going through now, this is for real.’⁴⁵⁷ As Williams’s worries, physical pain and anxieties became insufferable, so he identified himself with the Crucified, with his pains and sufferings. He needed professional help.

Duff had a cousin who was working at the mental hospital at Fulbourn⁴⁵⁸ and who recommended Williams to Dr Christopher H. Scott (d. 1977) which was for him ‘the discovery of a lifetime’.⁴⁵⁹ Williams remained Scott’s patient for fourteen years. In the first three years, he went to see him three times a week, then twice a week and in the last year, once a week. Scott was making the best use of both Freud and Jung, his approach focusing on the needs of the patient. There were, of course, also necessary tensions: the analysis would not have worked without going through phases of negative transference when Williams unloaded on Scott the resentments he had been storing.⁴⁶⁰ Although it was clear that Scott was not a Christian in any formal sense, later, having left for Mirfield, Williams believed that he was a mystic who had penetrated and was ‘in communion with Reality’.⁴⁶¹

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁵⁸ A mental health facility, established in 1856 at the outskirts of Cambridge. During the 1960s, Fulbourn Hospital became internationally prominent for its pioneering therapeutic community under Dr David Clark (1920-2010) who was appointed 1953 at the age of 32 as the youngest medical superintendent in the country. Dr Christopher H. Scott is mentioned in: David H. Clark, *The story of a mental hospital: Fulbourn 1858-1983* (London: Process Press, 1996).

⁴⁵⁹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 179.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 182.

With the help of psychotherapy and following a term's leave, Williams was able to teach again. As Robert Runcie memorably recalled:

Harry Williams, although he'd gone off and had his breakdown at Trinity, was enormously influential on me in those days, in telling people Jesus was not concerned that we should be religious, but more that we should be fully human. The gospel of the day was 'fully human', and the pendulum swung too far on that one. It did release a lot of people from their inhibitions. But on the way created all sorts of other problems.⁴⁶²

Having overcome his breakdown, Williams established himself as a respected figure in church circles. This was underlined by the fact that in 1956 he was invited to go to Moscow and then Leningrad as a member of the Anglican Delegation to the Russian Orthodox Church led by Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of York at that time.⁴⁶³ In Moscow, on 21 July 1956, Williams presented an uncontroversial paper on 'Sacraments, their Nature and Number', which was fully in line with the mainstream of Anglican theology.⁴⁶⁴

Dean of the Chapel at Trinity (from 1958)

In 1958, Williams took on additional responsibilities, one of which was as Dean of Chapel, the senior priest with overall responsibility for the Chapel, with two assisting Chaplains, in succession to John Burnaby. Although Williams was Dean of Chapel for some eleven years (until 1969), unlike his two predecessors (H. F. Stewart and John

⁴⁶² Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 126.

⁴⁶³ The delegation further consisted of A. E. J. Rawlinson (1884-1960), Bishop of Derby; H. J. Carpenter (1901-1993), Bishop of Oxford; Owen Chadwick (1916-2015), Master-Elect of Selwyn College, Cambridge; F. J. Taylor (1912-1971), Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford; H. M. Waddams (1911-1972), General Secretary of the Church of England Council on Foreign Relations; and J. Findlow (1915-1970), English Chaplain in Rome. The Russian delegation, appointed by the Patriarchate of Moscow, was headed by Bishop Michael of Smolensk and by Bishop Sergiy of Staraya Russa.

⁴⁶⁴ *Anglo-Russian Theological Conference*, ed. by Herbert Waddams (London: Faith Press, 1957).

Burnaby) and his successor (John Robinson), he does not have a memorial in the form of a plaque in the Chapel.

As Dean of Chapel, Williams would not be formally under the jurisdiction of any bishop as his Ordinary was the Master and Fellows of the College; from them appeal was to the Visitor, the late Queen – in this way, Williams liked to regard the Chapel as a Royal Peculiar.⁴⁶⁵ Montefiore recalls that he was also interviewed for the Deanship at Trinity, but he was beaten to the post by Williams. Burnaby later told Montefiore: ‘I knew you wouldn’t do, but I had to have a foil for Harry.’⁴⁶⁶ While his biographer claimed that he was not pleased with such manipulation,⁴⁶⁷ Montefiore himself wrote of it as a ‘lucky escape’, as he ‘would have loathed to go there as Dean’.⁴⁶⁸

Apart from appointing the Chaplains for a period of five years, Williams was also responsible for the appointment of incumbents in the 32 parishes of which Trinity College was a patron. He was also a Tutor with about 180 students and 60 vacancies to fill each year. One of his students, Robert Reiss⁴⁶⁹ recalled that if a student particularly impressed him during the interview, Williams was even allowed – and always ready – to waive the requirement of an entrance examination.⁴⁷⁰ By the time of the publication of *Soundings*, Williams became something of a cult figure. The honesty of his views was both evident and refreshing, and having Williams as tutor was viewed as a privilege.

⁴⁶⁵ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 205.

⁴⁶⁶ Peart-Binns, 79.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52; Peart-Binns claims that this was the circumstance of Montefiore’s application for lectureship, not Deanship.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁶⁹ Robert Paul Reiss (b. 1943), clergyman and author.

⁴⁷⁰ Robert Reiss, *Sceptical Christianity: Exploring Credible Belief* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2016), 18-20.

In his new capacity, Williams revised the service of Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer, a few years before the Church of England started issuing her own revisions, known as *Series One* to *Three*. At the same time, he became increasingly critical of traditional Anglican liturgy. Among the contributions in *Theology* of October 1958 is his 'Unchristian Liturgy' which preceded his contribution on the same topic in *Soundings*.⁴⁷¹ Williams found certain passages in the Book of Common Prayer 'profoundly unchristian', arguing that the services of Morning and Evening Prayer start with 'something calculated to have an exactly opposite effect' than an attitude of joy and fearless confidence. The General Confession was for him an 'elaborate piece of attitudinising, full of the self-consciousness which excludes humility', a 'desperate attempt to persuade God to forgive us'. For Williams, the emphatic reiterations⁴⁷² produced pathological guilt, not related to any identifiable wrong, an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear: 'Unless we tell God we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under his table, he may lock the dining room door in our face!' In Williams's eyes, this made it clear that Cranmer 'never fully believed in God's forgiving love', for he was 'too self-conscious' in God's presence and this 'black cloud of his unbelief' still darkens the liturgy, evoking the opposite of Christian faith.

Two months later, *Theology* published a critique of Williams's article by G. F. Smith, which – while admitting that he made some valuable points – accused him of an oversimplification in the application of psychology and human experience to the divine-human relationship and an inadequate notion of sin.⁴⁷³

⁴⁷¹ H. A. Williams, 'Unchristian Liturgy', *Theology*, 460 (October 1958), 401-04.

⁴⁷² 'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins', 'we do earnestly repent', '[we] are heartily sorry for these our misdoings', 'the remembrance of them is grievous', 'the burden of them is intolerable' etc. The Prayer of Humble Access contains the words 'We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table'.

⁴⁷³ G. F. Smith, 'Unchristian Liturgy', *Theology*, 462 (December 1958), 507-08.

Other novelties were introduced at Trinity: under Williams, the college choir sang an anthem to the Virgin Mary on the occasion of a memorial service for a devout Roman Catholic Fellow. This was probably the first time such an anthem had been sung since the time of Mary Tudor.⁴⁷⁴

Williams's relative open-mindedness is also attested by his invitation to the first woman preacher in the college: John Robinson's wife Ruth, who 'preached so superb a sermon that she won everybody over to her', including Simpson who was nonetheless 'perturbed' at the idea.⁴⁷⁵ Regretfully, the next female preacher (who remains unnamed) was 'a complete disaster' and Williams concluded that this was 'the final exit of any woman preacher in Trinity' while he was Dean.⁴⁷⁶ Mollie Butler⁴⁷⁷ writes in her memoirs about 'a distinguished woman theologian' who gave an extended sermon; to the amusement of everyone Williams desperately waved his watch and interrupted her to proceed to the Hall for dinner.⁴⁷⁸

During this period, Williams also gave a number of radio talks on the Home Service of the BBC which were transcribed and published under the titles *God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross* (Holy Week 1959) and *The Four Last Things* (November and December 1959).

***God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross* (1959)**

In his second book, Williams claims that Jesus had first understood God's reality by means of the intimate relation of father and son in a happy family.⁴⁷⁹ Jesus remains for

⁴⁷⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 207.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 207-08.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁴⁷⁷ Mollie Butler (1907-2009), later Lady Butler of Saffron Walden, second wife of Rab Butler (cf. p.235).

⁴⁷⁸ Mollie Butler, *August & Rab: A memoir* (London: Robin Clark, 1992), 104.

⁴⁷⁹ *God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross*, 14-15.

Williams fully human and fallible, sometimes even aggressive, and he could thus be partially responsible for his own fate:

You can't read the Gospels without noticing how His words were often like arrows. Certainly they stung the ecclesiastical leaders of His day, goading them into planning His arrest and execution. If He had been less aggressive in His teaching, He might never have been murdered. So He was Himself at least partly responsible for the evil of His own murder.⁴⁸⁰

Jesus thus imposed on Pilate, who was 'lazy and weak-willed, but not vicious', a burden of decision which 'might well have crushed much stronger men' and brought much suffering on his mother: 'Oughtn't a man [to] be more thoughtful about his family?'⁴⁸¹ This brings Williams to his point that a part of Christ's Cross consisted 'in the sheer impossibility of doing the ideal thing' and this was 'a part of his self-offering to God'.⁴⁸² Only in his Resurrection was Jesus's manhood 'freed from all limitations and contradiction, manhood capable of being absolutely ideal, Jesus' vision of moral perfection completely realized and made actual'.⁴⁸³

Williams further writes for the first time that while we think 'quite rightly' of God as a Being separate from ourselves, it is not the whole truth, since as our creator, 'God is not so much somebody else who stands over against us, as the fount of our being, the source from which we proceed. We are, so to speak, the picture on the television screen while He is the actual person in the studio'.⁴⁸⁴ He admitted that while this was not a perfect analogy he felt that it emphasized the continuous dependence of our own being upon God: 'We exist because we never cease to flow from Him.'⁴⁸⁵ Our surrender to

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 26.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

God is not like ‘the obedience of a soldier to his commanding officer’; it is not really a submission. Instead, Williams continued:

It is more like a discovery – the discovery of what we ourselves really are. It is a breaking through the crust of our superficial selves, a voyage into the depths of our own being, a going deep down within, in order to find the place from whence issues the stream which is myself. It is finding what I am.⁴⁸⁶

The book reflected how indebted Williams was to Tillichian views at that time. For Tillich, God is ‘the answer to the question implied in man's finitude’ for ‘he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately’, but Tillich also adds that ‘whatever concerns man ultimately becomes god for him’.⁴⁸⁷ In 1960, Williams told his BBC interviewer that ‘everyone would agree’ that it was now ‘quite orthodox’ to refer to God– using the language of Paul Tillich – as ‘the ground of all being’.⁴⁸⁸

In his address on ‘The Cross and God’, Williams continued his exposition stating that if we view God as an authority to which we are ‘non-related’, we see God as a possessor which would stifle our desire for communion.⁴⁸⁹ Williams attributed the central role in this discovery to Christ: in him, this non-relatedness was broken; Christ’s final cry is ‘the cry of a person who feels he is in a hell of isolation’.⁴⁹⁰ In a similar way, the core of Tillich's theological system was also to be found in the correlation of human existence and Christ.⁴⁹¹

The main idea behind Williams’s address ‘God is Charity’ is the fear of a personal encounter with God which can lead to depersonalization. God’s charity ‘comes to us incarnated, inseparably bound up with our whole human experience’ for ‘it is by means

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 30-31.

⁴⁸⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I, 211.

⁴⁸⁸ Paul Ferris, *The Church of England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 264-67.

⁴⁸⁹ *God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross*, 38.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁹¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* II, 19.

of our living our human lives in this world that God is creating us'.⁴⁹² Nevertheless, by this incarnation Williams does not seem to refer to the second person of the Trinity, but to the incarnation of God's charity in humans.

The Four Last Things (1959)

In his book *The Four Last Things*, Williams addresses the topics of death, judgment, hell and heaven. The addresses were first broadcast on the BBC.

In *Death*, Williams sees the main reason of our terror of death in losing control over ourselves, for 'death means our hand dropping away, our no longer being able to steer', being 'abandoned to the elements'.⁴⁹³ He paraphrases Jesus's saying '*Whosoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whosoever loses his life will preserve it*'⁴⁹⁴ by his own 'It's only by being ready to die that you will be able to live'. In order to grow into full maturity, men and women must not clutch at this or that aspect of ourselves: 'They must take the risk, the awful risk, of letting it go'.⁴⁹⁵ Death then becomes something of which we already have experience, 'the harbinger of life'. But we can't make ourselves die, Williams notes, for 'the inside, that's the real me'.⁴⁹⁶

When considering the idea of *Judgment*, Williams claims that standing before the judgment-seat of Christ never stops at condemnation, for it always includes becoming aware 'of the glorious destiny God has prepared for us'.⁴⁹⁷ The judge is not the Crucified, but 'the product of my own diseased imagination – a self-portrait of that part of me of which I am not directly aware, myself as hating – whose nature it is to kill and

⁴⁹² *God's Wisdom in Christ's Cross*, 110.

⁴⁹³ *The Four Last Things*, 7.

⁴⁹⁴ Cf. Mark 8.35; Matthew 16.25; Luke 17.33.

⁴⁹⁵ *The Four Last Things*, 9.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

destroy.⁴⁹⁸ Relating judgment to present experience, Williams notes that ‘the day of judgment is always to-day’.⁴⁹⁹ Judgment needs to be thus understood as a reappraisal of ourselves and our manner of life which is true and trustworthy only if it comes ‘as the result of a new vision of future possibilities. It is the person that God slowly making me into which reappraises the person I have been. It is my future in God’s Providence which judges my past, my destiny which judges my history’.⁵⁰⁰

Hell is for Williams not a place, but a condition: ‘It is what a man is like, not somewhere he is sent.’ Rejecting the idea that God sends people to hell as a dictator sends political opponents to a concentration camp, Williams argues that Jesus’s words ‘*where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched*’⁵⁰¹ when translated back to Aramaic, make it poetry and actually mean the description of a man who ‘desperately wants what he has made himself incapable of getting’.⁵⁰² And this hell can only be overcome in Christ: ‘What I have become by a natural and inevitable law is not the final edition of myself’ for ‘wherever we are, He doesn’t cease to be the Saviour who delivers our soul from the nethermost hell.’⁵⁰³

The final talk is on *Heaven*. Again, understood as a human condition, it is ‘being what you are’.⁵⁰⁴ Using a reference to Matthew 6.28,⁵⁰⁵ Williams writes that heaven means being oneself and in Jesus, we see man as God intends him to be: ‘Great or small, our deviation of the character of Christ show that we are not yet ourselves.’⁵⁰⁶ Williams resorts to the image of God as the ‘fount of being’ and summarizes:

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁰¹ Mark 9.44 (KJV).

⁵⁰² *The Four Last Things*, 23.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰⁵ ‘*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not, neither do they spin.*’ (KJV)

⁵⁰⁶ *The Four Last Things*, 29.

God is not only, over against me, Somebody Else. He is also the fount of my being, the source from which I proceed. I therefore find Him within myself. And thus I cannot wait upon myself without, at the same time, waiting upon Him. ... He is to be found, too, in the extraordinary circumstances of my life.⁵⁰⁷

John Betjeman⁵⁰⁸ was very complimentary about the addresses; in a letter to his wife, he wrote that Williams ‘was awfully good last night about “Death” on the wireless. He said that we were dying all the time and that refusing to die meant you lost your life, as Jesus said. ... It simply was a manifestation of not daring to trust yourself to the unknown.’⁵⁰⁹

Cambridge in the 1960s

Williams’s popularity attested to the fact that at Cambridge he exerted his greatest influence as a priest, teacher and counsellor. He became a leading figure in a new generation of theologically reflective scholars who were becoming increasingly prominent; they believed that the contemporary system of Christian belief and morals as taught by the Church of England could no longer be convincingly passed on to the post-war generation which was both more sceptical and better educated than the previous one.

According to many historians, in the 1950s, the Church of England was gradually losing touch with the life of society and did not engage sufficiently with contemporary issues: one can concur with Hugh McLeod that the ‘early 1960s’, including also the later 1950s, were a bridge between the post-war years and the ‘all-embracing spirit of

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁰⁸ Sir John Betjeman (1906-1984), journalist, poet, writer and broadcaster, British Poet Laureate.

⁵⁰⁹ Betjeman, John and Green C. L. (ed.) *Letters*, Vol. II. (1951-1984), John Betjeman to Penelope Betjeman, 27 November 1959 (London: Methuen, 1995), 179-80.

experiment and iconoclasm of the later 1960s.⁵¹⁰ As Rowan Williams has observed, in the 1950s, a crisis was brooding in the environment of the Church of England; by the beginning of the 1960s, its complacency was no longer tenable.⁵¹¹ Similarly, in the words of Keith Clements, Anglican churchmen of the 1950s ‘did not feel much need to deal with fundamental questions of faith; absorbed in the feeling that the foundations of their belief were secure, they engaged rather in questions of superstructure or in the corollaries of Christian faith’ and their ethos was ‘bland, boring and complacent’.⁵¹² Theology remained somewhat isolated; in Alec Vidler’s admittedly biased opinion, ‘natural theology’ was neglected except by some Gifford lecturers, and philosophical theology was on the wane.⁵¹³

Many academics and clergymen were disturbed by the ‘ineffectualness of official Christianity in England,’ which, according to Horton Davies, seemed ‘respectable, supine, intellectually irrelevant, and apparently complacent’.⁵¹⁴ Their discourse was marked by an uncertainty as to the relevance of traditional theology for the modern world and the continuing role of organized religion as an instrument of conveying the message of God. The pressures to adapt religion, as the only means to save its vitality, were increasing. At the same time, the continuing resistance by the Church of England to certain modern developments, albeit mitigated by a cautious welcome given to certain aspects of contemporary life, was coming under review. A distinct, yet but no means uniform, group of theologians emerged, challenging the *status quo* both in academia and in the Church of England. They were pursuing various theological

⁵¹⁰ Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 82.

⁵¹¹ Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 111.

⁵¹² K. W. Clements, *Lovers of Discord: Twentieth-century Theological Controversies in England* (London: SPCK, 1988), 152.

⁵¹³ Alexander Roper Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life* (London: Collins, 1977), 177.

⁵¹⁴ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 201.

interests, but they were united in their effort to change the intellectual and cultural environment in which they found themselves. Williams played a prominent role in these developments.

David Edwards⁵¹⁵ has stressed the importance of novelty in the theology of the time: ‘What seemed to be discussable had to be new, but quite often “radical” theology *was* news, partly because of the spectacle of clergymen criticizing Christianity.’ He rightly saw the Cambridge of the 1960s as a fertile ground, for ‘although much of the university is secular, the traditional arrangements have survived which provide for a substantial department of theology (Divinity Faculty) in the university and for “deans” (Senior Chaplains) in the colleges.... There is a feeling of freedom.’⁵¹⁶ Nevertheless, Williams stayed away from the Faculty and preferred to work in the safe institutional haven of his college – he always considered himself more a clergyman than a theologian. While there was certainly an opposition to new developments, Edwards felt that ‘if the conservatives barked, they did not bite.’⁵¹⁷

In terms of the novelty of its theological thinking, Williams could hardly have found himself in a place that was more invigorating than Cambridge. Establishment Anglicanism was gradually challenged by newly radicalized ideas and although there were many differences between members of the emerging group, they all drew extensively on contemporary perspectives from the Continent. It is also the case, as Leslie Houlden notes, that during this period the links between the Church and all but the more conservative elements in the world of formal theology had grown ‘weaker and

⁵¹⁵ David Lawrence Edwards (1929-2018), historian and theologian, Publisher of *Honest to God* at SCM Press, Dean of King’s College, Cambridge; Canon of Westminster; Dean of Norwich; Provost of Southwark. In 1953-1954, he studied at Westcott House where he then taught 1954-1955.

⁵¹⁶ David L. Edwards, *Tradition and Truth: The Challenge of England’s Radical Theologians 1962-1989* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 10.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

weaker’, and ‘the “churchy” among theologians [had] become more and more distinguishable from the theological community in general, just as they [had] become more and more a minority’.⁵¹⁸

A watershed moment in the Church of England was 1961, when the archbishopric of Canterbury transferred from Geoffrey Fisher, who was more broad-church and an institutionally-minded prelate, to Michael Ramsey. Ramsey was an impressive figure of formidable intellect and deep spirituality, ‘patently orthodox and transparently godly’, and ‘more in tune with the challenges to the norms of establishment than his predecessor could ever have been’.⁵¹⁹ He was conservative in heart and liberal in mind, and often advocated change. Theologically he stood firmly in the reforming tradition as represented by F. D. Maurice⁵²⁰ and William Temple. His *Gospel and the Catholic Church*⁵²¹ was viewed as a highly influential and ecumenically spirited work.

At the same time, as observed by Callum Brown, ‘the period between 1956 and 1973 witnessed unprecedented rapidity in the fall of Christian religiosity amongst the British people. ... That in itself makes the “long sixties” highly significant in the history of British secularisation.’⁵²² He goes still further in maintaining that ‘since the 1960s, the churches have become increasingly irrelevant in the new cultural and ethical landscape.’⁵²³ Similarly, for Simon Green, it was as early as in 1963, when ‘it became educated common sense to describe contemporary England as a secular society.’⁵²⁴

Along the same lines, the Evangelical historian Mark Vasey-Saunders readily claims

⁵¹⁸ Leslie Houlden, ‘A Wilderness Voice’, *Theology*, 731 (September 1986), 340.

⁵¹⁹ D. Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 262.

⁵²⁰ Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872), theologian, activist and a founder of Christian socialism.

⁵²¹ Michael Ramsey, *Gospel and the Catholic Church* (London: Longmans, Green, 1936).

⁵²² Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding secularization 1800-2000* (London: Routledge, 2001), 188.

⁵²³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵²⁴ Simon Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 294.

that the 1960s ‘were to see an explosion of permissiveness and rejection of institutions that were to have a catastrophic effect on church allegiance.’⁵²⁵

It is clear that the ‘revolutionary’ 1960s affected every aspect of life in one way or another, including sexual morals, religious faith and academic theology: the role of Cambridge in this process cannot be overemphasized. Early in 1960, Cambridge Opinion carried out a survey which indicated that 33% of the student body belonged to some religious group or society, while 66% were prepared to call themselves Christian; 49% professed to be members of the Church of England, and of these, 61% went to church regularly, and 21% only occasionally. These figures helped to make Cambridge a most fertile ground for theological ferment.⁵²⁶

A centre of the debate between the traditionalists and the liberals was the Divinity Faculty where the study of the New Testament was dominated by C. F. D. Moule,⁵²⁷ Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity for twenty-five years, from 1951 to 1976. Although firmly grounded in orthodoxy, Moule was nevertheless open to new ideas and new evidence. His seminal work *The Birth of the New Testament* (1962) explored the context in which the New Testament was written. Remarkably, in his 1964 lecture on *Man and Nature in the New Testament* held in London, Moule was one of the first theologians to raise environmental questions.

At the same time, London, especially the Diocese of Southwark which included most of Greater London south of the River Thames, was emerging as a centre of novel, practical developments. In 1959, shortly before Williams’s arrival to Cambridge, Eric

⁵²⁵ Vasey-Saunders, 53-54.

⁵²⁶ Beeson, 72-73.

⁵²⁷ Charles Moule (1908-2007), clergyman and theologian.

James⁵²⁸ moved from the Chaplaincy at Trinity College, Cambridge, to become Vicar of St George's, Camberwell (which had links with Trinity College), and joined a group of priests invited by Bishop Mervyn Stockwood to focus on ministry among the working class in South London. James became the first full-time Director of *Parish and People*⁵²⁹ and under his leadership, the movement flourished. Later he became a Canon Residentiary at Southwark where he promoted what had become known as 'South Bank theology'. Runcie invited James to St Albans, because he 'has always been one to stand up for blacks, the poor, gays – all the fashionable causes of the sixties, but none the worse for that.'⁵³⁰

John Robinson

A towering figure of the 1960s (and a man with whom Williams regularly corresponded) was John Robinson who had taught New Testament at Cambridge before moving to episcopal responsibilities as Bishop of Woolwich in London. One can concur with Adrian Hastings that 'Robinson was a man for the sixties, apparently willing to demythologize almost anything of which modernity might conceivably be suspicious.'⁵³¹

Robinson was early marked as a controversial figure, following his appearance for the defence in the court trial triggered by the unabridged publication of D. H.

Lawrence's⁵³² novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960; his remarks on sexual

⁵²⁸ Eric James (1925-2015), Chaplain at Trinity College (1955-1959), Select Preacher of the University of Cambridge (1959-1960), Vicar of St George Camberwell (1959-1964), Director of Parish and People (1964-1969), Chaplain to the Queen (1984); biographer of John Robinson.

⁵²⁹ Founded in 1949, a response to the Liturgical Movement in Europe, succeeding in bringing together both the Anglo-Catholic and the Evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, placing the accent on Sunday worship.

⁵²⁹ Trevor Beeson (b. 1926), theologian, Dean of Winchester (1987-1996).

⁵³⁰ Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 165.

⁵³¹ Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity 1920-2000* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 537.

⁵³² D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930), poet and writer.

intercourse as something essentially sacred and akin to Holy Communion shocked many, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Geoffrey Fisher.⁵³³ Following his admonition to Robinson, a letter was sent to *The Times*: ‘We regret that on one of the infrequent occasions when a bishop has caught the ear of the nation in a manner befitting a spokesman of the National Church, he should have been publicly rebuked by the Archbishop of Canterbury.’⁵³⁴ The letter was signed by a Cambridge consortium consisting of G. W. H. Lampe,⁵³⁵ Donald MacKinnon,⁵³⁶ Montefiore, Vidler, and Williams.

For someone like Williams who was struggling with his sexuality, the testimony of Robinson was a first step towards coming to terms with his own issues; in an unpublished letter he wrote to Robinson that a considerable number of Christians were ‘immensely impressed’ by his evidence in the trial:

You made the fundamental Christian assertion that sex is good, and that intercourse between man and woman was a holy thing. This needed saying as publicly as it could. And you said it with clarity and courage. I thank God that He has made you into the sort of person who could say it. Of course, everything can do harm (not least the uninstructed study of the Bible). But for the people I know, the Archbishop’s statement is a cause of stumbling.⁵³⁷

A few days later, Williams wrote to Robinson again, this time about his ‘magnificent article in today’s *Observer*’⁵³⁸ which felt like going into ‘the fresh air after being in a

⁵³³ Archbishop Fisher wrote that the appearance of Robinson in the trial would obviously ‘cause confusion in many people’s minds between his individual right of judgment and the discharge of his pastoral duties’. (*The Observer*, 6 November 1960, 17)

⁵³⁴ ‘Letters on Lady Chatterley: A Final Selection’, *The Times*, 10 November 1960, 16. Cf. Eric James, *A Life of Bishop John A. T. Robinson: Scholar, Pastor, Prophet* (London: Collins, 1987), 104.

⁵³⁵ Geoffrey Hugo Lampe (1912-1980), Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham (1953-1960), Ely Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (1960-1970), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (1970-1979).

⁵³⁶ Donald Mackenzie MacKinnon (1913-1994), Scottish theologian, from 1960 Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge, Gifford Lecturer (1965, 1966).

⁵³⁷ Williams, letter to John Robinson, 6 November 1960 (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3539, f. 199).

⁵³⁸ John Robinson, ‘Why I Gave Evidence’, *The Guardian*, 13 November 1960, 7. In the article, Robinson wrote that ‘the greatest enemy of the stability of marriage’ was ‘a trivial, selfish and irresponsible attitude to sex, whether inside marriage or without’. He wrote that for a Christian, ‘no sexual relationship outside or before marriage can be sacred’, and ‘the more sacred we hold the sex relationship to be, the more concerned

fog'. The article was, nevertheless, rather conservative and still affirmed traditional views of impermissibility of a sexual relationship outside of marriage.⁵³⁹

One commentator noted that Robinson 'had his finger on a real problem in postwar British church life'.⁵⁴⁰ Shortly after the trial, at a conference at Keble College, Oxford, Robinson called for the adoption of new forms of Christian ministry, expressing his thorough dissatisfaction with the contemporary parochial system. He was to become one of the most important figures of a religious revival and the leading radical of the Church of England. The collection of essays and addresses *On being the Church in the World*⁵⁴¹ confirmed his trajectory.

Nevertheless, while he was at Cambridge before becoming Bishop of Woolwich, Robinson had been still comparatively young, a Fellow and Dean of Clare College, and rather mainstream and uncontroversial. Montefiore, who between 1959 and 1963 was a Lecturer at Theology, did not hesitate to describe the contemporary atmosphere at Cambridge as stifling: 'We were all in the grip of John Robinson's "biblical theology", which came near to fundamentalism, and certainly allowed you to choose the parts of the Bible you preferred.'⁵⁴² Long before the later controversy emanating from *Honest to God* and the South Bank in London, Robinson was thought to be a rather conventional writer.

In response, Montefiore was soon developing his own brand of radical theology as he was increasingly dissatisfied with Robinson's teaching. He discussed with Howard

we shall be not to degrade it either by adultery or fornication outside marriage or by misuse or indifference within it'.

⁵³⁹ Williams, letter to John Robinson, 13 November 1960 (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3539, f. 200).

⁵⁴⁰ N. T. Wright, 'Doubts about Doubt: *Honest to God Forty Years On*', *Journal of Anglican Studies* 3 (2) (2005), 195.

⁵⁴¹ John A. T. Robinson, *On being Church in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1960).

⁵⁴² Peart-Binns, 108.

Root,⁵⁴³ Fellow and Dean of Emmanuel College, what could be done to counter Robinson's rigid theological views and how to disturb what had seemed to them the ostrich-like condition of theology at Cambridge.⁵⁴⁴ In the end, a tragic event came to mark the beginning of a new chapter.

Alec Vidler

In 1956, Ivor Ramsay,⁵⁴⁵ Dean of King's College, threw himself to his death from the chapel roof.⁵⁴⁶ It was important that a strong personality should replace him:

Montefiore suggested Vidler, then Canon of St George's Chapel, Windsor. Vidler had a reputation as a fiery priest in Birmingham where he had been banned on the issue of the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament by Bishop E. W. Barnes.⁵⁴⁷ When he was Librarian at St Deiniol's Library in Hawarden,⁵⁴⁸ Vidler became editor of *Theology*, retaining this role until 1964. By his time at Windsor, his reputation as a fine apologist and a mission speaker was established.

Vidler's outlook was similar to that of W. L. Knox (with whom he had written *The Development of Catholic Modernism* in 1933) and who was Warden of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd⁵⁴⁹ between 1924 and 1940; Vidler was the eminent expert on F. D. Maurice, and in spite of his Anglo-Catholic churchmanship, and his membership of the

⁵⁴³ Howard Eugene Root (1926-2007), Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge (1956-1966), Professor of Theology at the University of Southampton (1966-1981), Director of the Anglican Centre in Rome and Counsellor on Vatican affairs to the Archbishop of Canterbury (1981-1991).

⁵⁴⁴ Peart-Binns, 108.

⁵⁴⁵ Ivor Ramsay (1902-1956), clergyman and theologian.

⁵⁴⁶ This suicide was not an isolated event. In the Parliamentary debates in the Suicide Bill, Baroness Wootton referred to a report stating that 'rates [of suicide] at Oxford and Cambridge were enormously higher [than elsewhere in England]' (Lords 2 March 1961).

⁵⁴⁷ Ernest William Barnes (1874-1953), Bishop of Birmingham (1924-1953), leader of the Modernist movement in the Church of England.

⁵⁴⁸ Located in Hawarden, Wales, a residential library founded in 1894 by William Gladstone (1809-1908), Prime Minister 1892-1894. Since 2010, it has been known as Gladstone's Library.

⁵⁴⁹ A dispersed religious community founded in Cambridge in 1913, bound by a common Rule, and requiring of its members religious discipline including celibacy.

Oratory, he was open to embrace ‘the new theology’. Vidler was also an expert on Modernism and had a thorough awareness of the contemporary developments in theology, and had moved away from the neo-orthodox thinking which was so characteristic of his theology before the war: for a while, he had been a devotee of Reinhold Niebuhr⁵⁵⁰ and his writings.⁵⁵¹ Showing ‘a propensity for decidedly strong views combined with an ability to work with others,’⁵⁵² he liked to call himself ‘a theological midwife’: ‘My *métier* has been much more that of a producer or editor of other people’s theological compositions than that of a practitioner of the art myself.’⁵⁵³ During his twenty-five years as editor of *Theology*, Vidler could demonstrate a proven track of assisting theologians to publish their pieces. His book *Scenes from Clerical Life* is a powerful, although highly subjective, testimony of the atmosphere in Cambridge during his time. Much in demand as a speaker and also in the television studio, he has been remembered as ‘one of the more picturesque priests in the Church of England’, ‘combining conservative Catholic practice with markedly liberal theological views’. He was ‘a sceptic in faith’s clothing’; the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge recalled him as ‘a man who believed with all his heart and doubted with all his mind’.⁵⁵⁴

Emergence of *Soundings* (1962)

It was Vidler who was to gather together a group around the collected volume *Soundings* which he was to edit, and which included Williams who contributed its most

⁵⁵⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), American Protestant theologian, author of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941-1943), attempting a synthesis of Renaissance thought with the theology of the Reformation.

⁵⁵¹ Densil Morgan, 263.

⁵⁵² Clements, 147.

⁵⁵³ Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 174.

⁵⁵⁴ ‘Obituary: Alec Vidler’, *The Telegraph*, 27 July 1987, 21.

controversial chapter.⁵⁵⁵ When he became the Dean of King's, Montefiore and Root approached him, on behalf of a group of young theologians, to ask whether he might be willing to convene and meet with them 'to discuss their dissatisfaction with the state of the contemporary discourse'.⁵⁵⁶ Vidler was the natural choice for their leader; they felt that the centenary of *Essays and Reviews*,⁵⁵⁷ a volume that had been produced by a group of Victorian divines (Frederick Temple,⁵⁵⁸ Benjamin Jowett,⁵⁵⁹ Mark Pattison,⁵⁶⁰ and others) in 1860 was a good opportunity for a fresh look at many issues in contemporary theology, in the tradition of the collected works *Lux Mundi* (1889),⁵⁶¹ *Foundations* (1912),⁵⁶² and *Essays Catholic and Critical* (1926).⁵⁶³ Jowett, one of the fathers of the *Essays and Reviews*, had explained their purpose in the 1860 volume: 'We are determined not to submit to this abominable system of terrorism, which prevents the statement of the plainest facts, and makes true theology or theological education impossible.'⁵⁶⁴ In Vidler's words, in the 1960s it was less a system of terrorism that had to be encountered than 'a state of complacency'.⁵⁶⁵

The emerging group shared similar concerns and felt that 'some new lead was called for or at least a *cri de coeur*'.⁵⁶⁶ Although the group consisted almost exclusively of theologians, it was by no means a monolith. Together they were less a school than a

⁵⁵⁵ Soundings, 69-101.

⁵⁵⁶ Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 176.

⁵⁵⁷ *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker and Son, 1860). Seven essays challenging the traditional biblical authority of the Church and denounced for their liberalism by a meeting of Anglican bishops in 1861.

⁵⁵⁸ Frederick Temple (1821-1902), theologian, Bishop of Exeter (1869-1885), Bishop of London (1885-1896), Archbishop of Canterbury (1896-1902).

⁵⁵⁹ Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), academic, Master of Balliol College, Oxford.

⁵⁶⁰ Mark Pattison (1813-1884), academic, Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford.

⁵⁶¹ Charles Gore, *Lux Mundi: a series of studies in the religion of the incarnation* (London: Murray, 1889)

⁵⁶² B. H. Streeter, R. Brook, W. H. Moberly, R. G. Parsons, A. E. J. Rawlinson, N. S. Talbot, and W. Temple, *Foundations: A Statement of Christian Belief in terms of Modern Thought: by seven Oxford men* (London: MacMillan, 1912).

⁵⁶³ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *Essays Catholic and Critical* (London: SPCK, 1926).

⁵⁶⁴ Victor Shea and William Whitla, *Essays and Reviews: The 1860 Text and its Reading* (Charlottesville; London: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 124.

⁵⁶⁵ Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 176.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

group of individual theologians in conversation with each other.⁵⁶⁷ Later they were labelled by David Edwards as ‘Christian radicals’⁵⁶⁸ which was a term used by Vidler himself who highlighted the diversity of the group as one of its main strengths: ‘If anyone is to understand what for convenience I am calling “Christian radicalism”, he must appreciate the independence and heterogeneity of its ingredients.’⁵⁶⁹

Some of the participants were already well-established figures, such as John Burnaby, an expert on Augustine, and George Woods,⁵⁷⁰ who had become Professor at King’s College, London. Robinson – still considered to be too conservative – was not invited. The original group further included Joseph Newbould Sanders,⁵⁷¹ Roland Walls,⁵⁷² Root, Montefiore and Williams.

Although Geoffrey Lampe, a renowned expert in the field of the New Testament studies (which was also the main field of interest of Montefiore and Sanders), was not present at the first meeting, he remained an interested party.⁵⁷³ There were, nonetheless, two areas of weakness in the group: science and comparative religion. The first gap was filled by inviting John Habgood, then Vice-Principal of Westcott House and a trained physiologist. Ninian Smart,⁵⁷⁴ a non-ordained member of the group and an emerging authority in comparative religion filled the second space. Also invited

⁵⁶⁷ Davies, 201.

⁵⁶⁸ David L. Edwards, *The ‘Honest to God’ Debate: Some Reactions to the Book ‘Honest to God’* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 21.

⁵⁶⁹ Alexander Roper Vidler, *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and Outcome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 45.

⁵⁷⁰ George Frederick Woods (1907-1966), philosopher and clergyman, tutor at Ripon Hall (1936), Chaplain of Downing College, Cambridge (1943), Lecturer at the Faculty of Divinity (1947), Professor at King’s College London (1964).

⁵⁷¹ Joseph Newbould Sanders (1913-1961), theologian, University Lecturer in Divinity, Dean of Peterhouse.

⁵⁷² Roland Walls (1918-2011), theologian, Chaplain and Dean of Corpus Christi, Cambridge (1952), Founder of the Community of the Transfiguration (1965), later converted to Roman Catholicism (1981).

⁵⁷³ Peart-Binns, 109.

⁵⁷⁴ Ninian Smart (1927-2001), Scottish academic and religionist, Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham (1961), Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster (1967), Professor of Comparative Studies at the University of Santa Barbara (1988), President of the American Academy of Religion (2000).

were Henry Chadwick⁵⁷⁵ and A. H. Dammers.⁵⁷⁶ Chadwick decided not to participate and, according to Vidler, at the time seemed more interested in the history of the dogma than in dogma itself.⁵⁷⁷

The group met periodically at Vidler's rooms at King's, with each of its members in turn submitting an essay about that aspect of the theological task that was most on his mind. The essays were frankly and critically evaluated and, following revisions, re-discussed. Although they were friends, a bit of tension was nevertheless present at times. Vidler recalls having some difficulty in keeping Woods and Williams, both essential members of the group, 'in double harness'.⁵⁷⁸

In January 1960, the group (including, apart from Burnaby, Chadwick, Dammers, Habgood, Montefiore, Root, Sanders, Vidler, Williams and Woods also Kathleen Bliss⁵⁷⁹ and Eric Heaton)⁵⁸⁰ spent a long weekend together at Launde Abbey in Leicestershire. Also invited were J. R. Lucas,⁵⁸¹ J. W. S. Pringle,⁵⁸² and Walls, although they did not accept.⁵⁸³ Williams was invited, at the same time, to attend a conference organized by the Bishop of Sheffield. However, he turned the invitation down to come to Launde Abbey, a retreat house and a conference centre in Leicestershire.⁵⁸⁴ Ronald Williams, the Bishop of Leicester,⁵⁸⁵ joined the group on

⁵⁷⁵ Henry Chadwick (1920-2008), academic and clergyman, Regius Professor at the University of Oxford (1959-1970), Dean of Christ Church (1969-1979), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge (1979-1985), Master of Peterhouse (1987-1993).

⁵⁷⁶ Alfred 'Horace' Dammers (1921-2004), academic and clergyman, Lecturer in New Testament at Queen's College, Birmingham, later Vicar of Holy Trinity, Millhouses, Canon Residentiary and Director of Studies at Coventry Cathedral (1965) and Dean of Bristol (1973-1987).

⁵⁷⁷ Peart-Binns, 109.

⁵⁷⁸ Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 178.

⁵⁷⁹ Kathleen Bliss (1908-1989), theologian.

⁵⁸⁰ Eric Heaton (1920-1996), Old Testament scholar, Fellow, Chaplain, and Tutor at St John's College, Oxford, Chancellor of Salisbury Cathedral (1959), later Dean of Christ Church, Oxford.

⁵⁸¹ John Randolph Lucas (1929-2020), philosopher.

⁵⁸² John William Sutton Pringle (1912-1982), zoologist.

⁵⁸³ Alec Vidler, letter to undisclosed recipients, 23 July 1959 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁸⁴ Williams, letter to Alec Vidler, 10 August 1959 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁸⁵ Ronald Williams (1906-1979), Bishop of Leicester (1953-1979).

Sunday evening, but did not take part in the theological deliberations, as specifically requested by Vidler who did not want him to be involved.⁵⁸⁶ The reason behind this request may have been that Ronald Williams was a steadfast defender of the Anglican establishment and many of his views were very conservative (he later abstained from voting on the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 which decriminalized homosexual acts in private in England and Wales).

Montefiore recalled that at first, the conference was ‘more an hilarious house party than anything else’⁵⁸⁷ (which is not surprising given that they met over the New Year). It was nonetheless a high-powered group of academics who rejected the reactionary orthodoxies of their day but who, at the same time, were ready to admit that they did not know many of the answers.⁵⁸⁸ In the end, the group did not decide to produce a new volume of essays and reviews immediately, but its members allocated subjects to themselves agreeing to meet armed with their draft essays again in a year’s time when they hoped to have sufficiently coherent material. It soon emerged that Dennis Nineham⁵⁸⁹ was projecting a similar volume and he was invited to a meeting in Cambridge on 24 May 1960 with the contributors resident there.⁵⁹⁰

Williams sent his essay to Vidler only on 13 December 1960, writing to Vidler on 4 January 1961, partially excusing himself from attending the January meeting due to a wedding he had to take in Devon.⁵⁹¹

⁵⁸⁶ Alec Vidler, letter to Canon F. L. Godfrey, 15 October 1959; Letter by Ronald Williams, Bishop of Leicester, to Alec Vidler, 22 December 1959 (both Vidler Papers).

⁵⁸⁷ Peart-Binns, 110.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁹ Dennis Nineham (1921-2016), theologian, Professor of Biblical and Historical Theology at King’s College, London (1958), Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge and Fellow at Emmanuel College (1964), Warden of Keble College, Oxford (1969-1979).

⁵⁹⁰ Alec Vidler, letter to Dennis Nineham, 2 May 1960 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹¹ Williams, letter to Alec Vidler, 4 January 1961 (Vidler Papers).

At a meeting held on 27 July 1961, the order of the topics to be presented was agreed, subject to the final meeting on 3 October.⁵⁹² Vidler insisted on a modern style of writing: ‘Lower case for pronouns referring to the Deity, and when in doubt whether or not to give a word an initial capital letter, don’t.’⁵⁹³ It was also agreed that the contributors would not receive any royalties, but each should receive three free copies of the book instead of the customary one in the case of a symposium. Each essayist was also asked to find a suitable lay friend to read his essay to ensure that there were no technical or obscure terms that would not be understood. The structure of the group changed for the last time in October 1961 when Walls decided to withdraw from the project.⁵⁹⁴

When the *Observer* proposed a serialization of the forthcoming book on its pages, Williams was against the idea claiming that it would ‘be folly’, and ‘cheapen the book’, adding that ‘extracts will diminish the weight of each essay’; he already felt that his essay would be the most controversial one.⁵⁹⁵ Having received a sample of the book, Williams found it ‘extremely well set out’.⁵⁹⁶ At the beginning of January 1962, Vidler proposed to the members of the group a dedication to the memory of Sanders who had died in December 1961; the draft was provided by Burnaby.⁵⁹⁷

The volume eventually called *Soundings: essays concerning Christian understanding* was published on 14 September 1962.⁵⁹⁸ In the preface, Vidler wrote that the time was not yet ‘ripe for major works of theological construction or reconstruction’; it was

⁵⁹² Alec Vidler, note of 27 July 1961 (Vidler Papers)

⁵⁹³ Alec Vidler, note of 1 August 1961 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹⁴ Walls, telegram to Alec Vidler, 25 October 1961 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹⁵ Williams, letter to Alec Vidler, 29 December 1961 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹⁶ Williams, letter to Alec Vidler, 22 November 1961 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹⁷ Alec Vidler, note of 4 January 1962 (Vidler Papers).

⁵⁹⁸ C. F. Eccleshare of Cambridge University Press, letter to Alec Vidler, 4 September 1962 (Vidler Papers).

rather ‘a time for ploughing, not reaping; or, to use the metaphor we have chosen for our title, ... a time for soundings, not charts or maps’.⁵⁹⁹ He felt that the group could best serve the cause of truth and the Church by ‘candidly confessing where our perplexities lie, and by not making claims which ... theologians are not at present in a position to justify.’⁶⁰⁰ For that reason he suggested the title, based on a text from Bishop Miles Smith:⁶⁰¹ ‘Man hath but a shallow sound and a short reach, and dealeth only by probabilities and likely-hoods.’⁶⁰² The title also contained an allusion to Acts 27.28ff., where sailors shipwrecked with St Paul are taking soundings of the depth of the sea. Although *Soundings* became a manifesto of a generation of theologians, Vidler later complained that it ‘did not turn out anything like so radical as some of us at least had originally hoped or as many of our discussions were’.⁶⁰³ Nevertheless, after the publication, *Soundings* rapidly proved a ‘remarkable achievement’ in terms of sales, with many copies being sold in America.⁶⁰⁴ Most importantly, *Soundings* became for Williams the formative background for his later work.

‘Theology and ‘Self-Awareness’ by Williams

It was, by all accounts, Williams who ‘struck a highly original note’⁶⁰⁵ in *Soundings*, having now overcome his earlier Anglo-Catholic phase. As Clements observed, his essay ‘stamped the whole collection with a rebellious image’,⁶⁰⁶ while Davies found him ‘the most radical interpreter of the new morality’.⁶⁰⁷ To Montefiore it was obvious

⁵⁹⁹ *Soundings*, ix.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰¹ Miles Smith (1554-1624), Bishop of Gloucester (1612-1624).

⁶⁰² Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 178.

⁶⁰³ Alec Vidler, letter to Roger Tennant, 29 October 1962 (Vidler Papers).

⁶⁰⁴ C. F. Eccleshare of Cambridge University Press, letter to Alec Vidler, 3 December 1962 (Vidler Papers).

⁶⁰⁵ Clements, 154.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶⁰⁷ Davies, 206.

that Williams would ‘get the limelight, with his challenge to the Church to take the account of the discoveries of Freud’.⁶⁰⁸ According to Brewitt-Taylor, Williams’s position implied that lack of personal authenticity was ‘a serious moral failure’, finding ‘the real pungency’ in Williams’s contribution in his attacks on conventional Christianity ‘on precisely this score’.⁶⁰⁹

Looking back at his contribution to *Soundings*, Williams wrote in his autobiography that he was trying to appropriate Christian doctrine by making it a part of his personal identity: ‘I saw that I could not truly say “I believe” unless it was another way of saying “I am”. And the “I” here was the total me, which included the unconscious self as well as the conscious.’⁶¹⁰ Thus, a costly psychological experience was brought into expression; Williams’s main argument was that theology needed to face the implications of the Freudian and Jungian analysis: the painful, growing awareness of one’s submerged self has an effect on one’s knowledge of God, and should have important implications for the restating of Christian doctrine.

(i) On importance of psychology for theology

In the opening of his essay, Williams comments on the fate or fortune of theological study to have been forced to absorb into its system the assured results of other branches of learning; this process started when, under the influence of Copernicus, theology had to abandon the geocentric universe and continued in the nineteenth century when theologians ‘were made to swallow a tougher diet’.⁶¹¹ The methods of historical criticism and the discoveries of natural science resulted in the necessity of a radical

⁶⁰⁸ Peart-Binns, 112.

⁶⁰⁹ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism in the Church of England and the Invention of the British Sixties, 1957-1970: The Hope of a World Transformed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 186.

⁶¹⁰ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 213.

⁶¹¹ *Soundings*, 69.

restatement of a number of traditional Christian doctrines. Darwin's findings were no longer ridiculed or anathematized, and a consensus was reached that Christianity was no longer incompatible with his theory of the origin of species. When Sigmund Freud⁶¹² was conducting his researches into human psychology, it was, according to Williams, 'a new potential enemy', 'preparing a new sort of weapon'.⁶¹³

In his essay, Williams first presents the critiques of Freud by Lord Adrian,⁶¹⁴ C. E. Raven,⁶¹⁵ and Gregory Zilboorg,⁶¹⁶ seeing Freud's genius in his discovery of a completely new system of explanation which can make sense of subjective feelings so far unexplained. Nonetheless, Freud's theories cannot be apprehended merely by intellectual study. Williams goes on to an approach similar to Augustine's '*Believe that thou mayest understand*'.⁶¹⁷ As with Augustine, so with Freud, what is required is not irrational or intellectual credulity, but rather the risk of opening oneself to a reality greater than is at present known to us. For Augustine, the reality was God; for Freud, the unknown self. For Augustine, the way was prayer; for Freud, analysis. Just as one cannot know God simply by an academic study of prayer, so one cannot get to know one's unknown self just by studying books about psychoanalysis.

The contribution of Freud and his 'successors, disciples or deviationists' is seen in their identification of processes as to how we can discover within ourselves a great deal of what was previously unknown to us, and such discoveries can tell us a great deal of how we think and feel about God. This involves a costly surrender of what we imagine

⁶¹² Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis.

⁶¹³ *Soundings*, 69.

⁶¹⁴ Lord Adrian (Edgar Douglas), *Report of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (XI, 42) 1954.

⁶¹⁵ Charles E. Raven, *Natural Religion and Christian Theology* (Gifford Lectures 1952) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 195.

⁶¹⁶ Gregory Zilboorg, 'L'amour de Dieu chez Freud', *La vie spirituelle*, 1953, 8.

⁶¹⁷ Cf. Augustine, *Tractate 29* (on John 7.14-18).

or hope or fear we are, to what in our fullness we really are. Unless we are prepared for this surrender, the new understanding of human nature which Freud initiated will tell us nothing useful about belief in God: 'It is only by doing the truth that we come to the light. ... Much talk about God cuts no ice. What is talked about has never been lived. And that is why self-awareness cannot grow by the study of text-books on psychology.'⁶¹⁸

Later in the essay, Williams revisits the relationship of Freud and Christianity. Freud, in Williams's interpretation, saw in Christianity 'a weapon placed in the hand of the oppressor which he would use to continue and consolidate his absolute power under cover of the most respectable disguise'.⁶¹⁹ What eluded Freud was that 'genuine Christianity' is in fact 'an unqualified protest against any attempt ... to reinforce the oppressor within'.⁶²⁰

Here, Williams formulates his main argument: the principle of the Incarnation is the principle of involvement, in particular the identification with the afflicted, for in Christ, God involved himself totally in our human predicament. Williams claims that believers are tempted to forsake Christ and flee as they cannot bear to put themselves in the same class as the afflicted. Yet for Williams this is also the road to resurrection, to a fuller, richer life.

This was for many perhaps the most problematic statement of the essay: the necessity of the identification with the afflicted equated with 'the involvement, the incarnation, and the cross, of self-awareness'.⁶²¹ Nevertheless, Williams's critics failed (or did not

⁶¹⁸ *Soundings*, 73.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*

want) to understand that he does not assume that human affinity with the psychologically deranged would be a mandatory prerequisite to the understanding and conduct of our lives, viewing it rather only as one possible way of opening one's awareness.

(ii) On God

Williams then presents his thoughts about God, expressed almost exclusively in terms of negative statements. Statements about God remain for him necessarily analogical, and he acknowledges that while we may also speak of God in terms of causality, that merely means that there is something which 'in some way or other corresponds to causality as we know it in this world'.⁶²² In terms of affirmative statements about God, Williams makes the following confession: 'God is my father, my king, my judge, my lover, my friend, the first cause who upholds all things by the word of his Power and who directs all things by the operation of his Providence.'⁶²³ But soon he strikes a completely different note:

Since life for me is not all I think it could be ... it is inevitable that I should feel deep resentment against the almighty Father, the omnipotent king, the Person who is always claiming that he loves me utterly, but who, in terms of the language used to describe him, is ultimately responsible for all the ills from which I suffer.⁶²⁴

According to Williams, when we become aware of this resentment, it can be rationalized by either becoming a puzzled agnostic or a militant atheist. But if one remains a Christian believer, such feelings of resentment are both 'shocking and irrational'.⁶²⁵

⁶²² Ibid., 75.

⁶²³ Ibid.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 76.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

For Williams, we think of God often through analogies with people in the past under whose control and care we have been – people who have not yet been made perfect in love. He notes that in the Bible, ‘God is constantly represented making statements of a kind which belong to such imperfect people’.⁶²⁶ Our attitude to God, shaped by the way in which we can conceive him, is like an iceberg: a small amount appears above the surface of consciousness, below is the vast submerged mass we do not see.

Accordingly, Williams believes that it is necessary to replace the terms in which we think of God, for those terms represent merely our past experience of earthly things.

Faith, Williams tells his readers, is the gift of God (and he elaborates on this thought later in the essay) and cannot be fabricated by human beings. Likewise, it cannot be created by psychological analysis, nor by Bible-reading or attendance at Mass.

Analysis can, however, under God’s providence, strip a person of what was mistakenly taken to be an experience of God and show him or her that it was merely the experience of an earthly substitute. It can lead human beings along the negative way, detaching them and stripping them of what they once took as an experience of God, and showing that, on the contrary, it was an experience ‘of what eye has seen and ear heard, things of the earth which enter into the heart of man’.⁶²⁷

(iii) Criticism of the Book of Common Prayer

Williams then turns to the liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer. He had already expressed his condemnation of it as ‘our incomparably unchristian Liturgy’ in his previous contribution to *Theology*,⁶²⁸ and goes further than Burnaby’s advocacy for certain revisions. In *Soundings*, he went on criticize the use of the psalms which are

⁶²⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁶²⁷ Cf. 1 Corinthians 2.9 (KJV).

⁶²⁸ Williams, ‘Unchristian Liturgy’. Cf. p. 118.

allegedly dominated ‘by a temper which even the most reckless allegorizing can scarcely baptize into Christianity’.⁶²⁹

For Williams, the God contained in the pages of the Book of Common Prayer seems to be ‘a merciless egocentric tyrant, incapable of love, and thus having to be manipulated or cajoled into receiving his children’. It is one thing to make a straightforward confession of sin as is done in the *Confiteor* at the beginning of the Roman Catholic mass; it is, however, another thing altogether ‘to harp continuously and at length upon our utter unworthiness to approach God’,⁶³⁰ as is done in Cranmer’s Communion Service. His General Confession, with its repeated and elaborate protestations of guilt, looks to Williams like ‘a desperate attempt to persuade God to accept us on the score of our eating the maximum dust possible’.⁶³¹ Even after the Absolution, the Anglican believer remains for Williams uncertain of that absolution and so must be reassured by four quotations from the Scripture: ‘the Dominical words are not enough and must be reinforced by what is said by St. Paul and St. John’.⁶³² Williams goes on to show that what looks like Cranmer’s deep lack of faith in God’s mercy communicates itself to those who use his liturgy, and produces in them ‘a spirit of bondage again unto fear from which Christ came to us’.⁶³³ This is all the more likely, William adds (repeating the formulations previously used in *Theology*), with the Prayer of Humble Access coming between the *Sanctus* and the Consecration Prayer: ‘Unless, to the very last, we assure God of our unworthiness so much as to gather up the crumbs under this table, he may lock the dining-room door in our face.’⁶³⁴ Williams does not deny that, on one

⁶²⁹ *Soundings*, 236.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*

⁶³² *Ibid.*

⁶³³ *Ibid.*

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*

level, Cranmer was an orthodox believing Christian; but he suggests that in Cranmer, along with his belief in the Christian gospel, there lurked ‘a belief in a celestial Mr. Pontifex, unloving and incapable of being loved, who must thus be manoeuvred into giving his children what they need’.⁶³⁵

(iv) On moral values

In the following part of his essay, Williams presents an exposition of his views on Christian moral values. Much conventional morality is for him ‘a Pharisaic masquerade’ and a mockery. In response, Williams calls for a reassessment of our understanding of ‘how and when we give ourselves and how and when we refuse to do so’ – this is the standard by which actions can be measured. Otherwise, he finds it impossible to describe certain actions as wicked and others as good: ‘For only I myself can discover what actions I am giving myself and in what actions I am refusing to give.’⁶³⁶ Arguing from personalism to situational authenticity, Williams holds that when we are faced with a moral decision, we should not be asking ourselves whether actions of such and such a type are morally right or wrong, nor ask God to show his will. Similarly, he refuses to apply the utilitarian criterion of assessing the consequences of the various courses of actions; instead, he calls for a process of discovery as to whether in a particular action, the agent is giving himself or refusing to give.

If one is to give oneself away to another person, one cannot, in any circumstances, exploit her or him, for ‘to exploit is to withhold’, and exploitation is totally incompatible with giving. At the same time, Williams disagrees that in certain

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁶³⁶ Ibid.

specifiable circumstances one is always exploiting and never giving: ‘Yet this is what the Church says about sexual intercourse outside of marriage.’⁶³⁷ He is, nevertheless, not dismissive of the teaching of the Church on this topic in its entirety; Williams admits that extramarital intercourse ‘may be often, perhaps almost always, an exploitation, unilateral or mutual’.⁶³⁸ But he concludes that there are cases where it need not be and is not.

In a widely quoted and heavily criticized passage of his essay, Williams brings up a scene from the Greek film *Never on Sunday*,⁶³⁹ about a prostitute in Piraeus.⁶⁴⁰ A young sailor is afraid, nervous, and on edge, as he distrusts his capacity for physical union. Being prey to destructive doubts about himself, and not to moral scruples, he visits a prostitute who gives herself to him in such a way that, in the end, he acquires confidence and self-respect. The sailor goes away, in Williams’s view, ‘a fuller person than he came in’: ‘What is seen is an act of charity which proclaims the glory of God.’⁶⁴¹

Williams follows this example with another quote from a film, this time a British one: *The Mark*.⁶⁴² This film similarly tells the story of the rehabilitation into normality of a paedophile strongly attracted to young girls. Only when he has extramarital sex with a woman of his own age is he capable of establishing enough self-confidence to be delivered from his utterly destructive abnormality and, in Williams’s words, ‘he has been made whole’.⁶⁴³ Williams concludes that ‘where there is healing, there is Christ, whatever the Church may say about fornication. And the appropriate response is –

⁶³⁷ Ibid.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.

⁶³⁹ *Never on Sunday*, dir. Jules Dassin (1960, Lopert Pictures Corporation, Greece/USA).

⁶⁴⁰ Also cited in Joseph P. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: SCM, Press 1966), 126-27.

⁶⁴¹ *Soundings*, 81.

⁶⁴² *The Mark*, dir. Guy Green (1961, 20th Century Fox, United Kingdom).

⁶⁴³ *Soundings*, 82.

Glory to God in the Highest'.⁶⁴⁴ These two men are for Williams the victims of unconscious hypocrisy, like the Pharisees in the gospels and many good churchpeople today who are 'keeping the law as an insulation against the living God, the Creator'.⁶⁴⁵

(v) On faith

Williams then further elaborates on the concept of faith, claiming that conscious reason may give its loyal assent to the Apostle Paul's discovery that we are justified by faith, not by works. Williams's approach nonetheless differs from the traditional understanding of this concept:

For Williams, that the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. However, faith is not understood as intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions, but rather as the confidence in one's inner, true self; faith is 'confidence in life'. It is not a conviction, but something of intuitive nature, 'a given (not acquired) certainty that the forces on our side are greater than the forces opposed to us. In Christian language, this is faith in God.'⁶⁴⁶ Later in his essay, Williams addresses the question of faith once more: he sees it deep inside the subject, as 'the awareness that I am more than I know'.⁶⁴⁷ Faith understood as a gift emphasises 'the scandal of our human condition – the scandal of our absolute dependence'.⁶⁴⁸ This means that lack of faith in God is shown by our lack of belief in ourselves as flowing from God's creative act. Justification by faith thus means for Williams that 'a man has nothing else on which to depend except his receptivity to what he can never own or manage'.⁶⁴⁹ And this very capacity to receive

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 94.

cannot be the result of effort. Faith is therefore necessarily something given, not something achieved.

(vi) On sin

Next, Williams addresses the concept of sin which for him – on the general level of the human condition – arises when we identify the ‘known self’ with the ‘total self’.

Discussing the seven deadly or ‘root’ sins – pride, gluttony, sloth, covetousness, anger, lust, and envy – he argues that each of them is caused by one’s failure to recognize the incompleteness of the superficial self: ‘due to the non-faith which leads me to equate myself without remainder with what I already know or feel about myself’.⁶⁵⁰

Williams starts with pride, understood as ‘the inordinate love of one’s own excellence’, finding its essence in the reliance upon the artificial self: that is why ‘despair lies close to pride, and nemesis overtakes the arrogant’.⁶⁵¹ The other six root sins are, in Williams’s view, analogous to pride, arising and maintaining their strength – Williams here becomes somewhat repetitive – because of one’s incapacity to believe that one is more than the self which one knows. He brings an example of inciting gluttony by various advertisements so that we begin to see ourselves as little more than persons for whom living is equated with the enjoyment of food and drink. Unless we eat and drink well, we feel we are not ourselves, for we have equated our being with our capacity to enjoy this particular type of sensory satisfaction. (While this example contains an astute observation on the teleology of the advertising industry, there remains a slight irony that it is presented by a writer who was known to enjoy both good food and drink throughout his life and later suffered from obesity).

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 85.

Sloth is for Williams more complicated because it has a double motivation: it arises, he claims, from despair with the self we know and from the fear of the self we do not know. In turn, laziness is always, Williams maintains, a superficial symptom of a disease far more rooted, and the disease is always our inability to realise more of ourselves than we do.⁶⁵² Speaking of covetousness, Williams recalls the story of Naboth's vineyard.⁶⁵³ Williams believes that Ahab had lack of confidence in his kingship and the possession of the vineyard was precisely the sort of evidence which he needed: 'coming into the possession of what I covet, I am driven to covet something else'.⁶⁵⁴ The self is also the root of anger: for Williams it is primarily anger against oneself, arising from one's inability to realise one's potential.⁶⁵⁵

According to Williams, lust is not just sheer physical appetite; it arises from the impossibility of living without a sense of one's own value, so that if we are unable to give ourselves value from our own being, 'we try to steal it from somebody else'. Even the practice of religion can be a form of lust, and here the physical appetites are hardly brought into play at all.⁶⁵⁶ Finally, envy is for Williams founded on the conviction that we lack something which another person possesses. But unlike lust, envy does not seek identification with the possessor: it recognises that what they have has can never be our own. 'Envy faces the absolute distinction between me and the other, and leads in consequence to bitterness.'⁶⁵⁷ We feel the other person has life in a way in which we have it not.

⁶⁵² Ibid.

⁶⁵³ Cf. I Kings 21.

⁶⁵⁴ *Soundings*, 87.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid.

(vii) On self-awareness and the Virgin Mary

In the penultimate part of his essay, Williams introduced further lines of thought as to how self-awareness contributes to our understanding of Christian truth:

The first is concerned with the very centre of Christian faith and love – Christ in Gethsemane and upon the Cross. For Williams, the notion of Christ as the sin-bearer has been conventionalized, which means a new approach is demanded: ‘Christ’s total loss of the sense of his own value, which is ten thousand times worse than physical pain or death, was the stuff and substance which God raised up in glory.’⁶⁵⁸ In Christ, God ‘made it into the material of a full and infinitely satisfying communion with all that is’, ‘took inward agony and rage and torture, and made of them eternal life which is eternal love’, and ‘converted the destructive fire of our human agony into the living and life-giving flame which is himself.’⁶⁵⁹

The second line deals with forgiveness: Williams believes that when one says that God forgives, one generally means that God accepts people, without reservation, as they are: ‘He accepts the me who, because he is only part of himself and equates this part with the whole, is ugly, distorted and subject (although largely unaware of) to compulsive actions – that is, actions which, although rationalized ably enough, are in fact attempts to preserve at all costs my limited awareness of what I am.’⁶⁶⁰

The final illustration concerns the Virgin Mary. First affirming that he believes Mary to be truly the Mother of God, and, like numberless Christian believers, asks for her prayers, Williams comes back to his epistemological remarks about the possible ways

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 97.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 98.

of understanding God, reiterating that God cannot be directly described, but only indirectly indicated by analogies drawn from our human experience. As previously explained, the figure of God the Father may become a destructive idol: this happened, to a limited extent, in the religious feelings of Calvin and Cranmer and, with regard to the latter, Williams comes back to his idea about the shadow of this idol in the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer. Williams points out that in himself, God is no more a father than he is a mother. God's divine love is transmitted by means of our experience of human love which, if it is to be properly proportioned, must be both masculine and feminine: if our love is to grow into balanced maturity, we must be loved by both a mother and a father, as 'a sacrament in two kinds'. Attempts should be thus made to think of and worship God not only as our father but also as our mother.

From a motherlike perception of God Williams makes a bridge to the importance ascribed from early days to the Virgin Mary,⁶⁶¹ whom he regards as 'the symbol of that aspect of God's love which can be conveyed to us only by means of a feminine analogy'. If the function of the Virgin Mary is recognized as transmitting that element of God's love which the father-symbol cannot convey could be recognized, Williams argues that Protestants might be more willing to receive her. He claims that her absence can sometimes have bad results in the formation of personality, for 'Our Lady has never been a forbidding figure'.⁶⁶² Instead, she has been always associated with that love and understanding in which women excel. Williams maintains that, in his opinion, Freud himself, as a Jew, was brought up in an entirely father-ridden religion and wonders whether his description of religion as psychopathology is partly attributable to

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁶² Ibid.

that fact. The Roman Church, in declaring the Virgin Mary to have been born without taint of original sin, ‘gave expression in a theological idiom to what Freud later discovered in his consulting-room – the overwhelming influence for good or bad which a mother has upon her infant and child’.⁶⁶³ His final point is that we shall not avoid idolatry by simply ignoring the Virgin Mary, since we may well fall into ‘idolatry’ of worshipping the heavenly Father – if we have not been fortunate enough to enjoy the catharsis of Freud.

When emphasizing motherlike aspects of God, Williams seems to concur with one of Augustine’s perceptions of God in the *Confessions*. Rosemary Radford Ruether notes how in this work, Augustine presents God as choosing him from conception and leads him to his conversion and reception to the Church, like a mothering parent. However, she continues, in his later writings, Augustine ‘will strictly purge his imagery of God of any mothering traits’ and will use the imagery of the strict *pater familias* who becomes punitive, not nurturing and gentle. This is the image of the stern father who chastises his children for their own good, an image Williams had been fleeing from ever since his childhood.⁶⁶⁴ The image of Virgin Mary as particularly loving may thus be a substitute for Williams’s mother’s lack of affection. By the time of the publication of *Soundings*, Williams may have abandoned his Anglo-Catholic views, but clearly retained a deep affection for the Blessed Virgin which is commonplace in that tradition (and not just for many homosexual Anglican Catholics).

Williams’s pronouncements were significant in the contemporary context: Williams was one of the first to address the gender paradigm in the theological realm, the

⁶⁶³ Ibid., 101.

⁶⁶⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, ‘Augustine: Sexuality, Gender, and Women’ in *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, ed. by Judith Chelius Stark (Pennsylvania State University Press: University Park, 2007), 63.

exclusively male language for God, and reconstructed the traditional perception of God as including both a male and a female element. In this respect, his voice was novel in the context of English theological discourse and preceded the emergence of feminist theology.⁶⁶⁵

Williams's essay cannot be seen in isolation from those of the other contributors. Each essay forms an element in the mosaic of the volume, and the overall novelty of *Soundings* is a result of all the voices represented. Root joined Williams in using Tillichian terminology when he speaks of 'ultimate concern' as he examined natural theology in 'Beginning It All Over Again'. The notion of 'ultimate concern' also appeared in 'The Uneasy Truce Between Science and Theology' by Habgood. Woods, in his essay 'The Idea of the Transcendent' examined human experience – a cornerstone of Williams's writings – as a means of experiencing God. Some three decades before Williams himself was to recognize the importance of non-Christian religions, Smart addressed 'The Relation between Christianity and the Other Great Religions'. Sanders, who tragically died before the publication, was the author of 'The Meaning and Authority of the New Testament' where he partially rejected, like Williams, the authority of the Church. Vidler appended to Sanders's essay his 'Note on *Authority and Liberty* in the Church'. In his essay 'Towards a Christology for Today', Montefiore examined the 'radical weakness' of the formula of Chalcedon. Legalistic religion is essentially self-centred, Lampe argued in 'The Atonement: Law and Love'. Woods's second essay, 'The Grounds of Christian Moral Judgments', called for fresh

⁶⁶⁵ Cf. Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'The emergence of Christian feminist theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. by Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3-22.

principles of situation ethics (favoured by Williams). In his examination of ‘Christian Prayer’, Burnaby asked about its significance. The final essay by Vidler was dedicated to the relationship between ‘Religion and the National Church’.

The Mascall controversy

Given that the authors of *Soundings* challenged the tradition that they had inherited as academic theologians and churchmen, they understood their task, in Root’s phrase, as ‘beginning all over again’. It was therefore of little surprise that some readers felt shocked and scandalized seeing that instead of developing the potential of Christian doctrine and confronting it with the life and thought of the contemporary world, the group appeared to offer little guidance in the doctrinal and moral maze of the day. The authors were criticized for having misunderstood the function of the Christian theologian and for having ignored many contemporary questions.

As a leading Anglo-Catholic theologian in the Thomist tradition and Professor of Historical Theology at King’s College, London, E. L. Mascall⁶⁶⁶ offered his thorough critique of *Soundings* in the booklet *Up and Down in Adria*. He was deliberately using the nautical metaphorical language, which correlated with the wit of Ronald Knox⁶⁶⁷ who offered his critique of the 1912 collection *Foundations* published as *Some Loose Stones* the following year.⁶⁶⁸ On a general level, Mascall found that *Soundings* suffered from three serious deficiencies. First, it failed to ask the really fundamental questions. Secondly, it looked to the wrong quarters for answers. Thirdly, it failed to look to the

⁶⁶⁶ Eric Lionel Mascall (1905-1933), clergyman and theologian, Professor of Historical Theology at King’s College, London (1962-1973), a member of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd.

⁶⁶⁷ Ronald Abuthnott Knox (1888-1957), a theologian and an Anglican priest, later converted to Roman Catholicism.

⁶⁶⁸ Ronald A. Knox, *Some loose stones: being a consideration of certain tendencies in modern theology illustrated by reference to the book called ‘Foundations’* (London: Longmans, Green, 1913).

quarters in which the answers might be, and to a large extent were already being, found. Mascall also criticized the authors of the volume for not being sufficiently rooted in contemporary theological discourse and for neglecting notable attempts of others at dealing with their respective questions.⁶⁶⁹ For him, what was at stake was ‘nothing less than the basic affirmations of Christian faith and morals, the tradition, the *paradosis*, the whole *via vitae* of the Christian Church.’⁶⁷⁰

Mascall was especially vigorous in his criticism of Williams for stressing too much Freud and neglecting other depth-psychologists, and for his wilful attempt at redefining faith as trust in the worth of one’s larger self. He criticized Williams on three main grounds: firstly, that Williams appeared to have replaced salvation by Christ with a psychological technique. Secondly, that if Christian moral theology ought to be completely reconstructed in the light of psychology, Williams should have recognized that Freudianism was only one of a number of schools of modern psychology and that its basic postulates were not accepted by many contemporary experts on purely empirical grounds.⁶⁷¹ Thirdly, that, while saying a great deal about the psychological structure of man, Williams did not sufficiently distinguish between the psychological and the ethical side of a human being. Finally, Mascall argued that Williams substituted the Freudian notion of psychological maladjustment for the Christian notion of sin, although Mascall acknowledged Williams’s attempt, towards the end of the essay, to Christianize his Freudian thesis. In short, Mascall judged that Williams’s talk

⁶⁶⁹ Mascall, *Up and down in Adria: Some Considerations of the Volume Entitled Soundings* (London: Faith, 1963), 14.

⁶⁷⁰ Mascall, 10-11.

⁶⁷¹ Cf. Victor White, *God and the Unconscious* (London: Harvill, 1952); Joseph Nuttin, *Psychoanalysis and Personality: A Dynamic Theory of Normal Personality* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1954); Rudolf Allers, *The Successful Error: A Critical Study of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1941).

about the necessity of self-abnegation was ‘concerned with self from start to finish’ and God was mentioned virtually always only as the ground of the unknown self.⁶⁷²

Mascall’s assessment of one of the illustrations brought up by Williams was most sarcastic:

Is a more old-fashioned moralist mistaken in suggesting that perhaps the young sailor might have become a deeper fuller person still (whatever those somewhat vague words imply) if he had become convinced of the wickedness of fornication? Has Mr. Williams, I wonder, any similar recipe for the man who is timid and nervous not because he thinks dishonesty is sinful but because he doubts his capacity successfully to rob a bank?⁶⁷³

Using a maritime metaphor, Mascall went even further and wrote:

Mr. Williams has by implication claimed not only to have found bottom with his lead but also to have brought up highly important and hitherto unknown specimens from the ocean bed which have revolutionized his whole understanding of the great amphibian Man.⁶⁷⁴

For Mascall, Williams ‘has merely produced from the lower and less salubrious parts of the ship some interesting but unattractive biological organisms’ that cannot provide the necessary materials for a twentieth-century pattern of Christian living. Mascall concluded that ‘this particular Leadsman has failed to take any soundings if the sea-bed at all but has, without understanding what he was doing, devoted himself to the unpleasant but, when properly performed, sanitary task of pumping out the bilge of the ship.’⁶⁷⁵ This explains the unflattering title of his chapter on Williams, ‘Pumping out the Bilge’.

In 1963 and 1964, Williams and Mascall engaged in an extended exchange on the pages of *Theology* where Williams replied with the claim that Mascall regarded as self-

⁶⁷² Mascall, 31-53.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 43.

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

evident a clear distinction between the ‘normal’ people and those who are ‘mentally sick’. Yet, he felt, science had shown that this is not the case. Williams asked whether their dreams at night always conform to the pattern of healthy rationalizations when they are awake. In a world that can be destroyed by nuclear weapons, ‘what ... Professor Mascall call[s] normal, I call pathological.’⁶⁷⁶

In his response, Mascall claimed that Williams was confusing the two questions: firstly, whether any person is perfectly normal; and secondly, whether the norm is a special case of the pathological or whether the pathological is a distortion of the norm. While Mascall was prepared to admit that nobody is completely normal, he was not ready to accept that the standards should be based on the examination of wildly abnormal cases. Williams had ‘failed to show that a translation of the truths of one discipline into the idiom of another is either accurate or adequate’.⁶⁷⁷ In response to Williams’s concluding sentence, he accused him of having his terms ‘mixed up’; accordingly, it was Williams who should explain what he thought is normal.

Williams retorted sharply:⁶⁷⁸ Mascall’s approach suffered from the limitations of his academic background, which resulted in a kind of ‘theological mathematics’, which sought ‘to reduce man to the stature of a thinking machine’. Mascall knew ‘very little of Freud, Jung or Adler’, shown by his description of Williams as a Freudian fundamentalist when ‘anybody who knew about these things’ would have realized that he owed most to Jung. To Mascall’s final question, Williams offered the riposte that on the Christian view, the standard of normality is Jesus Christ. For Williams, Mascall’s type of argument was based on a familiar ground trodden for centuries but which had

⁶⁷⁶ H. A. Williams, ‘Up and Down in Adria’, *Theology*, 521 (November 1963), 460-61.

⁶⁷⁷ Eric Mascall, ‘Letters to the Editor: Up and Down in Adria’, *Theology*, 522 (December 1963), 508.

⁶⁷⁸ H. A. Williams, ‘Letters to the Editor: Up and Down in Adria’, *Theology*, 523 (January 1963), 21-23.

lost its meaning in the contemporary world. Williams added, with the caveat that it applied to both of them, a verse from the Acts: ‘*Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost; as your fathers did, so do ye.*’⁶⁷⁹

Mascall countered once more concluding with the observation that Williams’s ‘use of the Church’s admittedly deplorable past record in the scientific realm in order to discredit criticism of his own use of contemporary psychological theory seems to me to be sheer intimidation and obscurantism’.⁶⁸⁰ The discoveries of modern psychology were to be integrated into Christianity and not substituted for it; and Williams himself made a number of references to Freud and not a single one to Jung. Mascall reiterated that his main objection was on the ground of Williams’s statement that ‘a man can come to know his true psychological condition only by undergoing psycho-analysis and that psycho-analysis is an indispensable prerequisite to faith’. The exchange was closed by another text from Scripture: ‘*Believe not every Spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God*’.⁶⁸¹

Other contemporary echoes

Although *Soundings* contained other contributions, Williams’s essay was deemed to be the most important one and reviews concentrated on him.

Williams’s essay was indeed cited as evidence of a turning point in moral standards.⁶⁸²

This made it the subject of harsh criticism, among others by the evangelical theologian

⁶⁷⁹ Acts 7.51 (KJV).

⁶⁸⁰ Eric Mascall, ‘Letters to the Editor: Up and Down in Adria’, *Theology*, 524 (February 1964): 68-69

⁶⁸¹ I John 4.1 (KJV).

⁶⁸² ‘Morality: “Army” General Hits at New Evils’, *Daily Express*, 1 November 1963, 18; ‘Morals: Bishop Tells of Church’s Neglect’, *Daily Express*, 5 July 1963, 6; ‘The Defenders’, *Daily Express*, 9 September 1963, 8.

J. I. Packer.⁶⁸³ Similarly, Christopher Driver (better known as a food critic, but with a strong affinity for the Church) noted in *The Guardian*: ‘Mr Williams admits that the sociological implications of substituting “Thou shalt not exploit another person” for “Thou shalt not commit adultery” have yet to be worked out: one thing at a time.’⁶⁸⁴

When Williams was challenged by Edwin Morris⁶⁸⁵ to say categorically that fornication was a sin,⁶⁸⁶ he replied:

I believe that goodness consists in generous self-giving and evil in refusal or incapacity to give. I can conceive of circumstances where such generous self-giving is present in a sexual union outside marriage. (I gave an example of it in *Soundings*.) And, where sex outside marriage is the medium of self-giving of this kind, then I would unhesitatingly say that it is not sinful.⁶⁸⁷

Another critical voice was that of Alan Richardson,⁶⁸⁸ Professor of Christian Theology at Nottingham and later Dean of York, who replied with the publication of *Four Anchors from the Stern*. He accused the authors of unsubstantiated panicking in the stormy waters of liberalism. Of psychologizing tendencies in theology, he sardonically commented:

The new Freudian theology will effect our salvation – Christ and his cross are by the way; they are symbols of the truth about love – by analysing away our repressions and inhibitions (that is, our ‘religion’), and we shall become truly integrated persons, adult and religionless. Amongst other blessings we shall find ourselves no longer separated from the great majority of our fellow human beings in the twentieth century, who have already attained adulthood and dispensed with religion.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸³ J. I. Packer, ‘Liberals Give Tongue’, *Church of England Newspaper*, 11 January 1963, 4.

⁶⁸⁴ Christopher Driver, ‘The Morality of Harry Williams’, *The Guardian*, 22 May 1963, 11.

⁶⁸⁵ Edwin Morris (1894-1971), Bishop of Monmouth (1945-1967), Archbishop of Wales (1957-1967). He was known for his controversial views, among them that alcohol was a gift from God and pubs should open on Sundays.

⁶⁸⁶ Cf. Arnold Lunn and Garth Lean, *The new morality* (London: Blandford 1964), 61.

⁶⁸⁷ *Church Times*, 11 January 1963, 21.

⁶⁸⁸ Alan Richardson (1905-1975), a neo-orthodox Anglican scholar.

⁶⁸⁹ Alan Richardson, *Four Anchors from the Stern: Nottingham Reactions to Recent Cambridge Essays* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 7.

The theologian and historian Henry Chadwick generally appreciated the approach of the book while recognizing its limitations: ‘The authors of the essays in this new volume do not advance a programme. ... They display no desire to draw hard lines and to impose a more or less monolithic “orthodoxy” on which they are agreed. To this degree and in this loose sense the vague epithet ‘liberal’ might be attached to the book.’ He nevertheless appreciated that the essays in *Soundings* ‘spring out of a deep pastoral concern for puzzled believers, who can hardly remain unaffected by the general climate of uncertainty about past tradition that characterizes the mood of our age’. For Chadwick, Williams ‘will command immediate sympathy in so far as he wants to get away from the notion that Christian morality is nothing more than a rigid set of inflexible rules accepted on inscrutable authority and impervious to rational argument.’ However, ‘in his anxiety to be radical Mr Williams is overcalling his hand.’ Addressing the story of the young sailor, Chadwick was as critical and sarcastic as Mascall:

It remains an unconsidered question here whether, even if it was selfishness, cruelty, chicken-heartedness or plain discourtesy that deterred Joseph from accepting the urgent invitation of Potiphar’s wife, he could have shown a true respect and love for her, and so fulfilled a distasteful duty according to the will of God, by consenting to the act.⁶⁹⁰

Positive reviews, however, prevailed. Unsurprisingly, Vidler strongly approved of Williams’s contribution.⁶⁹¹ He later wrote that Williams’s essay was written not as ‘defence of the Christian religion’ but as an ‘elucidation of the options that are open to reasonable men in this age of the world.’⁶⁹²

⁶⁹⁰ H. Chadwick, ‘Soundings’, *Theology*, 509 (November 1962), 443.

⁶⁹¹ Alec Vidler, letter to John Robinson, 4 October 1962 (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 4729, f. 66).

⁶⁹² Alexander Roper Vidler, *20th Century Defenders of the Faith: some theological fashions considered in the Robertson Lectures for 1964* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 119.

The review of *Soundings* in *The Times Literary Supplement* was unsigned, as was the practice in those days. Williams knew, however, that the reviewer was Hugh Dickinson, one of the two Chaplains at Trinity.⁶⁹³ The review found most of the essays ‘unconstructive’, yet they help as ‘an advance to be liberated from the fiction that the house we live in is entirely secure’. According to the reviewer, there was ‘a considerable disparity between both the subject matter and the performance of the various contributors’. However, Williams’s essay was found to contain ‘some of the most important issues in the whole volume’ and theologians were advised to take more notice of the radical consequences following from this understanding of ethics and morality. On the one hand, ‘Mr. Williams writes as an *dévo*t and his readers are not to be blamed they think that sometimes he speaks with too much passion to be convincing’. On the other hand, the critique of ‘that fiend Cranmer’ by Williams perhaps neglected the view that ‘Cranmer had hoped that the scriptural reassurances might help to lift the load of medieval legalism’. The exposition on deadly sins was found ‘illuminating’ although Williams ‘seems too anxious to prove that self-awareness is *remedia omnium malorum*’. The review concluded that ‘this essay alone would make the volume worth buying’.⁶⁹⁴

Williams’s response was published a week later; while he found the review ‘fair and kind’, he felt obliged to correct the reviewer that he did not describe Cranmer as a fiend but that he wrote that ‘important elements of him did not believe in God’s mercy’.⁶⁹⁵

⁶⁹³ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 215.

⁶⁹⁴ ‘Men in a Boat’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 9 November 1962, 860.

⁶⁹⁵ H. A. Williams, ‘Soundings’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 16 November 1962, 873.

G. C. Stead,⁶⁹⁶ in his review in *The Journal of Theological Studies*⁶⁹⁷ called *Soundings* ‘tastefully produced, adroitly publicized, and standing in a distinguished succession of Anglican symposia’. Giving credit to the contributors, Stead nonetheless concluded that he should not like *Soundings* to be regarded ‘as the authentic word of the Anglican Church to the world of today’. On Williams, Stead wrote that his essay had ‘the great merit of imagination’ and that his treatment of morality was, by the time of writing of his review, probably notorious. Yet, ‘it would be foolish to laugh this away, or to recoil in virtuous disgust’ as ‘pious self-deception is indeed a much-neglected hindrance to Christian perfection, and loving generosity is too lightly regarded.’ Stead found faults in Williams’s argument by not distinguishing between the exercise of self-giving love and the promotion of psychological integration. He concluded: ‘For a psychologist, I find Mr. Williams a poor tactician; his sallies can too easily be dismissed as eccentric. But his engaging vigour may stimulate someone – perhaps even himself? – to begin the necessary work.’⁶⁹⁸

However, J. Heywood Thomas⁶⁹⁹ in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* found that in Williams’s ‘profoundly illuminating’ essay, there were many valuable things said and its main thesis, that self-awareness could contribute to the understanding of Christian truth, is ‘profoundly true’. Yet, he felt that Williams writes with ‘a certain extravagance’ and, in some respects, is ‘singularly naïve and academic’. He also held against Williams his ‘proneness to superficial analogies’.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁶ George Christopher Stead (1913-2008), Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, a leading Patristic scholar.

⁶⁹⁷ G. C. Stead, ‘Reviews’, *The Journal of Theological Studies* XIV (1963), 559-64.

⁶⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 561.

⁶⁹⁹ John Thomas Heywood (b. 1926), lecturer in theology and philosophy at Manchester, Nottingham and Durham.

⁷⁰⁰ J. Heywood Thomas, ‘Reviews’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 16 (2), 209.

In another contemporary account, Ved Mehta⁷⁰¹ wrote about *Soundings* that ‘the book sometimes left an impression of intelligent Anglicans sunk so deep in the sea of Christian thought that one could only wonder if there was any bottom to it’.⁷⁰²

The liberal-minded journal *Modern Churchman* brought a very positive review⁷⁰³ by David Edwards. He noted of Cambridge that ‘in recent years Christian life has been strong there, perhaps stronger than anywhere else in England’ and so *Soundings* was ‘a document in our country’s spiritual history’. It was ‘a book that ought to be read by all students of English theology, ordained or lay’. It was ‘highly readable’, Edwards finding it ‘a delight to watch fine minds grappling with important subjects and expressing themselves clearly and attractively’. He went on to note that ‘Protestant theologians of Germany, Switzerland and the United States do not seem to feel that the time is unripe for the energetic investigation of great themes’, and there are ‘stirrings of creative thought ... in the Roman Catholic Church’. Therefore ‘it would be a tragedy if England were to be content with the status of a second-class theological power’. On Williams, Edwards noted that ‘no one can complain that this essay is unconstructive’, finding it ‘full of sentences which force one to think hard’. The essay is so intimately personal that ‘a reader must wonder whether he has fully understood it’. Any criticism would be based instead on a doubt about ‘whether this Freudian construction is founded on the teaching of Jesus’. While self-awareness is urged by Jesus as by any other great religious teacher, in Williams’s essay, ‘self-awareness rapidly becomes self-acceptance’. He goes on to claim, however, that Williams ‘brilliantly interprets the seven root sins’, for it is much simpler to build ethics ‘on the struggle between two

⁷⁰¹ Ved Parkash Mehta (1934-2021), Indian-born, Oxford educated, U.S. based journalist and writer, notably writing for *The New Yorker*.

⁷⁰² Ved Mehta, *The New Theologian* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 18.

⁷⁰³ David L. Edwards, ‘Essays Anglican and Critical’, *The Modern Churchman*, VI (October 1962-July 1963), 144-49.

selves' and both traditional Christian morality and the teaching of Jesus are in fact founded on that tension. Although Tillich wrote 'Accept that you are accepted',⁷⁰⁴ the broad principle for Edwards remains that 'we are to accept ourselves because of what God intends to make us, not because of what we are at the present'. On the much-discussed passage about sex outside of marriage, Edwards commented: 'It seems to me truer to real life ... to say that all sexual intercourse outside of marriage is exploitation of sex, but that it may be entered into with some good motives and may have some good results.'⁷⁰⁵ Having commented on the individual essays, Edwards concluded: '[Biblical and historical theologians] must join with a vast army of other people to discuss in detail what the Gospel should be now – what in the tradition is true for today. Then the Holy Spirit will speak, as He spoke by prophets and apostles, doctors and reformers before. Indeed, He is already speaking – look at *Soundings!*'⁷⁰⁶

John Robinson was perhaps the most sympathetic reviewer. In his review for *Prism* he praised *Soundings* most highly, claiming that it introduced a newly dawning future in theology: 'Almost everything has suffered a sea-change.'⁷⁰⁷ There was indeed a considerable freshness about the ideas expressed in *Soundings* and the book received the widest notice as little, if any, of this kind of thinking had come from academia for quite a time. In Robinson's perception, some, but not all, of the essayists would not have dissented from A. H. Clough's verse: '*Where lies the land to which the ship would go? Far, far ahead, is all her seamen know.*'⁷⁰⁸ Robinson found that the difference of metaphor between *Foundations* and *Soundings* was significant, for

⁷⁰⁴ Cf. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribner's, 1948; London: Penguin, 1949, 1962), chapter 19.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁷ J. Robinson, 'Reviews: Soundings', *Prism* 66 (October 1962), 71.

⁷⁰⁸ Peart-Binns, 111. The lyric poem '*Where lies the land to which the ship would go?*' by Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) was first published in 1862.

‘almost everything has suffered a sea-change’ and ‘all is awash’.⁷⁰⁹ He further wrote: ‘It is a relief to keep company with men who are not to be blown about with every wind of doctrine or swirled around by the surface currents of ecclesiastical politics. ... They are men of depth, judgment and sound learning.’⁷¹⁰ Concerning Williams, Robinson wrote that his essay ‘[would be] talked of rather than trotted out, and talked of a long time hence ... In fact, it is the contribution to the symposium which would alone lift it into the class of its notable Anglican forerunners. Here indeed we are in deep waters, waters to swim in.’⁷¹¹ Williams’s essay was the only one ‘that takes the last revolution seriously’. Robinson recommended that ‘anyone who wishes to understand himself in relation to God should read it at least three times. ... This thesis is brilliantly – and beautifully – elaborated in terms of the seven deadly sins and in relation to forgiveness and the atonement.’⁷¹²

In October 1962, Vidler wrote to Robinson to thank him for his ‘very generous and extremely review of *Soundings*. He was also glad that Robinson was fond of Williams’s essay since he felt it was ‘the one thing that is really fresh and exciting’.⁷¹³ Robinson later suggested that it was precisely in 1961, when the central turning point of twentieth-century church history had occurred.⁷¹⁴

After *Soundings*

On 4 November 1962, Vidler appeared on the BBC religious programme *Meeting Point* and was interviewed again by Ludovic Kennedy. A heated controversy followed,

⁷⁰⁹ Robinson, *Reviews: Soundings*, 72-73.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹¹ Ibid.

⁷¹² Ibid.

⁷¹³ Alec Vidler, letter to John Robinson, 4 October 1962 (Vidler Papers).

⁷¹⁴ J. Robinson, ‘And What Next?’, *Prism*, 101 (September 1965), 9.

providing great publicity for the book.⁷¹⁵ In his autobiography, Vidler noted that the book had a much larger circulation and received much more attention than could have been anticipated. He believed that, in part, this may have been because it became caught up in, or was associated with, a number of other unforeseen and quite independent initiatives that made their appearance about the same time.⁷¹⁶

Gradually, heated discussions started between those contributors who were more orthodox minded and the liberals. They tried to keep the group going, but soon it was clear that they would disperse in separate directions, and Williams began to chart his own course too. In 1965, Vidler wrote to Nineham, asking him to take over the leadership of the *Soundings* group, expressing his belief that the production of another volume of essays ought to be envisaged.⁷¹⁷ However, Nineham was already busy organising his own group. This new group, dealing primarily with hermeneutics, included among others, L. C. Knights⁷¹⁸ and Maurice Wiles.⁷¹⁹

In 1967, Montefiore observed that ‘a lot of the sparkle and zest’ had gone out of the *Soundings* group, for events had overtaken it: ‘What seemed at one time to be adventurous and stimulating has settled down into an enjoyable situation. ... Is it possible that there is an opening through which we could go on to explore fresh ground, and to recapture some of our earlier enthusiasm and adventure?’⁷²⁰ In the same year, *Soundings* was published as a paperback and ‘got off to a good start’.⁷²¹ A

⁷¹⁵ A detailed account is provided by Clements, 162-67.

⁷¹⁶ Vidler, *Scenes from a Clerical Life*, 179.

⁷¹⁷ Alec Vidler, letter to Dennis Nineham, 18 November 1965 (Vidler Papers).

⁷¹⁸ Lionel Knights (1906-1997), a literary critic, Professor of English Literature at the University of Cambridge (1965-1973).

⁷¹⁹ Maurice Wiles (1923-2005), philosopher, theologian, leading Patristic scholar. In 1959, he succeeded Robinson as Dean of Clare College, Cambridge. Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford (1970-1991).

⁷²⁰ Hugh Montefiore, letter to Alec Vidler, 10 November 1967 (Vidler Papers).

⁷²¹ Priscilla Oakeshott of Cambridge University Press, letter to Alec Vidler, 4 March 1968 (Vidler Papers).

follow-up volume, however, was never published and *Soundings* remained a singular undertaking in Anglican theology of its period.

A look back at *Soundings*

For Horton Davies, *Soundings* represented ‘an exceedingly realistic assessal [*sic*] of the place of Christianity in an age of increasing secularism’ and ‘an honest, self-critical, tentative and modest essay in re-translating the essentials of Christian belief and practice in a way that will make them relevant in the technocratic age’.⁷²²

Keith W. Clements acknowledged that the editor of *Soundings* was speaking out of a mature sense of history – its future no less than the past – and that the book was not written out of a wilful, passing iconoclastic impulse.⁷²³ He admitted, however, that it might indeed appear as though the authors were simply celebrating the permanent demise of constructive theology.⁷²⁴ For him, the fresh note of the volume is to be found in ‘the sharp challenge to the assumption that lip-service could be paid to orthodoxy while continuing to ignore the questions which, coming from the contemporary world, had an integrity of their own’.⁷²⁵ For Clements, Williams’s utterances in the years 1962 and 1963 were ‘wounding to many at the time’, yet greatly contributing towards a spirituality ‘from below’.⁷²⁶ Williams’s views on morality in *Soundings* formed ‘the one page which was to mark, or damn, the whole essay in the eyes of many, and the whole book in the opinion of some’⁷²⁷ as it was inevitably ‘the odd, and peripheral, remark about fornication’⁷²⁸ which would attract wide attention.

⁷²² Davies, 202.

⁷²³ Clements, 155.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

Likewise for Arthur Marwick, *Soundings* contributed to the radical theology of the 1960s which was, according to him, a theology seeking to abolish the very religion required to sustain it.⁷²⁹

Soundings was questioning traditional structures of the Church which was a trend which eventually led to removing religion from Christianity (as will be examined in the following Chapter VI). As Mark Chapman has observed, disposing with the traditional was a highly risky strategy for the Church as it required that people would discover for themselves the ‘ultimate’ truths that lay beneath traditional religious language.⁷³⁰

Traditionally, authority in Anglicanism is expressed in terms of Scripture, Tradition and Reason – these elements are declared to be ‘in organic relation to each other’, mutually supporting each other and contributing to ‘redressing of errors and exaggerations’.⁷³¹ Any attempt to weaken one of the three elements only increases the ambiguity of their convergence and contributes to a disjunction between the traditional faith and its contemporary expression, leaving the faithful without a reliable guidance.

In 1989, Edwards returned to *Soundings* – almost thirty years after its publication. On the one hand, he appreciated the ‘sensitive awareness’ of the contributors to the cultural situation among them; on the other hand, he considered some omissions ‘glaring’ and ‘some silences deafening’ for the book failed to address many emerging topics.

Nevertheless, he found that Williams, ‘so far from predicting the rise of feminism, assured his readers that the devotion to the Motherhood of God encouraged by St Anselm among others in the Middle Ages had no future and was quickly forgotten. It had nothing in human experience on which to fasten.’ According to Edwards, Williams

⁷²⁹ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

⁷³⁰ Chapman, *English Bonhoefferism*, 100.

⁷³¹ *1948 Lambeth Conference Report* (London: SPCK, 1948) II, 84-86.

‘contributed a deeply felt essay on the danger of a poisonous image of God being taught by authority’.⁷³² However, he saw the relevance of *Soundings* as ‘far more important than its failure to cover some subjects which were to become prominent in later Christian discussion and action’ and the ‘foresight’ of the *Soundings* group was ‘more remarkable than its datedness’, while ‘warnings such as those of Williams and Lampe against images of God which deny his love have been heeded by almost all Christians.’⁷³³

Recently, Sam Brewitt-Taylor summarized Williams’s contribution as a mere reiteration of ‘the familiar radical themes of personalism, situationism, and radical honesty’⁷³⁴ claiming that Williams’s engagement with Freud divided radicals for the rest of the decade.⁷³⁵ This is hard to justify since there seem to have been no voices from inside the radical movement who expressed criticism of Williams’s engagement with Freud.

Also, while many ideas expressed in *Soundings* spoke only to theologians, the wider public was more attracted by the freshness of the thoughts related to ethics which went well beyond reiteration. *Soundings* addressed in particular the idea of extramarital sex but the principles of ‘Situation Ethics’, also expressed in Robinson’s *Honest to God*, called for their broader application which contributed to the movement calling also for the moral equivalence (or at least decriminalization) of homosexuality. Chapter VII will map these developments in correlation with Williams’s writings, discussing the role of the Church of England in the broader process of the secularization of post-war Britain. After elaborating on the significance of Williams’s own sexuality in his life

⁷³² Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, 17.

⁷³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷³⁴ Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism*, 186, 198.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, 197-98.

and writings, it concludes with an overview of the changing attitudes to homosexuality in Britain and the role of the circle around Williams in this movement. Before then, however, it is necessary to further outline the phenomenon of the 'new morality' in Britain, which was foreshadowed by *Soundings* and Williams's essay.

VI. WILLIAMS'S CONTRIBUTION TO 'NEW MORALITY'

This chapter explores how Williams began his search for integrity, gradually rejecting the moralism of the official Church teaching which he found narrow and destructive. Throughout his career, he explored questions of ethics and morals.

As a young man, Williams was initially under the spell of the teaching of the Church on ethics. In his autobiography, he writes that while he was an ordinand at Cuddesdon, his sister Joan became engaged to a divorcé. Without enquiring anything about the given circumstances (in fact, Joan's fiancé was left by his wife), the Principal advised Williams to oppose the marriage who went on to write a stern letter to his sister. She later married in India. Many years later, Williams bitterly regretted his advice as disavowing his sister's humanity, and admitted that eventually he himself was to pay the price of disavowing his own humanity.⁷³⁶

Controversial BBC interviews

Even before the publication of *Soundings*, Williams had been outspoken about what he believed was the outdated approach of the Church of England to ethics. In October 1961, he spoke to Ludovic Kennedy on the BBC in a broadcast dealing with Christian morals,⁷³⁷ using the opportunity to voice his views about the exploitation of others even within marriage and defending the cohabitation of a man and a woman without marriage on the grounds of the prioritization of human love over inflexible moral codes. On 30 November 1962, Williams was attacked on the front page of the *Church*

⁷³⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 95.

⁷³⁷ P. Ferris, 'The Technology of Faith', *The Guardian*, 28 October 1962, 7; C. Driver: 'The Morality of Harry Williams'.

Times. Glyn W. Simon, Bishop of Llandaff,⁷³⁸ criticized him for being too detached from parochial ministry:

When Mr. Williams says that, when two people sleep together outside marriage so that one of them is made whole and healing results, and that where there is healing there is Christ, he ought not to be surprised that many ordinary folks think not only that he approves of fornication but that he is blasphemous as well.⁷³⁹

Williams was not alone in his criticism of contemporary official morality of the Church. In the 1962 *Reith Lectures*, G. M. Carstairs⁷⁴⁰ questioned the assumption that chastity was a virtue required for social cohesion. Similarly, in 1963, Canon Douglas Rhymes⁷⁴¹ of Southwark claimed that Christ did not condemn all sexual activity outside of marriage. Like Williams, he was criticized by the *Church Times* for being ‘so muddle-headed as to present love as if it were essentially self-indulgence’.⁷⁴²

Introducing the ‘*Honest to God*’ controversy

In the same year, *Soundings* was overshadowed by an even more ground-breaking volume. The publication of John Robinson’s *Honest to God* was nothing short of a sensation, with twenty reprints ever since and sales of over a million copies. The central argument of the book was that the modern world no longer required belief in a theistic God and so Christian faith needed to be reformulated for the secular modern age.⁷⁴³ Robinson also laid out the ethical implication of this thesis: he called for a revolution in ethics, and a rejection of traditional moral codes. *The Observer* provided

⁷³⁸ Glyn W. Simon (1903-1972), Bishop of Swansea and Brecon (1953-1957), Bishop of Llandaff (1957-1971), Archbishop of Wales (1968-1971).

⁷³⁹ Glyn W. Simon, ‘Bishop Hits at ‘Hurt & Scandal’ on Television’, *Church Times*, 30 November 1962, 1; Williams, however, claimed the headline was ‘Hurt and Scandal of Television Programme’; cf. *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 195.

⁷⁴⁰ G. M. Carstairs, *This island now: the B.B.C. lectures, 1962* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964).

⁷⁴¹ Douglas Rhymes (1914-1996), clergyman and activist.

⁷⁴² *Church Times*, 15 March 1963, 12. Cf. Paul A. Welsby, *A History of the Church of England 1945-1980* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 110ff.

⁷⁴³ John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press 1963).

for massive publicity with its headline ‘*Our image of God must go*’, which Robinson unsuccessfully resisted, and which was used in the introductory article the Sunday before the launch of the book.⁷⁴⁴

As Mark Chapman has summarized, the book was hardly original and drew extensively on German sources; its aim was to popularize the thought of Bultmann, Tillich and Bonhoeffer and to challenge traditional concepts of God.⁷⁴⁵ Rowan Williams remarked that it was the last religious book in the United Kingdom to have anything that could remotely be called a mass readership, and found in it the partial crystallising of the intellectual self-doubt of the 1960s’ Christianity.⁷⁴⁶

Honest to God had an extraordinary impact, in particular because it was written by a bishop, and represented a turning point in British theology. Sam Brewitt-Taylor writes that

Robinson purveyed a narrative of a paradigm shift in western spirituality, which had recently rendered “religion” obsolete, necessitating the translation of Christianity into secular, non-supernatural terms. The narrative of the collapse of traditional religion was one that Robinson had borrowed from Bonhoeffer, and he called it ‘the process of secularization’.⁷⁴⁷

If Bonhoeffer provided Robinson with the narrative (following on the existential interpretation of the *kerygma* by Rudolf Bultmann), it was Tillich who provided him to a large extent with the required vocabulary. N. T. Wright aptly describes Anglican theology of the period as an environment where ‘piety and preaching oscillated uneasily and inarticulately between a firm reassertion of the old truths as though they

⁷⁴⁴ J. Robinson, ‘Our image of God must go’, *The Observer*, 17 March 1963, 8.

⁷⁴⁵ Mark Chapman, ‘The Evolution of Anglican Theology, 1910-2000’, in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume IV: Global Western Anglicanism, c. 1910-present*, ed. by Jeremy Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 45. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), German Lutheran theologian who argued for an existentialist approach to the New Testament.

⁷⁴⁶ Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 119-20.

⁷⁴⁷ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘The Invention of a Secular Society? Christianity and the Sudden Appearance of Secularization Discourses in the British National Media, 1961-4’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 24, 3 (September 2013), 341.

were unproblematic and a kind of enfant terrible flirtation with questionings of the Virgin Birth and Bodily Resurrection' so that 'the great German ocean-going whales were ... housed in small fresh-water tanks and made to do tricks to delight or shock' the public.⁷⁴⁸

The book became a key marker and the first culmination of a creative post-war theological discourse related to the gradual adoption of new German theology in Britain. Back in 1952, *Myth in the New Testament*⁷⁴⁹ by Ian Henderson⁷⁵⁰ was the first substantial (and sympathetic) treatment of Bultmann's concept of demythologization in the English language. In *Can Two Walk Together?*,⁷⁵¹ Henderson presented a sketch of the possibility of secular ethics. University of Glasgow was to become a centre of new theological thinking, under Henderson, John Macquarrie⁷⁵² and Ronald Gregor Smith.⁷⁵³ In 1953, Bonhoeffer's *Letter and Papers from Prison* were published in English.⁷⁵⁴

One of the most important precursors of the new, 'secular' theology was Ronald Gregor Smith's⁷⁵⁵ *The New Man: Christianity and Man's Coming of Age*,⁷⁵⁶ based on a series of five lectures which made a single point: Christianity must be rethought in relation to the situation of human beings today. 'Situation' became a key concept, with Smith calling for an abandonment of old metaphysical conceptions and acknowledging the contributions of Bultmann, Bonhoeffer, Niebuhr, Tillich and Buber, calling for a

⁷⁴⁸ Wright, *Doubts about Doubt*, 191.

⁷⁴⁹ Ian Henderson, *Myth in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1952)

⁷⁵⁰ Ian Henderson (1910-1969), studied at New College, Edinburgh, with Ronald Gregor Smith. In 1936, he proceeded to Zurich where he was taught by Karl Brunner (1916-1989), later in Basel by Karl Barth; Professor of Systematic Theology at University of Glasgow (1948-1969).

⁷⁵¹ Ian Henderson, *Can Two Walk Together?* (London: Nisbet, 1948).

⁷⁵² John Macquarrie (1919-2007), Scottish philosopher, theologian and clergyman.

⁷⁵³ Densil Morgan, 264.

⁷⁵⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1953).

⁷⁵⁵ Ronald Gregor Smith (1913-1968), theologian and clergyman.

⁷⁵⁶ Ronald Gregor Smith, *The new man: Christianity and man's coming of age* (London: SCM Press, 1956).

‘this-worldly transcendence’: ‘God is met in His works and gifts, not in Himself, and not in an idea of Him. He is met at the luminous point of human existence, where the individual faces Him in utter openness, receives forgiveness and is made free.’⁷⁵⁷ Like Williams and Robinson, Smith abhorred the idea of the Church ‘standing over the world with a whip’ and presenting a prefabricated religious package.⁷⁵⁸ According to Densil Morgan, Smith ‘was the first to champion the mischievous view, popularized by John Robinson ... that the German Lutheran [Bonhoeffer] was in fact an apostle of wholesale secularism’.⁷⁵⁹ He also claims that Smith ‘pioneered the secular theology of the 1960s, popularized by [Robinson], which robbed the gospel of its historicity, helped destroy the [Student Christian Movement], and led, in part, to the rapid de-Christianization of contemporary culture.’⁷⁶⁰ The demythologization was complete when Smith wrote that from the historical perspective, ‘we may freely say that the bones of Jesus lie somewhere in Palestine’.⁷⁶¹

A significant player in the development of this discourse from a different perspective was E. R. Wickham,⁷⁶² whose works can be categorised as ‘religious sociology’. It was in his *Church and People in an Industrial City*⁷⁶³ which reflected on his work with the Sheffield Industrial Mission, that Tillich’s concept of ‘theonomy’, God’s rule in an authentic meeting of one’s mind with God, appeared in British theology.

Before approaching the ethical issues addressed in *Honest to God*, it is useful to address the striking similarities between the theological concepts which Williams and

⁷⁵⁷ Smith, *The new man*, 111-12.

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 68ff.

⁷⁵⁹ Densil Morgan, 240.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 240-41; cf. McLeod, 83-92.

⁷⁶¹ Ronald Gregor Smith, *Secular Christianity* (London: Collins, 1966), 102-03.

⁷⁶² Edward Ralph Wickham (1911-1994), sociologist.

⁷⁶³ E. R. Wickham, *Church and people in an industrial city* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960).

Robinson developed, which in part is explained by the similarity of the resources on which they were drawing: Robinson argued that God could no longer be conceived as being ‘out there’ or ‘up there’, but rather had to be understood – in the language of depth psychology and Tillich – as the ‘ground of being’. Jesus was no longer the embodiment of God, sent down to earth by his Father, but was ‘the man for others’ opening for humanity their window to God given his own unity with the ‘ground of his being’.⁷⁶⁴ Similar to Williams’s ‘fount of being’, Robinson drew on Tillich for whom God as being itself was the ground of the ontological structure of being.⁷⁶⁵ Like Williams, he drew upon psychoanalysis: ‘Perhaps all the Freudians are right, that such a God – the God of traditional popular theology – *is* a projection.’⁷⁶⁶ For Robinson, ‘the man who acknowledges the transcendence of God is the man who in the conditioned relationships of life recognizes the unconditional and responds to it in unconditional personal relationship,’⁷⁶⁷ a position very similar to Williams’s actualizing and contemporizing approach. Likewise, when Robinson wrote that the ‘final psychological, if not logical, blow delivered by modern science and technology to the idea that there might *literally* be a God “out there” has *coincided* with an awareness that the *mental* picture of such a God may be more of a stumbling-block than an aid to belief in the Gospel,’⁷⁶⁸ he colluded with Williams’s refusal to substitute God for a celestial idol. Removing this idol was for Robinson possibly the only way of making Christianity meaningful in the future:⁷⁶⁹ ‘All true awareness of God is an experience at one and the same time of ultimacy *and* intimacy, of the *mysterium*

⁷⁶⁴ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 82.

⁷⁶⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I, 156.

⁷⁶⁶ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 17.

⁷⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁷⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

tremendum et fascinans.⁷⁷⁰ Worship was understood by Robinson primarily as the opportunity to be sensitive to ‘God in our midst’ in the needy, and no longer as an occasion of experiencing a mystery or a temporary withdrawal from the secular world: ‘I wonder whether Christian prayer in the light of the Incarnation is not to be *defined* in terms of penetration through the world to God rather than of withdrawal from the world to God.’⁷⁷¹ Therefore, ‘prayer is our openness to the ground of our being,’⁷⁷² which is another sentence which could have been written by Williams.

‘The New Morality’

Perhaps the most controversial chapter of *Honest to God* was ‘The New Morality’ in which Robinson called for a revolution in Christian ethics. According to Sam Brewitt-Taylor, the publication of the book marked a beginning of a permanent ‘revolution’ in British moral culture.⁷⁷³ The basis of Robinson’s argument was that human behaviour should not be determined by adherence to extrinsic rules, but rather by the application of love in particular circumstances. Robinson rejected, similarly to Williams, heteronomous morality and claimed that the only thing that was intrinsically evil was the lack of love.⁷⁷⁴

This position had been foreshadowed in Eric Brunner’s *The Divine Imperative*⁷⁷⁵ and received its most consistent statement in ‘The New Look in Christian Ethics’, an article by Joseph Fletcher.⁷⁷⁶ For Robinson, this was ‘the only ethics for man come of age’:

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid., 131.

⁷⁷¹ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁷² Ibid., 102.

⁷⁷³ Brewitt-Taylor, *Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain*, 530.

⁷⁷⁴ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 113.

⁷⁷⁵ Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (London: Lutterworth Press 1937), published in German in 1932.

⁷⁷⁶ Joseph Fletcher (1905-1991), American philosopher, founder of the theory of situation ethics, and pioneer in the field of bioethics.

‘Christian ethics is not a scheme of codified conduct. It is a purposive effort to relate love to a world of relativities through a casuistry obedient to love.’⁷⁷⁷ This new ethics was no longer ‘supranaturalist’, which meant, according to Robinson, that the Church needed to catch up with what had been happening in the society: ‘Our only task is to relate it correctly to the previous revolution ... and to try to discern what should be the Christian attitude to it.’⁷⁷⁸ The ‘ultimate depth’ was disclosed in Jesus, the ‘man for others’, with ‘utter openness in love to the other for his own sake’ as the fundamental criterion of morality. Robinson’s ethics was a moral code which lacks the coercive power of an external authority to impose ground-rules on the individual; as a consequence, it requires a degree of maturity. This is congruent with Fletcher’s later observation that while people might want ‘the Grand Inquisitor’, ‘there is no escape for them’ as ‘they are going to have to put away their childish rules’.⁷⁷⁹

Fletcher continued his exposition of this approach – which parallels Williams’s views and was praised by him in the posthumously published *Living Free*⁷⁸⁰ – by the publication of *Situation Ethics* in 1966. The term was, however, coined as early as in 1952, when Pope Pius XII denounced this non-prescriptive ethics as ‘situational’.⁷⁸¹ A reference to ‘situation’ is also found in Tillich, who formulates almost at the same time his apologetic theology as an ‘answering theology’ which addresses the questions implied in the human ‘situation in the power of the eternal message and with the means provided by the situation whose questions it answers’.⁷⁸² For Tillich, ‘to understand the Christian message as the answer to the questions implied in their own

⁷⁷⁷ Joseph Fletcher, ‘The new look in Christian ethics: six propositions’, *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (October 1959), 10.

⁷⁷⁸ Robinson, *Honest to God*, 105.

⁷⁷⁹ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 140.

⁷⁸⁰ *Living Free*, passim.

⁷⁸¹ Allocution of 18 April 1952 to delegates to the International Congress of the World Federation of Catholic Young Women, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 44 (1952), 417.

⁷⁸² Tillich, *Systematic Theology* I, 6.

and in every human situation',⁷⁸³ leads him to his method of correlation which looks at a particular situation, analyses it and then uses the Christian message as the answer to the respective question.⁷⁸⁴

Fletcher goes further and distinguishes between three approaches to ethics: legalism, antinomianism and situationism:

The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage. ... Situation ethics goes part of the way with natural law, by accepting reason as the instrument of moral judgment, while rejecting the notion that the good is "given" in the nature of things, objectively.⁷⁸⁵

Fletcher derives general principles but no laws or rules, claiming that 'we cannot milk universals from a universal'.⁷⁸⁶ He calls principles, maxims or general rules 'illuminators', but not 'directors' and agrees with Kant's term of 'practical reason' as precisely correct for ethics.⁷⁸⁷ Where the classic rule of moral theology had been to follow laws as much as possible according to love and according to reason, situation ethics requires law to be kept in a subservient place, 'so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down'.⁷⁸⁸ Situation ethics are for him governed by the four working principles of pragmatism (focusing upon 'pragma' understood as 'doing', rather than on 'dogma'), relativism (not understood as anarchy, yet relativizing the absolute without absolutizing the relative),⁷⁸⁹ positivism (being a-rational but not 'irrational'; outside reason but not against it)⁷⁹⁰ and conscience (understood as an antecedent function, not as a reviewing faculty). Fletcher's theological maxim remains

⁷⁸³ Ibid., 8.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁸⁵ Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, 26.

⁷⁸⁶ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁷⁸⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid., 47.

the Johannine proposition (Cf. I John 4.7-21) which he understands not in the sense that God is *love* but that *God* is love: Christians do not understand God in terms of love, they understand love in terms of God as seen in Christ.⁷⁹¹ To illustrate his point, Fletcher cites the same film as Williams in *Soundings: Never on Sunday*.

Robinson's views triggered a heated debate: he gave three related lectures at Liverpool Cathedral, later published as *Christian Morals Today*⁷⁹² and *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society*.⁷⁹³ Lectures at Hartford Seminary, Connecticut, and at Cornell University occasioned Robinson's *The New Reformation?*.⁷⁹⁴ Further addresses at Stanford University later offered him the opportunity to write *Exploration into God* (1967).⁷⁹⁵ Robinson returned to Cambridge in 1969 as lecturer in theology, and as Fellow and Dean of Chapel at Trinity, succeeding none other than Williams himself.

The reception of the book was highly polarized, as were many of the contemporary and more recent assessments of its contribution to the movement of which it became a major element.⁷⁹⁶ The *Church Times* wrote, for instance, that it was 'not every day that a bishop goes on public record as apparently denying almost every Christian doctrine of the church in which he holds office'.⁷⁹⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre began his review with the memorable words: 'What is striking about Dr. Robinson's book is first and foremost that he is an atheist.'⁷⁹⁸ He argued that Robinson replaced theology with a rhetoric of moral seriousness where the real subject of assertion is the human psyche.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid., 49.

⁷⁹² John Robinson, *Christian morals today* (London: SCM Press, 1964).

⁷⁹³ John Robinson, *Christian freedom in a permissive society* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

⁷⁹⁴ John Robinson, *The New Reformation?* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

⁷⁹⁵ John Robinson, *Exploration into God* (London: SCM Press, 1965).

⁷⁹⁶ For a comprehensive account of the subsequent discourse, cf. Edwards, *The 'Honest to God' Debate*; Ian Ramsey, *Christian Discourse: some logical explorations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); E. L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity: an analysis and critique* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1965); Vidler, *20th Century Defenders of the Faith*.

⁷⁹⁷ 'The Bishop of Woolwich and "Honest to God"', *Church Times*, 5 April 1963, 16.

⁷⁹⁸ Edwards, *The 'Honest to God' Debate*, 215.

Although the term used by Robinson was ‘the revolution in ethics’ rather than ‘the sexual revolution’, the discourse had important implications for overall discussions of sexual morality in Britain and elsewhere; it was primarily because of *Honest to God*, for example, that Robinson was later invited to stay at Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* mansion.⁷⁹⁹

Describing the widespread clerical reaction, Bishop Treacy⁸⁰⁰ wrote: ‘We feel that the ground is being cut from under our feet.’⁸⁰¹ And indeed, few years later, Robinson embraced the gradual and apparent dismantling of the traditional church and did not hesitate to call this decline ‘divinely ordained’.⁸⁰² Karl Barth was also critical. He wrote that ‘poor Bishop Robinson in his *Honest to God* ... has drawn off the froth from all this to put it on the market as the ultimate wisdom,’⁸⁰³ and called the book ‘an abyss of banality’.⁸⁰⁴ Many years later, N. T. Wright assessed Robinson’s contribution by summarizing that ‘his high modernist construct now looks very shaky in the cold light of a postmodern dawn, as well as in the warmer light of the mainstream Christian alternative.’⁸⁰⁵ Many aspects of this assessment could relate also to Williams.

Williams’s own attitude to *Honest to God* developed gradually. His initial reaction to the book was very enthusiastic: in an unpublished letter of 1963, Williams wrote to Robinson that he had ‘read and re-read’ the book ‘with the greatest excitement’, as Robinson had expressed ‘with clarity and force’ what Williams had been ‘confusedly feeling’ for years. Williams ‘positively and joyfully’ affirmed what Robinson wrote:

⁷⁹⁹ E. James, ed., *Stewards of the Mysteries of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1979), 169.

⁸⁰⁰ Eric Treacy (1907-1978), Bishop of Pontefract (1961-1968), Bishop of Wakefield (1968-1977).

⁸⁰¹ *Church Times*, 5 April 1963, 12.

⁸⁰² Robinson, *The New Reformation?*, 51–52.

⁸⁰³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: his life from letters and autobiographical texts* (London: SCM, 1976), 465.

⁸⁰⁴ Karl Barth, letter to Ronald Gregor Smith, in *Letters, 1961–1981*, ed. by Jürgen Fangmeier, Hinrich Stoevesandt, and G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), 102.

⁸⁰⁵ Wright, *Doubts about Doubt*, 195.

Nine years ago, the God out there almost destroyed me. Admittedly, in spite of my conscious beliefs, he was a horrific monster. But a great deal of monstrosity was involved in his being out there. With regard to what you say about prayer – I am a bit what you describe early in your book as psychic. ... So now all I do is to celebrate twice a week and go to chapel when my duty as dean requires it. But I do not say any prayers at all. But I am aware of communion with the depth of life, and often a sense of communion with our Lord. What I have experienced as a result is Love and liberation. I can be concerned with other people, but I can't evangelize them. ... Your book is epoch-making. I can't describe to you the comfort it has brought to me. I believe all you say. ... What you have written has confirmed me in what I believe to be the quintessential truth of the Christian gospel.⁸⁰⁶

Williams also reacted publicly in a sarcastic letter to *The Times* which lambasted the statements of Anglican bishops:

One cannot but admire the sense of responsibility shown by the episcopal bench as a whole. It is so profound that it has prevented them from saying anything of theological importance for at least the past two decades. A generation has grown up who know William Temple only by name and who have never heard of Charles Gore, Hensley Henson, and William Barnes. Hence the shock of young people when a bishop publishes anything they can think and argue about.⁸⁰⁷

Later, in *The True Wilderness* (1965), Williams wrote that 'the heat engendered by *Honest to God* was to a large extent due to its forcing us to notice our own incompleteness' which happened due to 'misused orthodoxy', not due to an encounter with God.⁸⁰⁸ Gradually, however, his stance became more distanced and critical. In *Tensions* (1976), Williams wrote that *Honest to God* was 'a ragbag of second-hand theology and philosophy' which nevertheless offered a belief in the Divine 'not chained for ever to pictures whose sociological significance was outworn'.⁸⁰⁹ In a 1977 article, Williams further admitted Robinson's limitations, criticising him for not going beyond finding God in the depth of one's own being: the discovery of God within us must necessarily lead to the paradoxical discovery that God is also at the same time

⁸⁰⁶ Williams, Letter to Robinson, 26 February 1963 (Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3541, f. 230).

⁸⁰⁷ *The Times*, 6 May 1963, 12.

⁸⁰⁸ *The True Wilderness*, 144-45.

⁸⁰⁹ *Tensions*, 65.

other and greater than us. For Williams, the two elements of this paradox cannot be separated, otherwise one is untrue to the fullness of personal experience: either view, in isolation, is idolatry.⁸¹⁰

Finally, in a 1981 lecture at the University of Manchester, Williams returned to Robinson's contribution, for without it, 'theology seems little more than logic-chopping'. In the lecture, Williams also acknowledged Tillich as another theologian who insisted that the Transcendent was not exclusively 'up there' and could be found everywhere around us. Williams was by then ready to admit the datedness of many of their thoughts, but nevertheless insisted on preserving their main point:

I have a fear that the insights which Tillich gave us and Robinson popularized have been left behind in the interest of being up to date. I have no desire to canonize these two men nor to elevate the status of their writings in the status of Holy Writ. It is with perfect equanimity that I can contemplate the relegation of both themselves and their writings to permanent oblivion, even though, perhaps because, John Robinson is my successor in Cambridge. But what I am passionately concerned about is their vision of the Transcendent as within us and among us.⁸¹¹

Subsequent discourse

Similarly, Williams's and Robinson's views on Christian ethics were not isolated, and triggered a broad series of debates. In 1964, Douglas Rhymes followed Robinson with a series of sermons on contextual interpretation of the Christian message, which were published under the title *No New Morality*.⁸¹² In the foreword, he acknowledged the contributions of Williams and Donald MacKinnon as to questioning the whole foundation upon which morality was based, both from outside and inside of the

⁸¹⁰ H. A. Williams, 'Psychotherapy as Repentance', *Christian*, 4, 2 (1977), 122-26.

⁸¹¹ H. A. Williams, 'Whither Theology?' The Second Basil Hetherington Memorial Lecture delivered at St. Peter's House Church and Chaplaincy, University of Manchester, 22 October 1981 (Archives of St. Peter's House).

⁸¹² Rhymes, Douglas. *No New Morality: Christian personal values and sexual morality* (London: Constable, 1964).

Church.⁸¹³ A year later, the American scholar Robert J. Page published his *New Directions in Anglican Theology*, surveying the developments from Temple to Robinson and including, in several instances, Williams. Williams, he wrote, was ‘broadly sympathetic’ with the advocates of the ‘new morality’. Nevertheless, he found that its proponents ‘have not given sufficient attention to the frailty of human nature and have not been sufficiently explicit as to the place of restraint, discipline, and law itself in the life of grace.’⁸¹⁴

A group of young clergymen agitating for church reform also played a prominent role in the development of a ‘secular theology’ and ‘new morality’. Emerging from Oxford as well as Cambridge, they had been influenced by the *Parish and People* movement. Prominent figures associated with this movement in the 1960s were Eric James and Trevor Beeson, who frequently advocated a more vehement confrontation of the Church with the world than a far-reaching adaptation to the contemporary world. Their principal platform was the monthly journal *Prism*. Edwards wrote that to contribute to *Prism* ‘is to be typecast as an angry young man’⁸¹⁵ since the group also included Roger Tennant⁸¹⁶ who wrote in an inimitable and irreverent style. The contributors were also behind a number of publications including *Essays in Anglican Self-Criticism*,⁸¹⁷ *Not Angels but Anglicans*,⁸¹⁸ and *What’s Wrong with the Church*.⁸¹⁹ *Prism* remained an advocate of an open discourse: in August 1964, Tennant invoked in it the example of Jesus being ready to give offence where necessary⁸²⁰ and in 1965, Guy Daniel

⁸¹³ Ibid., 7.

⁸¹⁴ Robert J. Page, *New Directions in Anglican Theology: A Survey from Temple to Robinson* (London: Mowbray’s, 1967), 171.

⁸¹⁵ Edwards, *The Honest to God Debate*, 21-22.

⁸¹⁶ Roger Tennant (1919-2003), theologian and clergyman.

⁸¹⁷ David M. Paton, *Essays in Anglican Self-Criticism* (London: SCM Press, 1958).

⁸¹⁸ David L. Edwards, *Not Angels but Anglicans* (London: SCM Press, 1958).

⁸¹⁹ Nick Earle, *What’s Wrong with the Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961).

⁸²⁰ *Prism*, August 1964, 25.

advocated that congregations be introduced to radical theology, even if it meant to make way for a new type of congregation.⁸²¹ With a clear ironical subtext, Tennant remarked on Robinson: ‘Just as you are beginning to wrestle in the dark with the unknown angel, Dr. Robinson will switch on the light and intone a few words in a familiar clerical voice.’⁸²²

Another prominent name in the contemporary discourse was that of Monica Furlong.⁸²³ Although she is never mentioned by Williams, an outline of discussions about the ‘new morality’ in Britain is hardly possible without her voice. Following the publication of *Soundings*, yet before *Honest of God* was published, she wrote: ‘The best thing about being a Christian at the moment is that organized religion has collapsed. ... It is common knowledge that the foundations have shivered, there are cracks mile wide in the walls.’⁸²⁴ For Furlong, Christian morals appeared ‘to represent a safeguard against the force of ... one’s desires’.⁸²⁵ She went on to call for clerical honesty, for ‘the clergy rarely admit ... to having problems of their own’ and thus ‘intelligent observers are left with the impression of a body which seeks to organize the moral stakes without being honest enough to declare its own interest’.⁸²⁶ Williams’s openness was an exceptional response to such calls. Another Furlong’s point was that the ethics of the Church led to ethical immaturity, and the voice of the Church was sometimes too quick to speak: ‘It is customary for the Church ... to fire away in a hit and miss manner at contemporary morals and attitudes, repeatedly ignoring the way the Christians have abrogated their

⁸²¹ *Prism*, July 1965, 17.

⁸²² *Prism*, May 1965, 14.

⁸²³ Monica Furlong (1930-2003), lay religious writer and activist, a major proponent of the ordination of women in the Church of England.

⁸²⁴ *The Guardian*, 11 January 1963, 12.

⁸²⁵ Monica Furlong, *With Love to the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1965), 43.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

responsibility and by their lack of charity, knowledge, culture and compassion.⁸²⁷

Williams would most likely have agreed with her.

A road to Britain's secularization

What role did the discussion on 'new morality' introduced by Williams and Robinson play beyond the ecclesiastical circles? What was its impact in the wider British culture?

We are presented with a number of alternative perspectives: historians tend to differ as to whether this novel theological discourse was an active agent of a gradual secularization process of Britain or whether it merely reflected what was happening in British society, where assumptions about the relevance of Christian morality were gradually undermined. They also disagree as to whether the process was gradual or one rapid change.

It remains undisputed that in the sixties Britain was in a constant state of flux, witnessing a gradual challenging of traditional certainties, breakdown of authority and established order, transformation of society, with a changing role for the individual, increasingly preoccupied with personal autonomy, prioritising a certain self-indulgence while gradually accepting moral relativism.⁸²⁸ Most people simply wanted to 'lead easier, pleasanter lives.'⁸²⁹ For Arthur Marwick, the period represented a true cultural revolution, bringing 'sexual liberation, entailing striking changes in public and private morals and ... a new frankness, openness, and indeed honesty in personal relations and

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸²⁸ Cf. Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: a study of the revolution in English life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London: Collins, 1969); Bernard Levin, *The pendulum years: Britain in the sixties* (Cambridge: Icon, 2003); Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain: the British cultural revolution from Lady Chatterley to Tony Blair* (London: Quartet, 2000).

⁸²⁹ Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (London: Pimlico, 1995), 29.

modes of expression'.⁸³⁰ The change, however, may not initially have been nationwide, with Dominic Sandbrook pointing to the limits of change, which he saw as characteristic only of London society rather than more generally.⁸³¹

Hugh McLeod seems correct in his claim that the religious crisis of the 1960s was a part of a gradual process, spread over 'the long sixties' from 1958 to 1975. Although he insists on a certain element of rupture when, by 1965, he discerns 'a revolution of people's perceptions of their society and the place of religion within it',⁸³² his main line of argument is that of a slow, gradualist process. For him, it was the radically-minded clergymen who took the lead in challenging the blanket prohibition on pre-marital sex in the early 1960s, advocating what their critics called 'the new morality'.⁸³³

Conversely, Callum Brown acknowledges that it was the popular 'sexual revolution', and not a gradual evolution, which caused the religious crisis of the 1960s, so that sexual revolution predated and caused the decline of organized religion.⁸³⁴ He further acknowledges 'a repudiation of self-evident "truths" (concerning the role of women, the veracity of Christianity, and the structure of social and moral authority)'.⁸³⁵ For Brown, secularization was nevertheless mostly a 'sudden and shocking' event which was based on external threats, and reflected in churches. In his view, the 1960s were not a mere transformation of religion from conservatism to liberalism, but 'a new and burgeoning disregard of faith' where secular liberalism succeeded Christian conservatism.⁸³⁶ In his recent work, Brown also identifies two additional drivers of the

⁸³⁰ Marwick, *The Sixties*, 18.

⁸³¹ Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: a history of Britain in the swinging sixties* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), 91.

⁸³² McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, 240.

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, 84-99.

⁸³⁴ Brown, *What was the Religious Crisis of the 1960s?*, 468-79, 471.

⁸³⁵ Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 176

⁸³⁶ Callum Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation, 1945-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 291.

period: with Peter Hitchens he acknowledges the entwining of decline in traditional sexual morals with youth protest,⁸³⁷ and with Adrian Bingham he points to the press which ‘straddled a line between sexual prurience and religious-framed moralising, fostering moral panic and titillation.’⁸³⁸ In the 1960s, according to Brown, in sex as in religiosity, deviance from the traditional codes of behaviour was allowed to be normal (although it did not yet become normative) and the sexual revolution was also accompanied by an epistemological revolution.⁸³⁹ Refusing to view the 1960s as undermining morality or moral narratives, he merely sees the Christian narratives being replaced by liberal ones: postcolonial narratives, feminism, gay liberation, the green movement and narratives of sexual freedom.⁸⁴⁰

Similarly, for Adrian Hastings, the 1960s were a period of a more abrupt change, caused by permissiveness in respect of sex, art and the whole of intellectual life. The religious crisis was for him understood more as a general change in post-war culture: it was a crisis of secularization.⁸⁴¹ Mark Donnelly concurs, seeing the Church not as an agent of change but rather an institution trying to react to what was happening anyway:

Attempts by the Christian churches to move with the times, whether in the form of the Bishop of Woolwich’s call to reorient the language of the Anglican Church towards a more personal conception of ‘God as love’ in *Honest to God* (1963) or the *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date) of the Catholic Church with Vatican II (1962-5) did not stop the flow of people away from Christianity.⁸⁴²

Sam Brewitt-Taylor’s recent discussion of the currents of theology through the 1960s offers a balanced view which seems to explain the religious and theological changes:

⁸³⁷ Cf. Peter Hitchens, *The Rage against God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁸³⁸ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19ff.

⁸³⁹ Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain*, 294-95. Normativity can be understood as designating certain behaviours, outcomes or actions as permissible or desirable while others are not. Normality, on the other hand, is what is considered as usual, typical, prevailing: the median or average set of data.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴¹ Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 580-86.

⁸⁴² Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: culture, society and politics* (London: Routledge, 2005), 54.

he maintains that the churches were ‘the’ agents of the post-war changes in attitudes to sex and morality, significantly shaping the rise of Britain’s ‘sexual revolution’ narrative, and also acknowledges that Christian clergymen made ‘a significant, early, unwitting, and hitherto unacknowledged’ contribution to Britain’s sexual revolution.⁸⁴³ He further observes that from 1963, especially in the wake of *Honest to God*, the idea of the ‘secular society’ was accepted by a wide range of Christian leaders, and consequently it passed into the received wisdom, allowing secular sociologists to dominate the debate from 1965.⁸⁴⁴ The significance of ‘new morality’ is seen by Brewitt-Taylor in the fact that it asserted a teleology of ‘antinomian moral transformation’, which was broader than a transformation of sexual morality, but expressly included it.⁸⁴⁵

It appears that the shift in attitudes towards moral and ethical issues was caused not by one but rather a complex of causes and that the process was more gradual than abrupt: both the external factors (the post-war change in attitudes to morals and sex in the Western societies generally) and the gradually changing ecclesiastical discourse (the Church of England being less rigid in terms of her theology than the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical wing not yet gaining prominence) were crucial, influencing each other and drawing on each other. Williams and Robinson belonged to theologians who were becoming aware of ‘the signs of the times’ and wished to enter into dialogue with the world on its terms, responding to the changing *Zeitgeist* of the 1960s and its changing consciousness. Instead of adhering to the traditional role of the Church, that

⁸⁴³ Brewitt-Taylor, *Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain*, 519-46.

⁸⁴⁴ Brewitt-Taylor, *The Invention of a ‘Secular Society?’*, 327–350.

⁸⁴⁵ Brewitt-Taylor, *Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain*, 531.

is of challenging the *Zeitgeist* with the perennial revealed truth, they aimed at accommodating the teaching and the practice of the Church to that *Zeitgeist*.

The majority of the theologians behind *Soundings* and *Objections to Christian Belief* were primarily motivated academically by a desire to open up theological discourse in Britain to wider influences, especially the fresh thinking coming from the German-speaking world, often uncritically elevating the new above the established. Others, in particular Williams and Robinson, deliberately went further. Riding on the emerging wave of the changing secular post-war culture, they used the newly available framework of German Protestant theology, which they felt was generally compatible with the broad Anglican understanding of Christian doctrine. At the same time, they also readily adopted it for a much wider purpose: fashioning a new framework for morality. Their aim was to correlate Christian faith to the outside world and to recontextualize it. They were ready to accede to the modern demands of science and rationality, even when the price to pay was a deconstruction of the normative tradition of ethics and its reconstruction according to the canons of the modern world. In the end, this deconstruction led to a distrust in the historical particularity of Christian revelation and the necessity of any mediation of such revelation by the churches. As a result, the traditional teaching of the Church was boiled away in the heat of abstraction and rationalization.

Their efforts were also assisted by the tendency towards tolerance inherent in the attitude of the prevailing ‘secular Anglicanism’ of the twentieth century, which had been reluctant to draw hard and fast boundaries around Christianity.⁸⁴⁶ Given their prominent standing as ecclesiastical figures, Robinson and Williams made a strong

⁸⁴⁶ Cf. Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, Community, and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 203-22.

impact on post-war British society. The media (then still genuinely interested in matters of religion and morals) embraced the new developments eagerly, triggering a nationwide discussion, and facilitating changes that went well beyond the acceptance of extramarital sex. The resistance of conservative churchmen and official ecclesiastical circles was, in the end, too weak as they were – then as now – well aware that as the established church, the Church of England could not, for an extended period of time, swim against the stream of the changing society. As Alasdair MacIntyre observed, the clergy found it increasingly difficult to make themselves understood, because the moral vocabulary of society had changed; the bishops ‘like other survivors of shipwreck live on deserted islands.’⁸⁴⁷

It needs to be noted, however, that there remain outspoken critics of these developments, including Denis Morgan for whom both *Honest to God* and Smith’s *Secular Christianity* ‘pulled the carpet from beneath any recognizably Christian concept of God’. He views them and the resulting social and cultural change as damaging in the longer term. Having published extensively on Karl Barth, Morgan reflects Barthian opposition to any attempt to correlate Christianity to the secular world. He believes that Robinson ‘emptied God of objective personhood’ and there was no longer any meaningful way of relating to the world; the Holy Spirit could no longer ‘bring individuals into fellowship with the divine or make the gospel story transformatory for people’s lives.’⁸⁴⁸ Cambridge, together with its Southwark offspring, thus ‘spearheaded the move towards desacralizing religion, discerning mission in worldly terms and making the church’s explicit presence problematic if not wholly redundant’.⁸⁴⁹ He maintains that overall, ‘the secular theology of the 1960s was

⁸⁴⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Secularization and Moral Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 54-55.

⁸⁴⁸ Denis Morgan, 264.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

quite disastrous for the health, even for the continued existence of the Christian church.⁸⁵⁰

In discussing morality, David L. Edwards sees the beginning of the new approach to morality as early as *Objections to Christian Belief* (1963) to which Williams contributed. Writing in 1989, he notes, from a rather conservative point of view, that ‘many evils also came’:

divorce as an epidemic, homosexual practices attracting the bisexual because put on the same level as marriage, the rise in illegitimate births, the diseases and heartbreaks resulting from sex without the bond of responsible love. People, and especially the young people most exposed to these evils, were going to look at Christianity for moral guidance, rather than for the tame approval of moral chaos, if they were going to look in that direction at all.⁸⁵¹

Regardless of whether the theological discourse was an agent of the far-reaching changes of the 1960s or not, and whether (depending on the individual stance of the historian) the resulting change of morality is seen as its decline or as its radical restatement and confirmation, the fact is that traditional Christianity became less and less prominent in the dominant culture in Britain. The number of Anglican churchgoers over the age of 15 fell from 9.9 million in 1961 to 5.4 million in 1966.⁸⁵² Mark Donnelly maintains that this was not simply ‘a rejection of institutional expressions of Christianity’ but rather ‘the beginning of an accelerated decline in faith itself’, for ‘no longer was it the norm for people to look towards Christianity either for a moral compass or for a guide to making sense of the world around them’.⁸⁵³

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., 265.

⁸⁵¹ Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, 24.

⁸⁵² Cf. François Bédarida, *A Social History of England 1951-1990* (London: Routledge, 1991) 263-69; Bryan R. Wilson: *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969) 22-25.

⁸⁵³ Donnelly, 53.

A period of struggle between conservatives and liberals followed in which new topics, especially homosexuality, started playing a key role. Brian Masters writes that ‘tolerance was our forte’, as it ‘extended to all kinds of private emotional or lustful activity, and homosexuals finally ceased to be criminals.’⁸⁵⁴ It was indeed homosexuality which significantly shaped Williams’s personality and found its expression in his writings.

⁸⁵⁴ Brian Masters, *The Swinging Sixties* (London: Constable, 1985), 222.

VII. STRUGGLING WITH HOMOSEXUALITY

When Williams was a popular preacher at Cambridge, in the congregation there was a particular minority for whom the imperative of seeking one's true self was a true spiritual liberation; it could be sensed, many years before it was fully disclosed, that he was gay. Much of Williams's affirmation of sexual identity was predicated upon the rejection of the religious affiliation of his childhood.

Williams's sexual frustration

In his autobiography, Williams presents the gradual development of his erotic feelings towards men. When he was six or seven and his family was still living in France, he had two pre-adolescent erotic dreams, in both instances involving men: one was a *sergent-de-ville* on duty near to the Williams's house, the other a conductor on a local tram. In his memories, homosexual feelings preceded puberty by a number of years.⁸⁵⁵

As a young curate, Williams followed the official doctrine of the Church in terms of the teaching on sexuality: once he advised a young man in a same-sex relationship that 'the books said that homosexual practices were wrong'.⁸⁵⁶ He felt obliged to follow the traditional teaching of the Church while he was himself struggling with being gay: the advice to the young man may have been a reminder to himself. However, by the time he was writing his memoirs, Williams was hoping that the young man had disregarded his advice: 'Real genuine love, God's greatest gift making us only little lower than angels, can find expression in an infinite variety of ways, including those which any

⁸⁵⁵ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 196.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

particular culture may find unacceptable.⁸⁵⁷ But the personal path to reach this conclusion was to be a long and painful one.

Williams originally thought that he had entered into a kind of ‘contract’ with God. As a part of this ‘contract’, he felt the duty to absolutely eliminate sex from his life; God – or rather the idol substituted for God – was expecting Williams to become ‘an emotional dwarf’.⁸⁵⁸ He understood that all forms of self-assertion were proscribed and enjoying oneself too much was something suspect: ‘For God wanted you to enjoy him, and how could you enjoy him if you had too great a relish for gin or smoked salmon or Noël Coward or a long lie-in?’⁸⁵⁹ Williams felt a permanent tension at the heart of his personality between being a priest and his sexuality; this was his cross to bear.

The same-sex attraction, however, persisted. Williams could thus easily discern a certain sexual subcontext of the atmosphere at Westcott House where he was teaching. In his memoirs, he observed that the Principal Ken Carey was fond of young men who were physically attractive and did not come from a lower-class background: ‘a plain lower-middle-class young man was a brick wall’.⁸⁶⁰ This gave rise to the rumours about Carey’s same-sex inclinations although his behaviour might have been just a result of his assured public-school background. On the other hand, Archbishop Runcie studied at Westcott House from January 1949 to December 1950 but did not notice any such inclinations of Carey.⁸⁶¹ When Runcie’s biographer asked Williams about his recollections about the relationship between Carey and Runcie, Williams replied: ‘With regard to the specific question you ask about sex and snob appeal: Carey certainly

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., 131.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁸⁶¹ Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 108.

treated R as one of the sheep rather than of the goats. He wasn't dazzled by R as he was by some of the student grandees ... And R was not the sort of person whose physique etc. attracted homosexuals.'⁸⁶²

Later, when Hugh Montefiore was asked about the circumstances of Runcie's marriage, he noted:

I thought he was a celibate. He was very much regarded at Westcott as in the Catholic tradition, and Harry Williams was his great – I wouldn't say idol, but model, who wasn't perhaps celibate, but wasn't a marrying man. I got the impression that it was a case of a person who'd always intended to be celibate, but was rather overcome by the unexpected emotions of being in love.⁸⁶³

Montefiore's remark about Williams is notable; although Williams claims that he was celibate until his breakdown, it is a testimony to the fact that at least one of his contemporaries did not regard him necessarily that way while he was at Westcott.

Whether or not he was celibate, Williams was by no means openly gay and did not feel comfortable voicing views which would be contrary to the teaching of the Church – which, at that time, he still claims to have upheld. For many years, his homosexuality remained a secret which dared not speak its name.

Nevertheless, Williams still remained guilt ridden about his homosexuality. At the same time, he felt a pressing need for lasting intimacy. A defining moment was when, still before his breakdown, at Trinity College, he was no longer able to suppress his feelings after having fallen in love with a certain 'Stavros' (probably a pseudonym), a student of partially Greek descent. For the first time, Williams was ready to let his feelings go, being aware that 'in any case the first step (*le premier pas qui coûte*)⁸⁶⁴ towards humanity is invariably far less than fully human; the first step towards health is

⁸⁶² Ibid., 11.

⁸⁶³ Ibid., 141.

⁸⁶⁴ Cf. Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* - Paris: Furne, 1838, 246).

itself invariably disease-ridden; when good begins to triumph there is still much evil about it'.⁸⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Stavros did not reciprocate the feelings of love, although he liked Williams 'a great deal'. He disclosed Williams's feelings to others (Williams did not tell him not to), and they were 'both amused and puzzled' that Williams seemed to be making 'such heavy weather' of it all. In reality, Williams claimed he 'was beginning to change gods' and his falling in love with Stavros was 'the first eruption of an earthquake'.⁸⁶⁶ As a result, he was 'being raised up from the unfeeling sleep of death to the severe pains and penalties, as well as the rewards, of life'.⁸⁶⁷ Obsessed with Stavros, Williams wanted him to be his 'father, mother, child, teacher, pupil and heaven knows what else'.⁸⁶⁸ Williams had even day-dreams that, under his influence, Stavros had found a vocation to be a clergyman. Williams later realized that his falling in love was the way in which his inner sickness eventually surfaced: 'It was the poultice which drew out the hidden poison so that it could no longer be ignored.'⁸⁶⁹

Liberation and renewal

Unrequited love took its toll and substantially contributed to Williams's breakdown. Having finally overcome it with the help of psychoanalysis, Williams was going through a period of a great spiritual and sexual awakening and coming to terms with his life. The breakdown became a breakthrough and gradually Williams was able to transform his newly gained experience into a different understanding of faith. His chosen way of following Christ was not in the denial of his natural inclinations, which

⁸⁶⁵ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 164-65.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

he felt was the teaching of the Church. Instead of denying flesh like Augustine, Williams did the opposite: he gradually embraced his sexuality.

Nonetheless, Williams's unrequited love for Stavros did not recede; he was still agonizingly obsessed with this young man, now projecting into him his phobias: 'In this fantasy portrait he was cruel, callous, narcissistic, a flirt, a cock-tease, not caring a damn how much he made people suffer'.⁸⁷⁰ In the end, Williams wrote in his autobiography, Stavros and Williams remained friends for over thirty years, having developed a realistic relationship – and Williams never revealed his friend's full identity. Nevertheless, although the papers kept at the Borthwick Institute contain extensive correspondence, there is no indication that any of the letters could be attributed to anyone called Stavros or to someone else from that period at Trinity. It is noteworthy that Williams kept among his few possessions a photographic portrait of a handsome man in his thirties (whose facial features suggests that he could be of Greek descent).

After Stavros, Williams maintains that he fell deeply in love twice more. This brought him untold happiness although there were 'inevitable quarrels which occasionally blew up with their consequent hurt feelings'. The resulting happiness nevertheless outweighed 'several times' the incidental misery. However, the two people for whom he had fallen in love stopped sleeping with him when they ceased to be in love with him. While this caused an unavoidable wound, Williams was grateful for the honesty, 'for love can't exist on the basis of pretence or fraud'.⁸⁷¹ Later Williams maintained that at the time of writing his autobiography he still had a love for these two people

⁸⁷⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 170.

⁸⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

which ‘would bear it out even into the edge of doom. And what more can anybody ask for than that?’⁸⁷²

Although at first Williams believed that one had to be in love to have sex with someone in a fulfilling way, he soon changed his mind and thought that what mattered was just mutual fondness and respect. Nevertheless, if these elements were no longer present he felt it was better to stop having sex.⁸⁷³ Later, while he maintained that it was wrong to exploit people, what was less and less obvious to him was that having sex with somebody necessarily had to be exploitative. As a consequence, Williams gradually started to understand sex transactionally, as an occasion of ‘mutual self-giving and enrichment’.⁸⁷⁴ As he recalled, during the next years he slept fairly regularly with several people whom he designates as friends: he does not say anything more about his partners at that time. It is striking that he could have decided to reveal something about them without being explicit about their names, as he does elsewhere about the people whose confidences he does not wish to betray. A reader may thus ask whether these sexual relationships really existed and if they did, whether they were merely a means to an end, with Williams not being able to transform them into a personal relationship.

In his autobiography, Williams explained his attitude to sex during that period in words that must have been one of the most revealing – and for many, shocking – public admissions by any clergyman (and a monk):

Cynics, of course, will smile, but I have seldom felt more like thanking God than when thus having sex. I used in bed to praise Him there and then for the joy I was receiving and giving. We cannot be whole unless our bodies are accepted, and the mutual acceptance of each other’s bodies in sex is one of the most glorious things in human life. That is a platitude, a commonplace, where

⁸⁷² Ibid.

⁸⁷³ Ibid., 198.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid., 196-97.

conventional heterosexual activity in marriage is concerned. But it can also be most wonderfully true when it is two men who are sleeping together.⁸⁷⁵

The eventual realization of the joys of sex was viewed by Williams as a most liberating experience. In this context, Williams also recalled the man born blind in John's Gospel who responded to the theological and ethical objections against his healer brought by the Pharisees with the statement '*Whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I can see.*'⁸⁷⁶

Formulating his views about homosexuality, Williams did not attempt to construct a new ethical or religious theory, but was simply acknowledging his new experience: 'I was once in the misery of bondage and then became free.'⁸⁷⁷ People considering homosexual acts disordered had, in Williams's reading, either never had any experience of them, or had experienced them in the context of exploitation or destructive guilt-feelings rather than of mutuality and freedom.⁸⁷⁸ Maintaining that what some people view as self-indulgence can be for others a summons to integrity, requiring an initial act of courage, but afterwards built up by joy, happiness, pleasure and – importantly – fun, he summarizes: 'The fun is important. Laughter in bed echoes the laughter of the universe.'⁸⁷⁹ And so, where Augustine made the renunciation of sex central to his conversion, for Williams giving way to his sexual feelings brought him, in his perception, closer to God.

By 1962, at the time of the publication of *Soundings*, Williams was ready to address the issue of sexuality in a contribution to *Theology*,⁸⁸⁰ although he still dealt with

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid., 197.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., 198. John 9.25 (KJV).

⁸⁷⁷ Ibid., 198.

⁸⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁰ H. A. Williams, 'Gentleness', *Theology*, 507 (September 1962), 355-58.

sexuality in general, avoiding explicitly the topic of homosexuality with which he felt uncomfortable. In this article, he warned about ‘a simulated gentleness’ which occurs when we are using others to procure satisfaction for ourselves in an act of ‘spiritual prostitution’. True gentleness must, for Williams, spring from our acceptance of ourselves, for gentleness to ourselves can then lead to gentleness towards others: ‘The compulsion to condemn others arises from my inability to accept myself.’⁸⁸¹

Gentleness to others is then for Williams ‘the most real and effective form of evangelism’.⁸⁸² In this connection, Williams criticized the attitudes of the Apostle Paul, alluding to his potential sexual issues: ‘Be it as it may, it is certain that St. Paul often wrote on sexual topics with considerable violence and this absence of gentleness may well have been due to his being unable to contemplate the horror of his own sexuality. It is reassuring that in the end (if he wrote Ephesians) his attitude changed.’⁸⁸³

Williams’s thoughts on sexuality were not unique but correlate with those of Julian Green, the French-American convert to Catholicism who also decided to salvage his sexuality: ‘The carnal man lives with the spiritual man. One tries to slit the other’s throat. To give up pleasure means throwing the carnal man into jail, but none the less, he goes on living, tied up, and gagged as tightly as you please; yet he is there, and what is strange, he changes, follows a completely personal evolution.’⁸⁸⁴ And he continues: ‘[Sexuality] is also an element of essential activity that is to be found everywhere, in my opinion, as much in the field of intellect, in literary creation, as in spiritual life

⁸⁸¹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 357. Williams’s emphasis on acceptance shows a similarity to Tillich’s ‘courage to accept acceptance’ expressed in *Courage to Be*, 153-59.

⁸⁸² *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 358.

⁸⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸⁴ Julian Green, *Diary 1928-1957*, trans. by Anne Green (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1961), 182. On parallels between Williams and Green, see above, Chapter II.

itself ... For the devout, enemy number one is the sexual instinct; the only thing he forgets is that this instinct comes from God.”⁸⁸⁵ Williams would agree.

Travels with the *Ramblers*

The 1960s were also a period of frequent travels which Williams thoroughly enjoyed and which shaped his late sexual awakening. He travelled abroad regularly both in the Easter vacation and in the summer with a group of about fourteen kindred spirits. Osbert Lancaster⁸⁸⁶ came across the group on two unexpected occasions⁸⁸⁷ calling them the *Church of England Ramblers Association*: Williams dedicated his *True Resurrection* to the *Ramblers*. The origin of the name is not clear: John Betjeman, another member of the *Ramblers*, claimed that he had once signed in this way a visitors’ book of a restaurant in Calabria whereupon the joke stuck.⁸⁸⁸

On these travels, Betjeman and Williams became close friends and sexuality was a frequently discussed subject. Betjeman’s biographer recalls that together with John Guest,⁸⁸⁹ Betjeman and Williams would read aloud to one another from the notorious story ‘*The Priest and the Acolyte*’ by John Francis Bloxam,⁸⁹⁰ which describes the infatuation of an Anglo-Catholic priest with a young acolyte, ending in mutual suicide. It was originally published in the short-lived homosexual magazine *The Chameleon* and played a prominent part in the trial of Oscar Wilde. The story was, in Victorian terms, sensational. Frederic S. Roden finds the story ‘a stunning apologia of sexual

⁸⁸⁵ Ibid., 131-32.

⁸⁸⁶ Sir Osbert Lancaster (1908-1986), architectural historian and cartoonist.

⁸⁸⁷ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 225.

⁸⁸⁸ Wilson, Andrew Norman. *Betjeman* (London: Arrow Books, 2007), 280.

⁸⁸⁹ John Guest (1913-1997), banker, writer and traveller.

⁸⁹⁰ John Francis Bloxam (1873-1928), churchman who belonged to the ‘Uranians’, a clandestine group of homosexual poets publishing between 1858 and 1930.

inversion', which is 'reminiscent of the later stereotype of a pedophile priest'.⁸⁹¹ It appeared in the same magazine that also included Bosie Douglas's⁸⁹² famous poem *Love that dare not speak its name*. Bloxam was later accepted into the Anglican priesthood and went on to become a highly regarded Anglo-Catholic clergyman known for his mission to inner-city boys.⁸⁹³ J. K. Jerome,⁸⁹⁴ the author of *Three Men in a Boat*, later threatened to expose him for his homosexual orientation.⁸⁹⁵

While there was no evidence that Betjeman was in his grown-up life a practising homosexual, Evelyn Waugh's⁸⁹⁶ son Auberon⁸⁹⁷ (known as Bron) had a deep, although unreciprocated affection for him. A certain hint of Betjeman's feelings can perhaps be found in an unpublished letter in 1974 sent by Betjeman to Williams from Scotland, where he writes of a 'LOVELY altar boy'.⁸⁹⁸ In his memoirs, Betjeman recalls frequent dinners with Bron and Williams, after which they talked all the way back 'in that luxurious car'.⁸⁹⁹ Williams and Betjeman had much in common: Betjeman's biographer acknowledged that Williams was for Betjeman 'a spiritual touchstone',⁹⁰⁰ noting that Williams comforted him upon the death of his close friend George Barnes⁹⁰¹ of cancer.⁹⁰²

⁸⁹¹ Frederick S. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 15-16.

⁸⁹² Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas (1870-1945), English journalist and poet, a lover of the Irish playwright and poet Oscar Wilde (1854-1900).

⁸⁹³ Brian Reade, *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900* (New York: Coward-McGann, 1970), 47.

⁸⁹⁴ Jerome Klapka Jerome (1857-1927), writer and satirist.

⁸⁹⁵ Wilson, *Betjeman*, 300.

⁸⁹⁶ Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), writer, journalist and book reviewer.

⁸⁹⁷ Auberon ('Bron') Waugh (1939-2001), journalist.

⁸⁹⁸ John Betjeman, letter to Williams, 14 June 1974 (Williams Papers).

⁸⁹⁹ John Betjeman, letter to Auberon Waugh, 13 February 1975, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 489.

⁹⁰⁰ Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 526.

⁹⁰¹ George Barnes (1904-1960), a prominent BBC figure, Director of BBC TV in 1950.

⁹⁰² Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 54.

In 1962, the group visited Israel and Jordan, before the Six-Day War, with Mervyn Stockwood, then Bishop of Southwark (who was rumoured to be gay but celibate). They also travelled to Greece, Italy, France, Scandinavia, Turkey, Iran, Morocco and Spain where the group included Lady Cavendish, Graham Storey,⁹⁰³ and Simon Phipps.⁹⁰⁴ Storey was ‘a confirmed bachelor’, who thought that his homosexuality was a secret to all but his fellow homosexuals, and ‘took considerable pains to ensure that it remained so’.⁹⁰⁵

One summer, Williams was touring Greece with Simon Phipps (later Bishop of Lincoln) who was then one of the Chaplains at Trinity but later left for Coventry. He was known for his support and affection for homosexual clergy.⁹⁰⁶ Among prominent *Ramblers* were also Simon Stuart⁹⁰⁷ and his wife Deborah. The relationship between Stuart and Williams was later described as one between ‘a gay Tantric monk and his aristocratic atheist disciple’.⁹⁰⁸ Another trip took them to Sicily in early 1966.⁹⁰⁹ There is also a letter by Betjeman, written in Ancona, Italy, in August 1966, in which he recalls that ‘Harry W has written a long treatise on Evil while here’. They stayed in Stuart’s villa.⁹¹⁰ Williams was always attracted to Italy; one of the books which he liked to quote was *South Wind*, once a best-selling classic, by Norman Douglas,⁹¹¹ a writer who divorced his wife and moved to Capri where he could enjoy the company of young boys.⁹¹² Williams’s *Tensions* (1976) contain a witty remark, reflecting

⁹⁰³ Graham Storey (1920-2005), editor of the letters of Charles Dickens and Gerard Manley Hopkins, Fellow of Trinity Hall from 1949, Senior Tutor at Peterhouse, and Gonville and Caius.

⁹⁰⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 186.

⁹⁰⁵ ‘Graham Storey’ (Obituary), *The Independent*, 15 November 2005, 13.

⁹⁰⁶ ‘The Rt Rev Simon Phipps’ (Obituary), *The Guardian*, 2 February 2001, 14.

⁹⁰⁷ Simon Stewart (1930-2002), son of Arthur, 7th Earl Castle Stewart and Eleanor Mary Guggenheim.

⁹⁰⁸ John Launer, ‘Passing on’, *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* (2007), 149-50.

⁹⁰⁹ John Betjeman, letter to William Plomer, postmarked 1 May 1966, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 304.

⁹¹⁰ John Betjeman, letter to Penelope Betjeman, 22 August 1966, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 323-24.

⁹¹¹ Norman Douglas (1868-1952), Austrian born writer. *South Wind* is about eccentric characters spending their time at the Mediterranean coast.

⁹¹² Wilhelm Meusberger, *Norman Douglas: A portrait* (Capri: Edizione Le Conchigli, 2004).

Williams's travels and encounters of various types of spirituality when he agrees with Douglas's observation that while the God of northern Europe is 'an overseer', the God of the south is 'a participator'.⁹¹³

Travels were spiritually important for Williams for they meant freedom: he felt especially well swimming in the sea, offering an explanation according to which 'it was a fantasy return to the security of the womb; or, in more fundamentalist Freudian terms, to jump into the sea was to insert the penis into the vagina'.⁹¹⁴ He explained it also as the encompassing mystery of Godhead in which he lived and moved.⁹¹⁵ On another occasion, Williams also visited Trinidad in the Caribbean, travelling from San Fernando to Port of Spain. Here, he experienced 'a bliss which it is impossible to describe', 'an experience of the ultimate reconciliation of all things as Love, a living presence, flooded over me and swept me into its own radiance, combining in itself an infinite grandeur with a tender personal intimacy' for 'awareness of God's encompassing glory never came to me again as strongly as it did on that bus in Trinidad'.⁹¹⁶

Williams's repeated visits to the English colony at Tangier also played a role in his sexual awakening. Here he found a community whose members had 'total freedom from moral and spiritual pretensions' which reminded him 'of the publicans and sinners whom Jesus loved'.⁹¹⁷ In Morocco, attitudes towards homosexuality were relaxed and, provided they were discreet, Westerners could indulge their sexual desires, without fear of harassment, with a supply of young locals ready to provide company to them. While

⁹¹³ *Tensions*, 81.

⁹¹⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 242.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

Williams and others found in Tangiers a safe refuge from the Western world and its prevailing moral constraints, many of them treated Moroccan people and customs as inferior and licentious subjects, exoticizing and eroticizing them for the pleasure of the European male.⁹¹⁸

It was in Tangier that William Burroughs,⁹¹⁹ high on drugs, wrote his shocking *Naked Lunch* (1959), a mixture of autobiography, science fiction and satire, peppered with descriptions of gay sex. The community also included Allen Ginsberg⁹²⁰ and Jack Kerouac⁹²¹ as well as Paul Bowles,⁹²² who had a long-lasting friendship with the artist Ahmed Yacoub. His book *The Sheltering Sky* (1949) explored the dark side of the human psyche. The literary legacy of Tangier includes many authors who were gay or bisexual, among them Jean Genet,⁹²³ André Gide,⁹²⁴ Tennessee Williams,⁹²⁵ Truman Capote,⁹²⁶ and Gore Vidal.⁹²⁷ In his autobiography, David Herbert,⁹²⁸ an English aristocrat and long-time resident of Tangier, bemoaned the city's 'Queer Tangier' reputation as 'a city of sin'.⁹²⁹ Williams, on the contrary, did not hesitate to call Tangier 'holy ground' since the people he met there seemed to be 'radiant with God's glory' so that he felt he was 'in the very house of God and gate of heaven'.⁹³⁰

⁹¹⁸ A seminal text on these misconceptions is Edward Saïd's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

⁹¹⁹ William Seward Burroughs (1914-1997), American writer and visual artist.

⁹²⁰ Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), American writer, poet and philosopher.

⁹²¹ Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), American poet and writer.

⁹²² Paul Bowles (1910-1999), American writer, composer and translator.

⁹²³ Jean Genet (1910-1986), French novelist, playwright and essayist.

⁹²⁴ André Gide (1869-1951), French author, Nobel Prize winner.

⁹²⁵ Thomas Lanier Williams III (1911-1983), American playwright.

⁹²⁶ Truman Capote (1924-1984), American novelist, screenwriter and playwright.

⁹²⁷ Gore Vidal (1925-2015), American writer.

⁹²⁸ David Alexander Reginald Herbert (1908-1995), British socialite and author.

⁹²⁹ David Herbert, *Second son: an autobiography* (London: British Commonwealth Edition, 1972).

⁹³⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 248.

In the end, Williams felt his affirmation of sexual orientation could coexist with his continuing religious belief and church membership. This road to eventual liberation was, for Williams and others, a long-distance run and must be viewed in the context of the changes happening in post-war British society.

The uneasy path to Wolfenden

For almost forty years of Williams's life, homosexuality was not just a behaviour viewed by traditional Christian theology as sinful. It also meant breaching the law. Since the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which further strengthened earlier laws against sodomy, all homosexual acts between men had become illegal. The Labouchère Amendment extended the law to cover all male homosexual acts, whether committed in public or private, and introduced increased legal penalties.⁹³¹

Beyond these legal implications, the public perception of homosexuality remained constrained by Victorian morals, meaning that a homosexual identity was often resisted. As John Marshall writes:

Outside or on the fringes of the subculture were many men with a homosexual orientation who avoided giving their behaviour a homosexual interpretation. Until the mid-twentieth century, because male homosexuality was so often equated in popular thinking with the display of feminine behaviour and personality traits, it was often difficult for men who combined strong homosexual feelings with a strong sense of male gender identity to regard themselves as homosexual.⁹³²

However, matters began to change through the twentieth century. The 1950s were a critical period for homosexual law reform, since the subject of homosexuality was no longer taboo, even though the number of indictable male homosexual offences was

⁹³¹ F. B. Smith, 'Labouchère's Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill,' *Historical Studies*, 17 (1976), 165-75.

⁹³² John Marshall, 'Pansies, Perverts and Macho Men: Changing Conceptions of Male Homosexuality,' in *The Making of the Modern Homosexual*, ed. by Kenneth Plummer (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 133-54.

steadily increasing.⁹³³ In the Church of England, the matter was initially raised by an ordinand, Graham Dowell,⁹³⁴ later to become a university Chaplain and Vicar of Hampstead, who wrote a letter on the subject to *Theology*.⁹³⁵ As a response, an article⁹³⁶ by D. Sherwin Bailey⁹³⁷ encouraging the exploration of the legal position of homosexuals was published, representing one of the first scholarly responses from the Church of England. The matter was then taken up by the Moral Welfare Council of the Church of England (of which Bailey was a prominent member) which produced its interim report, *The Problem of Homosexuality*,⁹³⁸ in 1952. The report reinforced the position of the Church of England that homosexuality was sinful but at the same time called for a reform of the legislative framework. By then, the Council had already reviewed the two volumes by Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy and Clyde E. Martin⁹³⁹ which provided significant factual background for the discussion, as well the anonymously published *The Invert*, one of the very first books written in its entirety from an openly homosexual viewpoint.⁹⁴⁰

In 1952, the Council established a dedicated ‘Inversion Group’ led by its Education Secretary. In November of the same year, *The Times* published a letter by a group of prominent public figures asking the Government to launch an official inquiry into the issue of homosexuality.⁹⁴¹ Williams had a conversation with Archbishop Fisher about

⁹³³ While in 1938, the police in England and Wales prosecuted 134 cases of ‘sodomy’ and ‘bestiality’, in 1952 the number of cases reached to 670, rising to 1043 in 1954. In terms of ‘gross indecency’, the number of cases increased from 316 in 1938 to 2322 in 1955. Cf. Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of sexuality since 1800* (Harlow: Longman, 1981), 239-40.

⁹³⁴ Graham Moffat Dowell (1926-1999), clergyman.

⁹³⁵ Graham Dowell, ‘The Church and Homosexuals’, *Theology*, 379 (January 1952), 28-29.

⁹³⁶ Sherwin Bailey, ‘The Problem of Sexual Inversion’, *Theology*, 380 (February 1952), 47-52.

⁹³⁷ Derrick Sherwin Bailey (1920-1984), theologian, Church of England expert on sexual ethics.

⁹³⁸ *The Problem of Homosexuality: an Interim Report* (London: Church Information Board, 1952)

⁹³⁹ Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell B. Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Philadelphia; London: Saunders, 1948 and 1953).

⁹⁴⁰ Anomaly (pseud.), *The invert and his social adjustment* (London: Baillière, Tindall & Cox, 1927).

⁹⁴¹ H. J. Blackham, Chorley, Marcus Lipton, Herbert Read, Russell, and Glanville Williams, ‘Letter: “Homosexual Laws”’, *The Times*, 25 November 1952, 9.

the draft letter. Fisher informed Williams that it was his practice never to sign letters in conjunction with others except for Roman Catholic and Free Church leaders. In the end, while working during a long vacation in Madrid as the Chaplain to the British Embassy, Williams learnt about the convening of the Wolfenden Committee and concluded that ‘there was no more to do’.⁹⁴²

In an official announcement, the Home Secretary, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe,⁹⁴³ claimed that ‘homosexuals in general are exhibitionists and proselytisers and a danger to others, especially the young.’⁹⁴⁴ At the same time, high-profile cases involving homosexuals created a stereotype of them as immoral agents undermining British society. This must have led to a great degree of anxiety among homosexual men, among them Williams. In 1954, the Montagu-Wildeblood trial took place involving Lord Montagu⁹⁴⁵ and Peter Wildeblood,⁹⁴⁶ the diplomatic correspondent for *The Daily Mail*, who saw his own homosexuality as ‘essentially a personal problem, which only becomes a matter of public concern when the law makes it so.’⁹⁴⁷ Although in Wildeblood’s own words, the ‘trial did much to forge a modern and respectable homosexual identity’,⁹⁴⁸ male homosexuality remained stuck with stereotypes, associating gay men invariably with effeminacy, ‘pederasts’ and ‘pansies’. In the media, photographs from the Wildeblood case were intentionally edited to reinforce the alleged degeneracy and the effeminacy of the defendants.⁹⁴⁹ In fact, Wildeblood wanted to present himself in a completely

⁹⁴² *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 302-03.

⁹⁴³ Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe (1900-1967), Home Secretary 1951-1954, Lord High Chancellor 1954-1962.

⁹⁴⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet, 1990), 241.

⁹⁴⁵ Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu, 3rd Baron Montagu of Beaulieu (1926-2015), aristocrat and politician.

⁹⁴⁶ Peter Wildeblood (1923-1999), journalist.

⁹⁴⁷ Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and pleasures in the sexual metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 10.

⁹⁴⁸ Peter Wildeblood, *Against the Law* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 8.

⁹⁴⁹ Weeks, *Coming Out*, 241.

different light, as a middle-class gay man, a respectable homosexual⁹⁵⁰ – something Williams might have aspired to. Simon Szreter and Kate Fischer also note the prevailing ‘centrality of privacy to mid-twentieth-century sexual respectability’ where the activists attempted to construct an image ‘of the respectable, domesticated homosexual, who had a right to engage in whatever sexual behaviour he liked behind closed doors’.⁹⁵¹ Following his coming to terms with his sexuality, this was also the attitude of Williams. Matt Houlbrook even suggests that the majority of gay men were perfectly happy with their sexuality and led generally ordinary, well-adjusted lives.⁹⁵²

In 1954, a departmental committee was created to deal with the issue of homosexuality and prostitution, chaired by Lord Wolfenden,⁹⁵³ who had been headmaster of two independent schools and was then Vice-Chancellor of Reading University. While liberals wished to change the current situation where homosexual acts were criminalized, the more conservative members felt that something also had to be done about prostitution. Motivations were far from straightforward. In the view of Geoffrey Weeks, the purpose of the Committee was not to liberalize the law but to ascertain whether the law was the most effective means of control.⁹⁵⁴ Weeks claims that prejudice against homosexuality was much more deeply rooted than against prostitution, which was the other concern of the Committee’s recommendations.⁹⁵⁵

Also, homosexuals were then not perceived as a group which needed to be courted as

⁹⁵⁰ Patrick Higgins, *The Heterosexual Dictatorship: male homosexuality in postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 247-48.

⁹⁵¹ Simon Szreter and Kate Fischer, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 350; Houlbrook, 195-218.

⁹⁵² Houlbrook, 255-58.

⁹⁵³ John Frederick Wolfenden, Baron Wolfenden (1906-1985), educationalist.

⁹⁵⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The regulation of sexuality since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), 311.

⁹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 241.

prospective voters in elections or taxpayers to be appeased.⁹⁵⁶ For Stephen Brooke, the main motivation for the reform was not concern for citizens suffering discrimination, but rather the ‘condescension and pity for victims of an incurable illness’.⁹⁵⁷ In the end, as he points out, the reform of the laws on homosexuality turned on the conversion of elite opinion and obtained the apparent approval of the public.⁹⁵⁸

The churches played an increasingly significant role in the process of change. Initially, the Church of England approached homosexuality mostly in medical terms; the main argument was that homosexuality itself was morally neutral but might find expression in various homosexual acts ‘upon which a moral judgment must be passed’.⁹⁵⁹ Timothy Jones nevertheless observes that the Church of England created ‘a queer space contiguous to its fragile nineteenth-century tolerance of same-sex desire’, a ‘stained glass closet’, a space of tacit acceptance for those designated as ‘inverts’. This meant that, ‘both in supporting gay law reform, and institutionally accommodating homosexuals, the Church of England of the 1950s was thus surprisingly ahead of its time’.⁹⁶⁰ Williams himself offers an example of such permissiveness: he never wrote of any hostility in official circles against his sexual orientation which was generally known although he never made any public admission of it, carefully staying in the closet until the publication of his 1982 autobiography.

⁹⁵⁶ Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 155. Cf. Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual Dictatorship: Male Sexuality in Postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

⁹⁵⁷ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 179.

⁹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 180f.

⁹⁵⁹ *The Problem of Homosexuality: An interim report by a group of Anglican clergy and doctors* (London, 1954), 7.

⁹⁶⁰ Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England 1857-1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 182. The changing positions of various churches has been described in comprehensive detail by Brian Lewis, *Wolfenden's Witnesses: Homosexuality in Postwar Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 233ff.

In 1955, the Chairman of the Moral Welfare Council, Derrick Sherwyn Bailey, published his *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*,⁹⁶¹ which, while adopting a generally conservative approach, offered interpretations of key biblical texts that were both innovative and radical. Viewing homosexuality as a ‘deformity’, he stressed a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual acts, differentiating between persons who had a set homosexual condition (‘inverts’) and those who engaged in homosexual acts (‘perverts’). He also conveniently used the concept of bisexuality (or ‘ambisexuality’), maintaining that those who describe themselves as bisexual usually fall into the category of ‘perverts’.⁹⁶² In 1956, the report *Sexual Offenders and Social Punishment: Evidence Submitted to Government by the Church of England’s Moral Welfare Council (SOSP)* was published. Links between paedophilia and homosexuality were dismissed and so was the idea that homosexuality is in any way contagious. This did not mean that homosexual acts would no longer be considered sinful but personal morality was not to be regarded as synonymous with a criminal act, even if the causes of homosexuality were understood as uncertain.

Lesley Hall observed that the medical profession was initially hostile. Views on homosexuality expressed in the medical press ranged from ‘a cancer at the root of national stability and fitness’ to praise for the ‘socially useful’ work performed by ‘adjusted homosexuals of high character’.⁹⁶³ The Gibson Committee of the British Medical Association prepared evidence for the Wolfenden Committee, the

⁹⁶¹ Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955).

⁹⁶² Mark Vasey-Saunders presents a convincing argument that Bailey’s approach defined the terms of Christian discourse for most Christian churches for the years to come, in particular for the Evangelicals. Cf. Mark Vasey-Saunders, *The Scandal of Evangelicals and Homosexuality: English Evangelical Texts 1960-2010* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

⁹⁶³ Lesley A. Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain since 1880* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 163.

Memorandum on Homosexuality and Prostitution;⁹⁶⁴ which, while conceding that the problem was more ‘social than medical’, suggested a range of psychiatric, drug and physical treatments, and referred to ‘reprehensible and harmful practices’. While Hera Cook brings up examples of psychotherapists who were still involved in attempting to convert homosexuals to heterosexuality,⁹⁶⁵ Hall is right to acknowledge the end of ‘the long Victorian era in which the premonitory trends already under way in the preceding decade continued and intensified.’⁹⁶⁶

Opposition among clergymen and theologians initially remained strong. In December 1955, an article in *Theology* by R. P. Casey⁹⁶⁷ was published: *The Christian Approach to Homosexuality*.⁹⁶⁸ He responded to Sherwin Bailey’s *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition*, disagreeing with his differentiation of heterosexuals indulging in homosexual practices and homosexuals whose inclination is conditioned by nature, maintaining that homosexuality is ‘never primary’ and is determined by the psychic reactions to the early environment. Casey believed that psychoanalysis had demonstrated that ‘in many cases’ these psychic reactions are not unalterable and their conversion can be better effected by psychotherapeutic means.

A different approach was taken by William Graham Cole⁹⁶⁹ in his *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* published in 1956⁹⁷⁰ which outlined not only the teachings of

⁹⁶⁴ ‘*Homosexuality and Prostitution: B.M.A. Memorandum of Evidence*,’ Supplement to the British Medical Journal, 17 December 1955, 2656.

⁹⁶⁵ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 344.

⁹⁶⁶ Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, 167.

⁹⁶⁷ Robert P. Casey (1897-1959), American Biblical scholar who moved to England in 1950 as a lecturer at Cambridge; he was also a trained psychiatrist.

⁹⁶⁸ R. P. Casey, ‘The Christian Approach to Homosexuality’, *Theology*, 426 (December 1955), 459-63.

⁹⁶⁹ William Graham Cole (b. 1917), theologian.

⁹⁷⁰ W. G. Cole, *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956).

Freud, but also the writings of contemporary psychoanalysts Horney,⁹⁷¹ Alexander,⁹⁷² and Rado.⁹⁷³ Cole presented a compact exposition of creation, original sin and redemption: the first needs a positive attitude to body and sexual intercourse; the second explains the anxiety which inhibits, at a fundamental level, man from a right attitude to his sexuality; redemption is then understood as the hope of a personal integration leading to a creative and right understanding of sex. Cole offers a conclusion not dissimilar to Williams's later views.

Even though Archbishop Fisher continued to believe that homosexual behaviour was 'sin against God' and an 'anti-social moral perversion',⁹⁷⁴ he also favoured the change in legislation. In 1957, the Church Assembly passed a motion to support the principles which were later embodied in the Bill decriminalizing homosexual acts and urged the Government to act. In the end, as Timothy Jones observed, the Moral Welfare Council actively lobbied the Government for an inquiry into the homosexual law reform.⁹⁷⁵ For many, it came as a considerable surprise. In the words of Peter Wildeblood:

I had always thought of the Church as the last stronghold of prejudice and had never found an occasion for praising it for its courage in controversial matters; yet here, from Church House, came an attack on the law which was as broad-minded, clear-headed and brilliantly argued as one could wish. It was all the more surprising because the English laws against homosexuality were religious in origin and widely held to represent the views of the Church.⁹⁷⁶

The essential role of the Church of England in the process has been attested by a number of historians: for Brooke, the 'revisionist' route depended upon the confident articulation 'not of a radical future, but of a modern present already achieved.'⁹⁷⁷ In

⁹⁷¹ Karen Horney (1885-1952), German psychoanalyst.

⁹⁷² Fritz Gabriel Alexander (1891-1964), Hungarian-American psychoanalyst.

⁹⁷³ Sandor Rado (1890-1972), Hungarian psychoanalyst.

⁹⁷⁴ Geoffrey Fisher, letter to R. D. Reid, 3 November 1953 (Lambeth Palace Library, 126, f. 298).

⁹⁷⁵ Timothy Willem Jones, *Sexual Politics in the Church of England 1857-1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 206.

⁹⁷⁶ Wildeblood, 64.

⁹⁷⁷ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 157.

terms of the Church of England, Weeks's study acknowledges that bodies within the Church of England started dealing with issues of sexual morality which included homosexuality, sex offenders, abortion and divorce.⁹⁷⁸ O. R. McGregor finds 'the remarkable and usually unnoticed' role of the Church of England as an 'active agent of change' in the 1960s.⁹⁷⁹ Likewise for Jones, the Church of England even took the lead in homosexual law reform in England, discussing homosexuality in its journals and commissioning the Moral Welfare Council to publish its report.⁹⁸⁰ Laura M. Ramsay also supports the view that British churches contributed to permissive legal reforms and redefining of sexual ethics.⁹⁸¹ Similarly, Grimley argues that on the question of homosexuality, the Church of England was a pioneering body in advocating for reform and well in advance of public opinion.⁹⁸² The role of the Church of England has been further acknowledged by G. Willett.⁹⁸³ Jones aptly concludes: 'If Wolfenden "invented" the homosexual as a legal being, it did so with the cooperation of, and to an extent even at the instigation of, the Church [of England].'⁹⁸⁴

The recommendation of the Committee, the *Wolfenden Report on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* published in 1957, was that homosexual acts between two consenting adults should no longer be a criminal offence. According to Weeks, it was 'the period's most influential liberal statement'.⁹⁸⁵ Brooke claims that the Report

⁹⁷⁸ Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 261.

⁹⁷⁹ O. R. McGregor, 'Equality, sexual values and permissive legislation: the English experience', *Journal of Social Policy*, 1, 1 (1972), 56.

⁹⁸⁰ Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 164.

⁹⁸¹ Laura Monica Ramsay, 'The Church of England, Homosexual Law Reform, and the Shaping of the Permissive Society, 1957-1959' *Journal of British Studies*, 57 (January 2018), 118.

⁹⁸² Grimley, *Law, Morality and Secularisation*, 725-41.

⁹⁸³ G. Willett, 'The Church of England and the Origins of the Homosexual Law Reform', *Journal of Religious History*, 33 (2009), 418-34.

⁹⁸⁴ Timothy Willem Jones, 'Moral Welfare and Social Well-Being: The Church of England and the Emergence of Modern Homosexuality' in *Men, Masculinities and Religious Change in Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. by L. Delap and S. Morgan (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 208.

⁹⁸⁵ Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society*, 240.

‘steered a delicate course between the espousal of sexual libertarianism and the continuation of controls on private behaviour.’⁹⁸⁶ It was based upon a distinction between public and private morality, acknowledging that the realm of private morality must not be the law’s business.⁹⁸⁷ Houlbrook nevertheless suggests that 1957 did not go far enough since it merely served to bring a particular kind of homosexual into political life – respectable, adult, private and civilian – and by doing so, in fact reaffirmed the heterosexual norm.⁹⁸⁸

A prominent role in the process was played by a friend of Williams, Carl Winter, Fellow at Trinity and Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum.⁹⁸⁹ Williams taught his younger son John and they travelled together in Europe and North Africa. According to Williams, Winter had ‘a tremendous love of life’, ‘no inclination to cultural snobbery’, being a man who ‘overcame the world, the flesh and the devil by making fun of them’, which made ‘pious respectability look like the sham it is’.⁹⁹⁰ He moved to Cambridge in 1946 from the Victoria and Albert Museum. Together with Patrick Trevor-Roper⁹⁹¹ and Wildeblood, Winter gave evidence to the Wolfenden Committee, anonymously as ‘Mr Whiter’. Trevor-Roper and Winter came forward mainly because they had heard that Wildeblood was to testify; their intention was to counterbalance the expected unfavourable impression of Wildeblood by stating that sexual orientation was innate and not the result of ‘recruitment’ or ‘seduction’. This was a vital point in persuading the Committee, and thus the Government, to agree to decriminalization.⁹⁹² Further

⁹⁸⁶ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 155.

⁹⁸⁷ *Report of the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution*, Cmnd. 247 (1957), 24.

⁹⁸⁸ Cf. Houlbrook, *Queer London*; Lucy Robinson, *Gay Men and the left in post-war Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

⁹⁸⁹ Carl Winter (1906-1966), Director and Curator of Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

⁹⁹⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 159.

⁹⁹¹ Patrick Trevor-Roper (1916-2004), eye surgeon and gay activist.

⁹⁹² Patrick Higgins, *Heterosexual dictatorship: male homosexuality in postwar Britain* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996).

pieces of research were later published, some of them under aliases. This included Michael Schofield's *A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain*,⁹⁹³ which was published under the pseudonym Gordon Westwood. It was only his *Sociological Aspects of Homosexuality*⁹⁹⁴ that was published under his name.

Legalization of homosexual acts

It took another ten years until the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee were finally adopted by Parliament in 1967, and Archbishop Michael Ramsey spoke out in full support of the change.⁹⁹⁵ He was not the only church leader to support the decriminalization. The sponsor of the Sexual Offences Act was Leo Abse⁹⁹⁶ who was able to speak of the support for moderate homosexual law reform by the Church Assembly, the Methodist Conference, the Church of England Moral Welfare Council, and even the Roman Catholic Welfare Committee, all of which had, in varying degrees, accepted the need for Wolfenden-style reform.⁹⁹⁷

The supportive stance of the churches was attested in February 1967, before the adoption of the Sexual Offences Act, when Norman Pittenger,⁹⁹⁸ then Professor of Apologetics at the General Theological Seminary in New York, and residing at King's College, Cambridge, published an article in the radical journal *New Christian*. The article (soon published as a booklet) with the title *A Time for Consent*,⁹⁹⁹ presented a

⁹⁹³ Michael Schofield ('Gordon Westwood'), *A Minority: A Report on the Life of the Male Homosexual in Great Britain* (London: Longman, 1960).

⁹⁹⁴ Michael Schofield, *Sociological Aspects of Homosexuality: a comparative study of three types of homosexuals* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965).

⁹⁹⁵ U.K. Parliamentary Debates (Lords), 5th ser., 269 (1965), cols. 716-17.

⁹⁹⁶ Leo Abse (1917-2008), Welsh lawyer and politician.

⁹⁹⁷ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 177.

⁹⁹⁸ Norman Pittenger (1905-1997), theologian and clergyman, Honorary Senior Member of King's College, Cambridge (1964-1997).

⁹⁹⁹ Norman Pittenger, *A Time for Consent: a Christian's approach to homosexuality* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

Christian case for homosexual conduct. In the article he claimed that an exclusively same-sex attracted Christian cannot be expected to give up sexual life altogether, introducing the term 'conscientious homosexual'. That year, Williams's fellow writer from *Soundings*, Hugh Montefiore, presented an open lecture at Somerville College, Oxford, suggesting that even Jesus may have been gay. This caused a 'colossal scandal'.¹⁰⁰⁰ In the end, as Stephen Brooke observes, 1967 was a kind of 'annus mirabilis' of sexual reform: not only did Parliament decriminalize homosexual acts in private involving persons over twenty-one, but it also passed the Abortion Bill which he sees as the birth of a progressive society where the basis of civilization was sexual liberty. He sees in these two acts 'at best, utilitarian reforms that left open or provoked questions of class, gender, sexual equality, individual rights, and agency'.¹⁰⁰¹

When homosexual acts were decriminalized,¹⁰⁰² Williams had already overcome his mental breakdown and previous feelings of guilt about his sexuality, although he was not yet ready to make a public admission which came only in 1982. He continued his spiritual journey, still struggling with his own self-identity.

Williams gradually realized that that a person's relationship with one's true self had to be based on the love of God and the value that such love renders. In the process of Williams's self-discovery, psychoanalysis and therapy played a core part. Although psychology was to play a prominent part in his writings, Williams never abandoned his conviction that psychology can address only one side of the coin, the other being the

¹⁰⁰⁰ Hugh Montefiore, *Christ for Us Today: Papers read at the Conference of Modern Churchmen, Somerville College, Oxford, July 1967*, ed. by Norman Pittenger (SCM Press, London: 1968); Cf. Malcolm Macourt (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

¹⁰⁰¹ Brooke, *Sexual Politics*, 147.

¹⁰⁰² *The Lesbian and Gay Movement: Campaigning for Justice, Truth and Love*, ed. by Sean Gill (London: Cassell, 1998) which provides a thorough contextual background to the emergence and development of the gay and lesbian movement in Britain since 1976.

domain of theology. While the foundation of Williams's thought was theological, psychology helped him to address Christian spirituality in a way that was accessible to contemporary minds, not least his own. Psychoanalysis consequently helped Williams discover the self-deceptive and false nature of his former spirituality and becoming aware of those aspects of his personality which 'idolatry' was trying to conceal.

The following chapter addresses his continuing encounter with different schools of psychoanalysis, their reflection in Williams's writings, and his critique of them.

VIII. WILLIAMS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS; *OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIAN BELIEF*

Williams and psychoanalysis

Psychotherapy was instrumental for Williams's recovery from his breakdown and his gradual sexual liberation. Williams soon ceased to be only a patient and developed a deep interest in the discipline of psychology and psychoanalysis, which started to permeate virtually all his future writings. Indeed, according to Fraser Watts, he became 'one of the pioneers in the work on the interface between theology and psychology.'¹⁰⁰³

Psychology and psychoanalysis were well suited for modern culture, with their accent on individuality enabling one to be free from the constraints of doctrines and prescriptions, and their emphasis on anonymity. The patient, no longer locked in the closet of his mind, could speak freely to the therapist who – unlike a priest – did not judge the patient by the prescribed norms of his religion, but was called to accept him. This call for acceptance was a key notion of Williams's writing, but because of his statements on deep psychology and psychoanalysis, many accused him of betraying some of the key tenets of Christian teaching.

For Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace, there is a link between the emergence of psychoanalysis in Britain and the tradition of English romantic Gothic culture. They see psychoanalysis foreshadowed in Gothic's images of perversion, transgression and the forbidden.¹⁰⁰⁴ A particular British school of psychoanalysis started developing soon

¹⁰⁰³ Fraser Watts, 'Psychology and Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. by Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 203.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (eds.), *Gothic Modernisms* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 3-4.

after Freud himself and his daughter Anna settled in London. Members of this ‘British School’ reflected the European tradition but added to it a particular insular twist, focusing on the ‘object-relations’ point of view.¹⁰⁰⁵ There was initially a considerable opposition in medical circles as well as in the Church.¹⁰⁰⁶ Psychoanalysis started being accepted as an independent science following the 1929 Report by a special Committee of the British Medical Association which approved it officially as a method of treatment of neuroses on the basis of Freud’s discoveries about the unconscious.

In the period after the Second World War, psychotherapy became one of the major forces in the transformation of the Western world. The role of psychology in general was rising as the power of religion was declining. Although post-war Britain did not prove an exception to this rule,¹⁰⁰⁷ the road to general acceptance was longer than elsewhere, and in particular, than in America. As Gregorio Kohon remarked: ‘It was perceived as belonging to a different realm. Psychoanalysts and their patients were tolerated as part of a wild but harmless bunch of eccentrics in a land of eccentrics.’¹⁰⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the new ‘therapeutic culture’ was gradually emerging as a kind of new set of norms which sought to substitute the ‘spiritual man’ with the ‘psychological man’ as the dominant character type in the post-Christian West.¹⁰⁰⁹

¹⁰⁰⁵ History of psychoanalysis in Britain is exhaustively described in Eric Rayner, *The Independent Mind in British Psychoanalysis* (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2020) as well as in Gregorio Kohon (ed.), *British Psychoanalysis: New Perspectives in the Independent Tradition* (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁰⁰⁶ Kohon, 28.

¹⁰⁰⁷ For further legacy of psychoanalysis in Britain, cf. Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Steven Groarke, *Managed Lives: Psychoanalysis, Inner Security and the Social Order* (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁰⁰⁸ Kohon, 46.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966). Rieff argues that Freudian psychiatry marked the beginning of Western civilization’s decisive turn away from the authoritative truths of faith to the relative ‘truths’ of therapy, and the birth of the ‘psychological man’.

Sam Brewitt-Taylor claims that psychotherapy was attractive to some radical Christians because it offered a secular justification for the existing radical Christian emphasis on the necessity of accepting any expression of personal authenticity.¹⁰¹⁰ However, this was not the case for Williams, for whom the process was the other way round: the effects of his own psychotherapy triggered the process of finding his authentic self. And as a believer, Williams sought to reconcile his faith with the attitudes of Freud, Jung and their followers towards religion.

Freud's approach to religion was basically reductionist and unsympathetic. His general views on the origins of religious thought can be found in *Totem and Taboo*;¹⁰¹¹ he then presented an exposition on the religious thoughts of an individual in *The Future of an Illusion*.¹⁰¹² For Freud, religion had its origin in a symbolic re-enactment of the murder of a father in a tribe and he saw its major motivating force in guilt. In his understanding, religion preserves a piece of infantile behaviour and is thus 'an immature response to the awareness of helplessness, an illusion created as a way of coping with unpleasant reality' and, accordingly, God is seen as an 'ideal father figure, a projection of person's own mind'.¹⁰¹³ This approach has been discussed, among others, by Paul Ricœur¹⁰¹⁴ and W. W. Meissner.¹⁰¹⁵

Carl Gustav Jung's attitude was far more sympathetic to religion as his views on the subject developed. His early views were expressed in *Psychology of the*

¹⁰¹⁰ Brewitt-Taylor, *Christian Radicalism*, 197.

¹⁰¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the psychic lives of savages and neurotics* (London: Routledge, 1919); originally published in German in 1913.

¹⁰¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth 1928); originally published in German in 1927.

¹⁰¹³ Fraser Watts and Mark Williams, *The Psychology of Religious Knowing* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 27.

¹⁰¹⁴ Cf. Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁰¹⁵ Cf. W. W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and Religious Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

Unconscious,¹⁰¹⁶ and his later understanding is discussed in his *Psychology and Alchemy*¹⁰¹⁷ and in *Answer to Job*.¹⁰¹⁸ A description of the development of Jung's quest for the 'True Self' as distinct from the everyday 'ego' has been given by J. W. Heisig and N. J. Cranbury.¹⁰¹⁹ Jung concentrated on the study of the perception of God in man's psyche rather than dealing with the metaphysical question as to whether this was a reflection of the actual God. He was not content with merely tracing the projections of God but gradually embraced the concept of the 'numinous' (understood as the experience of the divine as a mystery) expressed in Rudolf Otto's¹⁰²⁰ *The Idea of the Holy*.¹⁰²¹ Although he did not attack the transcendent concept of God, his 'view of the God-image as a symbol of, and pointer towards, the state of individuation led him increasingly to see the Self as an image of God.'¹⁰²² By 'the Self', Jung understood not just the centre of consciousness, but the 'whole person, including as yet unrealised and unconscious contents'.¹⁰²³ This Self became life's goal, as the 'completest expression of that fateful combination we call individuality,'¹⁰²⁴ its ultimate purpose being the bringing of the person to integration and wholeness. God was thus understood as an archetype and a manifestation of the deepest level of the unconscious mind.

This led Jung to believe that God was an *a priori* structural component of the psyche, a psychic reality, a factor of human experience which was fundamental and psychologically demonstrable. Jesus was the exemplification of the archetype of the

¹⁰¹⁶ Carl Gustav Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (London, 1918); originally published in German 1911-1912.

¹⁰¹⁷ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (London: Routledge, 1953); originally published in German in 1944.

¹⁰¹⁸ Carl Gustav Jung, *Answer to Job* (London: Routledge, 1954); originally published in German in 1951.

¹⁰¹⁹ Cf. J. W. Heisig and N. J. Cranbury, *Imago Dei: A Study in C. G. Jung's Psychology of Religion* (Associated University Presses, 1979).

¹⁰²⁰ Rudolf Otto (1869-1937), German theologian and religionist.

¹⁰²¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: H. Milford, 1923); originally published in German in 1917.

¹⁰²² Watts and Williams, 31.

¹⁰²³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

¹⁰²⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1928), 240.

Self,¹⁰²⁵ a particularly powerful symbol of it.¹⁰²⁶ As Michael Palmer¹⁰²⁷ observed, Jung posited two Christs: the past-historical Christ who is the subject of the gospel story, and the present-immediate Christ who is known here and now through psychic encounter. Jung refused to see the past-historical figure Jesus as any substitute for the Christ of faith; in the Christ of faith, the Self-archetype is present. Yet, Jung formulated two criticisms, namely that some ideas of God are formed by projecting the wrong image, and that so long as a man is unaware of ‘the individual psychologic roots of the Deity’, his idea of God is valueless to him.¹⁰²⁸ Williams’s distinction between the valueless idol and the real God could not have been formulated more aptly. Christopher Bryant¹⁰²⁹ concisely summarized the difference of approaches of the two founders of psychoanalysis in his claim that ‘for Freud, God is a father-substitute, for Jung, a child’s father is a God-substitute’.¹⁰³⁰

In 1963, David Cox wrote a contemporary account of analytical psychology in Britain. In the book, he defined psychoanalysis as ‘the technical term to describe analytical work as it is done by those who regard themselves as in some sense disciples of Freud’, whereby ‘the corresponding name for work carried out by those who are in some sense disciples of Jung is “Analytical Psychology”’.¹⁰³¹ The book contains an exposition of

¹⁰²⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *Aion: researches into the phenomenology of the self* (London: Routledge, 1959), 78.

¹⁰²⁶ Watts and Williams, 31-32; 96.

¹⁰²⁷ Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion* (London: Routledge 1977), 121.

¹⁰²⁸ Cf. David Cox, *Jung and St Paul: A study of the doctrine of justification by faith and its relation to the concept of individuation* (London: Longman Green, 1959), 258-59.

¹⁰²⁹ Christopher Bryant (1905-1985) Anglican monk, one of the Cowley fathers (Society of St John the Evangelist), writer on the relationship of psychology and prayer, attempting a synthesis of Jung’s theories and Christian ascetic thought.

¹⁰³⁰ Christopher Bryant, *Depth psychology and religious belief* (Mirfield: Mirfield Publications, 1972), 2.

¹⁰³¹ David Cox, *How the Mind Works: A Simple Account of Analytical Psychology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963), 23.

the same concepts and terms which Williams was to use until the end of his life. Cox combines them with his first-hand accounts.¹⁰³²

It follows that Williams adopted the Jungian concept of the Self. Combining it with the Tillichian ‘ground of being’, he gradually arrived at his notion of the ‘real me’, the attainment of which he also considered his life’s goal. In his writings, he identified the ideal ‘real me’ with Jesus, understood similarly as the Christ of faith of Jung. Thanks to Jung, Williams concluded that his own previous ideas of God resulted exactly in projecting a false image of a mere idol.

Jung therefore played a much more important role in forming Williams’s own concepts, although – probably for the sake of simplicity – he tended to mention in his writings only the name of the founder of the discipline, Freud. Nevertheless, Williams always understood Freud’s work in the context of the later developments, including the school of Jung. This somewhat inconsistent approach explains also one of the points raised by Mascall in the controversy after the publication of *Soundings* mentioned in Chapter V. In his book, Mehta writes of his meeting with Williams, who then lived on the ground floor of a staircase in the Great Court of Trinity College and ‘turned out to be a saturnine sort of person with a beet-red face’. In their conversation, Williams remarked:

I have tried talking psychology with many dons, and this is quite easy, because quite a few of the dons here are in psychoanalysis, I have discovered. And they have the kind of perception that only psychoanalysis can give one. ... What I learned from psychoanalysis was that what one thought on the conscious level, and thought was sincere, had unconscious origins.¹⁰³³

¹⁰³² Another contemporary overview of psychoanalysis, from a Catholic perspective, can be found in E. F. O’Doherty, ‘Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy and Spiritual Direction’, in *The Priest and Mental Health*, ed. by E. F. O’Doherty and S. Desmond McGrath (Dublin: Clanmore and Reynolds, 1962), 66-86.

¹⁰³³ Mehta, 60.

As he realized that the aim of psychoanalysis was to bring out hitherto repressed elements of one's personality, Williams had to be ready to face hidden aspects of himself. He gradually came to the understanding that the self of which we are aware is only a fraction of the total self; this unknown self would include all the feelings that have been 'subconsciously' [*sic*], which roughly corresponded with the Freudian *id*.¹⁰³⁴ The infinitely larger part was for Williams the unknown Self, which he found the fount of 'everything good, lovely and creative' – this would largely correspond with the Jungian Unconscious.¹⁰³⁵

Objections to Christian Belief (1963)

The relation of psychology and religion gradually found its way into Williams's writings. Williams later believed that his contribution to the discourse at Cambridge was not always understood, perhaps due to his failure to state clearly what he was trying to do. This may have been the result of not being entirely clear in his own mind: 'To many people I gave the impression that I was attempting to criticize the traditional dogmas of Christianity by means of what had become the traditional dogmas of Freudian psychology.'¹⁰³⁶ But he maintained that this was never his intention: 'Christian doctrine cannot retain its integrity if it concedes to Freud an unconditional surrender as though *The Future of an Illusion* could replace the Fourth Gospel.'¹⁰³⁷

He was nevertheless criticized: at the beginning of 1963, Williams wrote to Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury,¹⁰³⁸ to thank him for his article in the *Sunday*

¹⁰³⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 185.

¹⁰³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰³⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁰³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰³⁸ Michael Ramsey had a strong connection to Cambridge; he was born and educated there, ministered at St Benet's Church and in 1950 became the Regius Professor of Divinity there, before becoming Bishop of Durham in 1952.

Times.¹⁰³⁹ In his unpublished reply, the Archbishop mildly reprimanded Williams, saying ‘there were right uses to be made of psychology but it would be an error to allow theology simply to abdicate in its favour’.¹⁰⁴⁰ Williams tried to make his position clear at the outset of his contribution to the *Objections to Christian Belief*, a series of lectures to Cambridge undergraduates organized by Alec Vidler. Williams gave the second talk, ‘Psychological Objections’. Acknowledging that one orthodoxy, Christianity, cannot be criticized by the dogmas of another orthodoxy, that is psychology, he refused to regard the latter as ‘the Gnosticism of the twentieth century’.¹⁰⁴¹

It was a novelty that four prominent theologians would be potentially speaking against the faith they were supposed to teach and defend; the Divinity Faculty designated the lectures as *Objections*. The aim of the lectures was not to provide answers to objections to the Christian faith, but – using a metaphor resembling the title of *Soundings* – only ‘to plumb [their] depth’.¹⁰⁴² The attendance at these lectures was extraordinary and for many of the 1500 undergraduates attending each lecture there was only standing room.¹⁰⁴³ Writing from the Evangelical point of view, Densil Morgan observed that the impact of the publication of the *Objections* was that ‘agnosticism was now seen to be more virtuous and authentic than holding resolutely to the substance of the traditional faith’.¹⁰⁴⁴ In the opening lecture, D. M. MacKinnon¹⁰⁴⁵ dealt with the ‘Moral Objections’, refusing to understand morality as a divine arbitrary dictate and calling for humanist ethics. Nevertheless, he did not defend premarital sex as he believed that it

¹⁰³⁹ ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury on Civilisation, Sex and Morals’, *The Sunday Times*, 17 February 1963, 22.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Michael Ramsey, letter to Williams, 19 February 1963 (Lambeth Palace Library, Ramsey 338/27).

¹⁰⁴¹ *Objections to Christian Belief*, 35-36.

¹⁰⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰⁴³ Clements, 168.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Densil Morgan, 263.

¹⁰⁴⁵ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 217.

leads to men and women being estranged from – coining his own Tillichian term – the ‘substance of their being’.¹⁰⁴⁶ On the other hand, he refused the ‘appalling stigma’ on remarried couples and did not hesitate to call clergy who excluded divorced persons from sacramental communion ‘moral bigots’.¹⁰⁴⁷

Williams’s lecture became a statement of his own journey so far and he declared in it, for the first time, the imperative of writing one’s own subjective experience of living.¹⁰⁴⁸ This was also the first occasion of his admitting his own inner conflict between the belief in ‘the essential elements of Christianity’ and ‘the subterranean forces’ of which Williams became aware within.¹⁰⁴⁹ Appropriating the term ‘artful dodges’¹⁰⁵⁰ used in *Lord Jim* by Joseph Conrad, Williams claimed: ‘When Christianity is used as an artful dodge to allow me to escape from the discovery of what I am, when the light that is in me is thus darkness, how great is that darkness’. Williams cited H. G. Wells’s Mr. Polly,¹⁰⁵¹ who considered God as ‘a limitless Being having the nature of a schoolmaster and making infinite rules, known and unknown.’¹⁰⁵² Referring to Cranmer’s two general confessions in the Book of Common Prayer – a topic addressed previously – Williams felt that if we do what churches tell us to, we will have to pay the price of our own destruction: ‘I am the slave of my own guilt-feelings, reduced to a puppet manipulated by this horrific puppeteer’.¹⁰⁵³

Williams illustrated this with the clearly autobiographical example of ‘a person of some academic intelligence’, ‘loyally practising his religion as a devout and a rather

¹⁰⁴⁶ *Objections to Christian Belief*, 13.

¹⁰⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 38-39.

¹⁰⁵⁰ ‘It is my belief that no many fully understands his own artful dodges to escape from the grim shadow of self-knowledge.’ Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (London: Dent, 1946), 80.

¹⁰⁵¹ H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (London: Collins, 1953), 15.

¹⁰⁵² *Objections to Christian Belief*, 50-51.

¹⁰⁵³ *Ibid.*, 53.

high church Anglican' who one night had a dream of a monster in human form who was hypnotizing the actors on the stage of a theatre, reducing them to mere puppets. This was 'the god he was really worshipping in spite of his having got a First in the Theological Tripos. And to this god he had painfully to die.' The practice of his religion had been 'a desperate attempt to keep his eyes averted from the monster of the nightmare' and he was 'a devil's slave' for his devotion was just 'a compulsive response to a deeply embedded feeling of guilt'.¹⁰⁵⁴

The dreamer whose history (with his permission) I have recounted was seen, about two years after his nightmare, drunk among the bars and brothels of Tangier. He was learning that for him evil was not what the priests had told him it was, but rather that evil was the disguised slavery to his own hidden corruption which had led him to go to Mass every day and to confession every month. And he told me that words of Jesus rang in his ears like bells of victory – the words which Jesus addressed to the churchmen of His day – *'Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you'*.¹⁰⁵⁵

Writing these words, Williams was not advocating being a slave to drink or sex, but suggested that there were evils much worse, and those who were addicted this way knew somewhere inside that they were mere slaves. He concluded, nonetheless, with a provocative statement that Jesus was not crucified by the publicans and the sinners, but by the Church.¹⁰⁵⁶

Vidler continued the series with the 'Historical Objections', his main thesis being that Christian belief ought to be about the teaching of Jesus, rather than about his historical person.¹⁰⁵⁷

¹⁰⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Ibid., 54; cf. Matthew 21.31 (KJV).

¹⁰⁵⁶ Ibid., 54-55.

¹⁰⁵⁷ *Objections to Christian Belief*, 100-08.

The response to the lectures, in particular after the publication, was overwhelming; one reviewer sardonically designated the writers as ‘the resident firemen of Christianity acting as incendiaries, cutting their own hoses, in order to demonstrate how well they understand the human condition of arson’.¹⁰⁵⁸ The *Church Times* was similarly sarcastic in comparing the essays to ‘a striptease show inserted in the middle of a vicarage garden party’: ‘all we get is a little gentle swearing in the vicarage drawing-room.’¹⁰⁵⁹ Austin Farrer¹⁰⁶⁰ replied in *Theology* by addressing to Williams a satirical poem:

*Press not hypocrisy so far
As to be better than you are
Nor by confession of your plight
Wallow in obscene delight.
The phrases of the Common Prayer
Are steps in hell’s descending stair.
The bars and brothels of Tangier
Make the inward vision clear.*¹⁰⁶¹

In a more serious review in *The Expository Times*, William Barclay¹⁰⁶² felt that in the *Objections*, the Christian faith was ‘subjected to the most stringent examination by a group of fearless Christian thinkers’. Williams’s lecture was found ‘perhaps the most searching’ and ‘no summary of that chapter would do anything like justice to it’. Barclay concluded: ‘This is an intensely important book. Any thinking Christian who reads it will be better able to face himself, the world, and God.’¹⁰⁶³

¹⁰⁵⁸ *The Listener*, 27 June 1963, 12.

¹⁰⁵⁹ *Church Times*, 5 April 1963, 16.

¹⁰⁶⁰ Austin Marsden Farrer (1904-1968), philosopher and theologian opposing the views of Bultmann, Warden of Keble College, Oxford (1960-1968)

¹⁰⁶¹ Austin Farrer, ‘Objections to Christianity’, *Theology*, 518 (August 1963), 317-18. The last line betrays that the poem alluded to the English version of the two last stanzas of the Eucharistic hymn *Pange lingua* containing the words *Therefore we, before him bending*. Farrer’s thinking was heavily influenced by Thomas Aquinas to whom the hymn is attributed.

¹⁰⁶² William Barclay (1907-1978), clergyman and theologian, Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow from 1963.

¹⁰⁶³ William Barclay, ‘Entre Nous’, *The Expository Times*, September 1963, 288.

David Edwards's assessment of the *Objections* was similarly generally positive: 'It was, I believe, right to decide that the old orthodoxy was no longer a fit harbour for the ship of Christianity. But as the ship left harbour there were rocks ahead.' For him, the book 'demolished the credibility of the old system of dogmas' and highlighted two tendencies where the ship was heading for the rocks. Edwards sees the first difficulty in a tendency to identify Christianity with the acceptance of human nature instead of putting the emphasis on the transformation of human nature in a new Christian life and in a humble dependence on the Triune God. He further finds that in the lectures, conformity to nature became prominent while conversion to Christ obscure or suspect. Edwards views it as a pity ('although inevitable') that the essay by Williams was noticed chiefly for its exposition of the need to accept some physical expressions of sexuality outside marriage. Yet, he also suggests that Williams 'guarded himself against leaving the impression that he was advocating the abandonment of all restraint or the naïve yielding to everything that can be called "natural"'.¹⁰⁶⁴

In his later overview of the period, Keith Clements went even further viewing *Objections* in the context of the 'Cambridge theology' as a disparate movement where the unifying factor was only the necessity to question the received formulations and practices. He found that there was a disparity between *Soundings* and the *Objections to Christian Belief* which made it difficult to formulate properly critical responses.¹⁰⁶⁵

Williams's writings of this period demonstrated that his stance on psychoanalysis was by no means uncritical. While he was aware of his own psychological baggage, he did

¹⁰⁶⁴ Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, 24.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Clements, 171.

not base his thought on experience alone. Williams unambiguously acknowledged that the various types of psychotherapy and psychological analysis were not a universal panacea, and in no unclear terms warned against using the investigations of Freud and Jung without discrimination, both among those who do not believe in God and by those who do. He remained convinced that there are the individual ‘denominations’ of psychology and its practical application differs considerably from analyst to analyst.¹⁰⁶⁶

Thanks to sympathetic understanding of the mindset of his readers who were often turning inward through the influence of psychology, Williams was now able to become an effective spiritual guide for many of his followers. Combining theology and psychoanalysis, he was relentless in his exposure of the self-deception of those who understood faith merely as a set of propositions.

In spite of his newly acquired knowledge of the self, Williams still struggled to live the comfortable life of an Oxbridge clergyman and academic. He inevitably longed for the affection and attention of others, but was still unable to find them. Although he was settled at Trinity, he continued to face his longstanding interior battles. In his writings, he focused more intently on what it meant to live in relation to our true selves.

¹⁰⁶⁶ *Objections to Christian Belief*, 36.

IX. ROAD TO MIRFIELD

Things started changing at Trinity: in 1965, Rab Butler,¹⁰⁶⁷ with his second wife Mollie, arrived to become Master in succession to Lord Adrian.¹⁰⁶⁸ Williams praised Butler for his ‘immense subtlety of mind and manoeuvre’ who ‘practised the art of the possible’.¹⁰⁶⁹ The Butlers and Williams became close friends; when Butler died in 1982, Williams was invited to speak at his funeral: ‘[Rab and Mollie] complemented each other in a way and to a degree that I have never seen in any other married couple. Indeed, it is almost impossible to think of Rab without Mollie or Mollie without Rab.’¹⁰⁷⁰ Mollie Butler remembered Williams very fondly: ‘He was witty – people used to laugh during his sermons – he was profound and, above all, he made religion cease to be a duty and turned it into a glorious way of life in which, listening to him, you longed to share.’ Once she had a friend visiting whom she took to hear Williams preaching at Great St Mary’s; when the visitor was wondering why they had to run, Mollie Butler was breathless in her reply that it was the only way to get a seat.¹⁰⁷¹

Mehta offers a contemporary account of a conversation with a Cambridge don:

‘Williams, I suppose, is a radical, but he tries things on his pulses and he often paints with words, to evoke the maximum response.’¹⁰⁷² This unconventional approach made Williams a sought-after preacher, and during this time Williams produced some of his finest writings. He was no longer just an eminent scholar or brilliant theological mind,

¹⁰⁶⁷ Richard Austen Butler (1902-1982), a prominent Conservative politician, Education Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary, Deputy Prime Minister, First Secretary of State and Foreign Secretary, before becoming Master of Trinity College between 1965 and 1978.

¹⁰⁶⁸ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 199.

¹⁰⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Michael Jago, *Rab Butler: The best prime minister we never had?* (London: Biteback, 2016), 426.

¹⁰⁷¹ Butler, 102.

¹⁰⁷² Mehta, 60-64.

but – thanks to the new experience of continuing therapy – also finally a sensitive pastor. Gradually ‘freeing himself from himself by a degree of self-exposure that was rare and uncomfortable’, Williams made his Cambridge pulpit into ‘a theological couch where he would tell almost all’.¹⁰⁷³

The True Wilderness (1965)

Williams’s popularity was attested in 1965, when the publisher James Mitchell,¹⁰⁷⁴ then working at Constable, asked Williams to send him his sermons from Trinity, and from these he selected twenty-one. They were published under the title *The True Wilderness* and although the sermons were not completely coherent with one another, the book soon became a best seller. In the introduction, Williams laid out his reference framework based on personal experience: ‘I resolved that I would not preach about any aspect of Christian belief unless it had become part of my own life-blood.’¹⁰⁷⁵ Alluding to the title of his book, Williams maintained that ‘human life is very largely a wilderness, a dry land where no water is’ and ‘death is the realistic acceptance of our wilderness’, but once we accept our wilderness, there follows the miracle of resurrection and the desert becomes verdant.¹⁰⁷⁶ According to Williams, when we feel evils working within us, we are receiving Christ ‘who took all evil into His own heart and used the horror and agony of it to give Himself utterly to His Father, thus bringing good out of evil itself’.¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁷³ Peart-Binns, 113.

¹⁰⁷⁴ James Mitchell (1939-1985), publisher. Together with John Beazley (1932-1976), founder of Mitchell Beazley Publishers in 1969.

¹⁰⁷⁵ *The True Wilderness*, 8.

¹⁰⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁰⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In the book, Williams introduced a number of controversial propositions. One challenging thesis was that the Jesus of the synoptic gospels does not give the impression of being an ‘innocent’, by which he means that some of Jesus’s pronouncements can be sometimes perceived as harsh. He further added that Christ ‘was not a saint as that term is commonly and mistakenly understood’, for he ‘did not always do the ideal thing’. According to Williams, ‘the most costly of the sacrifices He had to make ... was the loss of His confidence’ for ‘perhaps from the start He had been the victim of an illusion’.¹⁰⁷⁸

Williams also addressed the notions of guilt and repentance, admitting that without repentance one cannot be a disciple of Jesus, yet ‘to repent does not mean to be guilty’ for ‘guilt is a form of self-hatred’.¹⁰⁷⁹ Repentance does not merely mean trying to be sorry for something we enjoyed doing; instead, its essence is liberating, ‘discovering something about yourself something positive, not negative’.¹⁰⁸⁰

Williams then turned his attention to a discourse on true values in life. In his address ‘They that have riches’¹⁰⁸¹ (alluding to Mark 10.23), Williams warns about learning or seeing things just for the sake of ticking a box: he compares visitors to an art gallery who treat it merely as ‘a sort of aesthetic stockmarket’ so that the real treasure is denied them with others who are not concerned to ‘acquire or retain anything’ and thus come away filled with good things. Likewise, in terms of university studies, what we study nourishes us only when we are concerned with its own inherent value and ‘unconcerned with any riches of prestige we may collect on the way’.¹⁰⁸² However, for

¹⁰⁷⁸ *The True Wilderness*, 159-60.

¹⁰⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁰⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁰⁸² *Ibid.*

Williams, the most destructive ‘riches’ of all are the religious ones – when religion is observed for religion’s sake – which can lead to ‘the ghastly unselfishness of the self-centred, which is infinitely harder to put up with than any honest selfishness’.¹⁰⁸³

The topic of riches also leads Williams to an exposition on epistemology, following up on his remarks in *Soundings* (1962). On the basis of John 16.13, he outlines two kinds of truth: external and internal. Universities are concerned only with the former, with observing objects or ideas; the latter kind of truth, however, is mastered by means of what we see or feel. God can never be an outside kind of truth, and theology is a matter of ‘juggling with ideas’. In this context, Williams, coming back to his concept of the true self, uses his favourite quotation from St. Catherine of Genoa that ‘My me is God, nor do I know my selfhood save in Him’.¹⁰⁸⁴ The two kinds of understanding are explained by Williams using the dichotomy ‘analytic’ and ‘poetic’: Jesus’s understanding was of the latter, intuitive kind.¹⁰⁸⁵

Examining true values in life, Williams believes that Jesus’s statement about the first and the last means that ‘real life is not to be measured in terms of what a man has been able to accumulate, whether it be possessions, achievements or personal characteristics’.¹⁰⁸⁶ Instead of accumulating riches we are invited to receive something else, even if this ability comes slowly and mysteriously. The question ‘Am I organized to accumulate or to receive?’ is the most important question we shall ever have to answer.¹⁰⁸⁷ In this instance, Williams fails to adduce a fitting parable (although the story of the rich fool springs to mind (Luke 12.16-21)).

¹⁰⁸³ Ibid., 61.

¹⁰⁸⁴ *The True Wilderness*, 17-18. Cf. *Vita e dottrina di Santa Catarina da Genova*, cap. xiv.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Ibid., 74.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Ibid., 79.

For good measure, Williams also addresses the importance of doubting, for we can never be certain whether it is the Spirit working within us: 'Faith consists in the acceptance of doubt, not, as we generally think, in its repression.'¹⁰⁸⁸ If faith occasionally fails, we are driven into the 'funk-hole of objectivity' of what the Bible or the Church maintain, but we should not forget that it was the 'orthodox experts who crucified Jesus because He trusted the Spirit within Him and not the establishment'.¹⁰⁸⁹

Selected passages of *The True Wilderness* were cited by Christopher Bryant in his *Depth Psychology and Religious Belief* (based on a series of his lectures delivered at Imperial College in 1968) to support his claim that 'for Jesus, fear and distrust of God were the great enemies'.¹⁰⁹⁰ Bryant later published his study *Jung and the Christian Way*, in which he acknowledged that Williams 'with an enviably clear and lively literary style and a complete freedom from psychological jargon ... shows unmistakably the influence of Jung'.¹⁰⁹¹ Separately, John Betjeman admitted that composing his poem *Narcissus*¹⁰⁹² came from reading *The True Wilderness* which enabled him to write openly about guilt.¹⁰⁹³

The True Wilderness received mixed reviews; while T. R. Milford¹⁰⁹⁴ acknowledged in his review for *Theology* that Williams's identity was that of 'a sensitive man' who had been helped to self-knowledge by psychoanalysis, he was nevertheless moved to

¹⁰⁸⁸ Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Bryant, *Depth Psychology and Religious Belief*, 69. Cf. p. 225.

¹⁰⁹¹ Christopher Bryant, *Jung and the Christian Way* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983), ix.

¹⁰⁹² Originally published in the *London Magazine* (Vol. 5, Number 3, June 1965) and later in John Betjeman, *High and Low* (London: John Murray, 1966).

¹⁰⁹³ John Betjeman, letter to E. M. Foster, 27 June 1965, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 293-94.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Theodore Richard 'Dick' Milford (1895-1987), Anglican theologian and clergyman, educated at Westcott House and later vicar of St Mary's, Oxford, the first chairman of Oxfam. He defended Penguin Books in respect of the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

protest when Williams was attempting to describe what was going on in the mind of Jesus in Gethsemane: ‘Strip yourself, Mr Williams, and I may see what Christ has done in you and be grateful. Tell me my secret thoughts, and now and then I cry *touché*. But please leave my Lord alone. You shall not make me see him in your image.’¹⁰⁹⁵

At the time of publishing *The True Wilderness*, Williams had finally recovered from his breakdown: ‘My last twelve years at Trinity were for me a very happy time indeed.’¹⁰⁹⁶ Nevertheless, he realized that he needed to embrace his own wilderness, and started questioning the comforts of his Cambridge position. He had conversations about his state of mind with Ralph Leigh,¹⁰⁹⁷ who was elected a Fellow of Trinity a year after him. In 1967, Williams was forty-eight and thought that he had to make a definite decision at the age of fifty: it was then or never. He realized that he had never taken any major initiative in his life and always ‘accepted what had been offered [to him] on a plate’; he did not have to pull any strings to get his curacy in London, the Chaplaincy at Westcott House nor the Fellowship at Trinity.¹⁰⁹⁸ Betjeman recalled this state of mind in the advice Williams gave to ordinands at Cuddesdon, warning them that ‘when doing is divorced from a deep understanding of that fact, no wonder we feel like men who have played every card in the pack and never taken a trick.’¹⁰⁹⁹

This was exactly his situation: Williams could have remained in his job at Trinity until his retirement and in his rooms until his death. But he deemed clinging on to the

¹⁰⁹⁵ T. R. Milford, ‘Book Review: The True Wilderness’, *Theology*, 542 (August 1965), 385-87.

¹⁰⁹⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 199-200.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Ralph Alexander Leigh (1915-1987), Fellow at Trinity and Professor of French at the University of Cambridge (1973-1982).

¹⁰⁹⁸ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 269.

¹⁰⁹⁹ John Betjeman, letter to Harry Jarvis, 5 January 1966, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 300.

security of the place he loved to be a cowardly option. He began to feel that to grow fully into himself he needed to leave. Gradually, Williams was no longer prepared to associate God with any established institution and remained very sceptical about organized religion and sacramental priesthood. He wrote in *The True Wilderness*:

The true priest ... is anybody who is the channel of God's love, and is willing to share something of the cost of that love; and whose eyes are open to perceive God's presence everywhere and in everybody. Priesthood... has nothing to do with entering a special divinely ordained caste. ... The ordained ministry with its hierarchical structure is no more than a sociological phenomenon, a necessary organization of convenience ... since most people in all ages seem to need their deepest feelings and yearnings organized for them, or at least explained to them, by authority.¹¹⁰⁰

The sacred canopy¹¹⁰¹ started to look bogus but Williams kept himself busy.

In difficult times, he often found comfort and encouragement in the arts. Williams's favourite pieces included the first movement of the Symphony in D minor by César Franck, in which he found 'a gigantic struggle between faith and unbelief'.¹¹⁰² He believed that although the great creative artists of the world show the glory of God, 'they can't be fitted into the ecclesiastical straitjacket labelled goodness' as 'ecclesiastics prefer to keep God safely in His box as if He were a biscuit'. Williams was also heartened by lighter arts, his favourite being Noël Coward's *Sail Away*: '*When your heart feels as dreary as a worn-out glove/Sail away.*'¹¹⁰³

On an occasion, he was touched by the words of the matriarchal woman lecturing to Judy Garland in *A Star is Born*: 'There was no knowing where God would explode

¹¹⁰⁰ *The True Wilderness*, 193.

¹¹⁰¹ Ibid. The term was coined by Peter L. Berger (1929-2017), Austrian born sociologist and Protestant theologian. In *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), Berger argued that religion is the 'sacred canopy' which every human society builds over its world to give it meaning.

¹¹⁰² *Some Day I'll Find You*, 256.

¹¹⁰³ Ibid., 257. *Sail Away* (1961), a musical with a book, music and lyrics by Noël Coward.

next.¹¹⁰⁴ In the end, Williams continued to feel like a slave who had been set free, yet for whom what was emerging was a sense of emptiness, an ultimate dissatisfaction.

The most obvious cause was failing where other people succeeded: Williams longed to share his life with another human person, but there was no one. He admitted that the resultant loneliness had made him querulous and disagreeable, and he started to drink even more.¹¹⁰⁵ At the same time, he was unable to immerse himself in a homosexual ghetto, gay parties or pubs having no attraction for him.

It was not a coincidence that in March 1966, Williams preached on the question ‘What the Devil?’.¹¹⁰⁶ The Devil had for him no personal dimension; he was a myth without being a monster, not a person with horns and a tail. However, although Williams acknowledged that we need to resort to the myths drawn from the human psyche, as described by Freud, he maintained that the Devil should not be understood merely as a psychological process. There is reality of evil in the world and Williams elaborated on its impact using the mythology of psychological analysis, hoping that ‘the myth will not be mistaken for a photograph’.¹¹⁰⁷ Williams concluded with a most honest personal admission, reflecting his mental state at that time: ‘Here and now there is, metaphorically, a Beyond, where Satan and Sanctus are one. Like many others, I’ve been there occasionally.’¹¹⁰⁸

¹¹⁰⁴ *A Star Is Born*, dir. George Cukor (1954, Transcona: USA).

¹¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 239.

¹¹⁰⁶ ‘What the Devil?’, *Sermons from Great St. Mary’s*, 110.

¹¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 118-19. Williams uses the same phrase in *Tensions* (cf. p. 287).

The God I Want (1967)

In 1967, Williams finished his last essay before leaving Trinity. It was a contribution to *The God I Want*, a series of essays edited by James Mitchell, James Alexander Hugh, and Charles Rycroft. In the book, dedicated ‘To the Unknown God,’ each of the nine contributors attempted to describe their ideal notion of God, their views ranging from conventional to the sceptical.¹¹⁰⁹

In his essay, Williams maintained that God could not be the object of a direct intellectual inquiry leading to informative results. He wanted a God who was independent from what he might want as a theologian, a God who was not mixed up with infantile fantasies: ‘I want Him in some sense or other to be real.’¹¹¹⁰ Williams reiterated his perception of ‘identity and difference’ of ‘me and other’, and quoting again St Catherine of Genoa, he wrote about the experience of transcendence within immanence. Provocative statements continued: he wrote about Jesus that perhaps ‘there was in His outlook more of the monotheism of the Old Testament and of Job’s vision of reality than we find comfortable to admit’¹¹¹¹ and – very controversially – Williams did not hesitate to invite the reader to consider that ‘Jesus [was] pathological rather than healthy-minded’.¹¹¹²

The reviewer in *Theology* admitted that ‘running through these pages there may be superficial cause for hissing and gnashing of teeth’, nevertheless the point that the ‘real significance of the individual begins to emerge as a fraction of the whole of creation

¹¹⁰⁹ *The God I Want*, 8.

¹¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹¹¹² *Ibid.*, 189.

and history' is made clear in Williams's 'masterful contribution, by far the best and final essay'.¹¹¹³

Sermons from Great St. Mary's (1968)

Finally, 1968 brought the publication of the collection of *Sermons from Great St. Mary's* which was edited by Montefiore. The sermons were chosen from the addresses of the previous five years, including one by Williams. Later, another Williams's sermon preached before leaving Cambridge was included in *More Sermons from Great St. Mary's* (published in 1970),

In his sermon 'On Belonging', Williams attaches a great value to the sense of belonging, the awareness that we are parts of a great whole from which nothing can separate us. Although Williams finds a fitting expression of the sense of belonging in Jung who is 'asking the individual to become aware that he is inalienably part of a comprehensive totality,'¹¹¹⁴ he remains firmly Christocentric; Christ remains for Williams the source of true human identity and belonging. While happiness is certainly a part of being human, the degree to which we are fully happy is the degree to which we are willing to find our individual identity in Christ¹¹¹⁵ who is, for Williams, the totality in whose being everything is gathered together and revealed as one.¹¹¹⁶ Even hatred, cruelty and despair are part of Christ, for he was 'willing to receive and take upon himself as his own all the perversions of life, changed their character, straightened out their crookedness, made them once again the raw material of

¹¹¹³ W. S. Boycott, 'The God I Want', *Theology*, 566 (August 1967), 376.

¹¹¹⁴ Williams, 'On Belonging', *More Sermons from Great St. Mary's*, 89.

¹¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

goodness'.¹¹¹⁷ Christ was present, according to Williams, even in the hatred and violence of the assassin of Dr Martin Luther King – here Williams resorts to a contemporary reference. Whatever is, is a part of Christ and all places on earth are the vehicles of his real presence. Perhaps the only prayer we need ever pray is that of the blind beggar: '*Lord Jesus, that I may receive my sight*'.¹¹¹⁸

In another address, 'On Christian Experience', embarking on his slow and steady path towards a certain kind of universalism, Williams understands Christ primarily in terms of practical human experience. He suggests that Christ's identity needs to be made our own for he cannot be reduced to 'a neat and intellectually satisfying description': otherwise we would be in danger of turning him into an idol. The reader is invited to see in him 'the creation of goodness and love, not by escaping from the moral ambiguities and contradictions of life in the world but by being fully involved in them'.¹¹¹⁹ By the acceptance of suffering, Christ took all the destructive evil upon himself. Christians are not mere spectators but are 'caught up in the drama so that it becomes their own'. Suffering, accepted in Christ and for his sake, is 'the means whereby the power of God is brought to bear upon the world,'¹¹²⁰ for 'God works not through human success but through people consecrated for the purposes of his love.'¹¹²¹ As an example Williams chooses Bonhoeffer, who was someone 'who, sharing Christ's life, partook in great measure of his experience'. Although Bonhoeffer 'often contradicts himself', and so his power 'is to be found only in a minor degree in what he wrote', his real power was his 'dedication to truth and justice'.¹¹²²

¹¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹¹⁸ Lk 18:41; Mk 10:51 (KJV). The idea is reiterated in *Becoming What I Am*, 10.

¹¹¹⁹ Williams, 'On Christian Experience', *More Sermons from Great St. Mary's*, 77-78.

¹¹²⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹¹²¹ Ibid., 84.

¹¹²² Ibid.

Dissatisfaction with life

Increasingly, Williams felt that he was not happy and needed a change – at which point Geoffrey Beaumont¹¹²³ mentioned the monastic community at Mirfield. Beaumont had been Chaplain at Trinity during the first two years of Williams time as a Fellow; Williams had a high opinion of him and thought Beaumont was someone ‘who was absolutely free from any taint of idol worship’.¹¹²⁴ From Cambridge, Beaumont went to Madrid where he was Chaplain to the British Embassy Church (where Williams also spent a long vacation as temporary Chaplain there). Later, facing problems with alcohol, he decided to join, first for a short period, the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, following the invitation by Hugh Bishop¹¹²⁵ who was subsequently to become Superior of the Community. Upon his visit back to Cambridge, Beaumont described the Community – reluctantly – as an ‘absolute hell’ of ‘boring, devotional shits’.¹¹²⁶ However, he later grew to love the brethren and returned. The fact that the Community did not turn Beaumont into a grey saint so impressed Williams that he thought that Mirfield might be good for him, too.

Williams gradually realized that staying in Cambridge forever was not for him. He had a strong inner drive to discover new places and was ever restless, but also longed for a special place where he could give free rein to his struggle for depth. He suffered deeply from loneliness and tried to flee from it. In the back of his mind, there lingered a

¹¹²³ Geoffrey Beaumont (1903-1970), Chaplain at Trinity College, Cambridge (1947-1956), Vicar of St. George’s Camberwell (1957-1959, Trinity College’s mission parish in Southwark), from 1961 member of the Community of the Resurrection, a well-known hymn writer; later posted to South Africa where he died.

¹¹²⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 258.

¹¹²⁵ William Fletcher Bishop (1907-1989), member of the Community of the Resurrection (1940-1974), its Principal (1956-1966), and later Superior (1966-1974).

¹¹²⁶ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 263.

thought as to whether the brethren of the Community could become his family, his real home.

During the spring vacation in 1968, Williams thought he might be temporarily relieved from making the pressing choice; he flew to Lerwick, Shetland, for a fortnight's holiday, joined by his friends Betjeman and Lady Cavendish.¹¹²⁷ However, due to inclement weather, the party was confined to their rooms where one night they watched the film *Don't Count the Candles*¹¹²⁸ about growing old in comfortable affluence: Williams recognized his very situation. During the trip he also visited a Scottish Episcopal church in Lerwick where he found an 'overpowering' sentence from the Prayer Book epistle for Easter Sunday: '*Ye died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.*'¹¹²⁹ Williams understood this 'not so much a divine imperative as a divine invitation'.¹¹³⁰

Williams wrote to Beaumont about the possibility of trying to join the Community. Beaumont advised him to write to Bishop, the Superior, and Williams received an invitation to spend a few days in the Community next time he was free, which practically would not be until July 1968.¹¹³¹ Williams was aware that he was up against a serious contradiction: he still disliked and feared organized churchiness, which all too often resulted in a negation of God, reducing the ultimate mystery into 'manipulable counters doled out by hierophants',¹¹³² who claimed to have exclusive possession of the truth. Williams also knew that there were only five or six lay brethren at Mirfield,

¹¹²⁷ John Betjeman, letter to Lionel Perry, 8 February 1968, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 347.

¹¹²⁸ *Don't Count the Candles*, dir. Antony Armstrong-Jones Snowden (1968, CBS: USA, UK).

¹¹²⁹ Colossians 3.3 (KJV).

¹¹³⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 273.

¹¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹³² *Ibid.*, 275.

and that most members of the Community were clergymen: 'Even worse, they were Anglo-Catholics.'¹¹³³

At the same time, Williams was attracted to the routine of regular prayer and contemplation, which was not something that he could achieve on his own, without the company of other people. At the end of the term, Williams attended to a student who, together with his girlfriend, was injured and in a critical condition following a car crash. Williams claims that it was there when he realized that God had invited him to dedicate himself to prayer for others, and he understood the recovery of the student (whose wedding he took a few years later) as a sign to go to Mirfield.¹¹³⁴

Upon his first visit to Mirfield, Williams did not take in much of the place. In his conversations with the brethren, he did not want to take sides in the ongoing controversies about saying private masses. He was told that in the first months he would be a postulant, living by the Community Rule but still having access to his own money. Then he would be admitted as a novice who is under the direction of an official called the Novice-Guardian; after two years a secret ballot would be taken by the brethren as to whether he would be elected a full-blown member of the Community, with vows for a period of three years. There would then be another ballot, leading to life-time vows. Williams first intended to use his sabbatical to become a postulant but the Superior told him that this would not be acceptable and he would have to resign from Trinity first:¹¹³⁵ in monasticism, there was no way to have one's cake and eat it.

Upon his return to Trinity, Williams wrote to the Superior about his intention to join the Community from the end of the academic year 1968-1969. In a separate letter to the

¹¹³³ Ibid., 276.

¹¹³⁴ Ibid., 278.

¹¹³⁵ Ibid., 281.

Master of Trinity, he resigned his Fellowship. The boats had been burnt and Butler wrote to the Archbishop of Canterbury about the departure ‘of our excellent Dean of Trinity, Harry Williams’ as of the summer of 1969, asking for a recommendation of someone for this position.¹¹³⁶ The only person with whom he continued to share his feelings was his psychoanalyst Dr Scott who advised Williams: ‘You’ll be all right at Mirfield as long as you don’t take it over-seriously.’¹¹³⁷ Nonetheless, Williams claims that shortly before his arrival at Mirfield, he again began to suffer from a psychosomatic condition which caused itchy spots all over his body, except on the visible parts; he regarded it as a sign of nervous disability showing his lack of suitability for a new life.¹¹³⁸ Although this description is similar to that of his condition prior to the breakdown, no breakdown was to occur this time.

During his final sabbatical Williams travelled extensively: he spent two weeks in Athens with Graham Storey, then went on a three weeks’ tour to Iran and on a lecture tour to the USA. Williams recalled his return flight in first class on a ‘Yankee Clipper’¹¹³⁹ as ‘a spiritual experience of no mean order’.¹¹⁴⁰ After a short medical check-up, he continued travelling, visiting Malta, Naples, the Sorrento peninsula, Rome, Cornwall and Ireland: ‘And between these trips I had the debris of eighteen years to sort out and dispose of.’¹¹⁴¹

Having made a firm decision, Williams placed a notice in *The Times*. The wording of the notice illustrates Williams’s selective memory. In his autobiography he claims that

¹¹³⁶ R. A. Butler, letter to Michael Ramsey, 30 July 1968 (Lambeth Palace Library, Ramsey 148, f. 20).
Michael Ramsey, letter to Rab Butler, 31 July 1968 (Lambeth Palace Library, Ramsey 148, f. 21).

¹¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹¹³⁹ ‘Clipper’ was a designation of transatlantic planes flown by the now defunct airline Pan American.

¹¹⁴⁰ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 287.

¹¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the text was ‘Harry Williams is grateful to the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield for undertaking from July next year to see if he would be the slightest good as a monk.’¹¹⁴² However, the actual notice¹¹⁴³ was much more formal: ‘The Rev. Harry Williams, Fellow and Dean of Chapel at Trinity College, Cambridge, is going to the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, Yorkshire, next August to find out whether he is suited to the monastic life.’ In the actual notice Williams also claimed that entering into a monastery had been on his mind ever since he was ordained – he may have wanted to find a plausible reason for the ground-breaking change to his life so that it did not look whimsical. He continued: ‘I was afraid before that going into a monastery might be a form of escapism but now I’m confident that it’s not.’ The article also informed the reader that Williams was 40 (instead of 49); this is perhaps more likely a mistake of the editor than Williams vainly trying to pass for a younger man. Later, Williams received an encouraging letter from Michael Ramsey, who as Archbishop was also Mirfield’s Visitor.¹¹⁴⁴

As Dean, Williams was to be succeeded by John Robinson. Williams wrote to Butler that Robinson ‘might well wish to return for a time to academic work, and the College would be lucky, to say the least’.¹¹⁴⁵ At first, Robinson was not shortlisted. On 3 December 1968, Williams, who was not on the committee selecting his successor, wrote to Robinson: ‘I am more sorry than I can say, as there is nobody I should like more to succeed me than yourself.’¹¹⁴⁶ Later, Butler overcame his initial opposition and Robinson was hired.¹¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, when Robinson succeeded Williams, ‘his

¹¹⁴² Ibid., 288.

¹¹⁴³ *The Times*, 19 October 1968, 10.

¹¹⁴⁴ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 297.

¹¹⁴⁵ James, *A Life of Bishop John A. T. Robinson*, 163.

¹¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 163-64.

¹¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 168.

shyness and reserve and lack of small talk contrasted with his predecessor's warmth and ebullience'.¹¹⁴⁸

While some friends admired Williams's decision to abandon the prestige of a Cambridge college for a considerably less glamorous future as a monk, other friends questioned whether he was doing the right thing, and encouraged him to consider the liberties he might lose. Lady Cavendish, one of Williams's closest friends, was totally opposed to his decision to become a monk.¹¹⁴⁹ In the spring of 1969, Williams stayed with her and Betjeman in Trebetherick in Cornwall. She reminded Williams that it was 'parties and travel and young men, however much it sometimes hurts, and interesting people' which were feeding his imagination. In her view, he was making a catastrophic mistake, as she could not envisage his being happy in an order where the luxuries of life were pared down to the minimum. Ann Tusa,¹¹⁵⁰ the wife of the journalist and TV commentator John Tusa, took the opposite view, encouraging Williams to make the move.¹¹⁵¹

James Mitchell and his wife Janice were apprehensive yet comforting, promising Williams a job as a safety net. At that time, Mitchell was already a successful publisher, together with his business partner John Beazley who died tragically of cancer a few years afterwards. In an unpublished letter of 15 July 1968, Mitchell wrote to Williams, summarizing the feelings of his closest friends:

None of us, I think, could ever lose you. I mean all of us, the incredible number of people whose lives have been enriched and given meaning by what you have said and written and stood for. ... You are, whatever you feel or don't feel about it, a figure of immense power and influence – healing influence – to a whole disorganised army of people. You have reassured people not by

¹¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 192.

¹¹⁴⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 290.

¹¹⁵⁰ Ann Tusa, historian.

¹¹⁵¹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 292-93.

confirming them in irrational prejudice but in their internal hope, in the possibility of their inherent gentleness through the storms of impotence and feelings of cynicism and valuelessness. You became this to people because you were, in old fashioned language in the world one of us. ... It was Tangier – the background of Tangier – which has kept you on our side.¹¹⁵²

A Trinity Fellow, Bob Robson,¹¹⁵³ wrote a farewell song that was sung in Williams's room by the choir – in the autobiography, Williams decided not to publish it as it 'might lead to more than one misunderstanding'.¹¹⁵⁴ Another of the farewell songs was 'Let's get drunk, get drunk, get drunk,/ For Harry the monk, the monk, the monk.' The cast included a young Prince Charles, which led to its publication in the newspapers the following morning. The episode was attested by Betjeman who wrote in a letter to Mary Wilson that Williams 'had a great influence on Prince Charles who likes him very much'.¹¹⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Betjeman remembered Williams as a 'moral tutor' of the young Prince who 'often serves at weekday celebrations in Trinity'.¹¹⁵⁶

This was not the first time that the young Prince found himself cast in a thespian role in the presence of Williams: when the Prince joined Trinity's drama group, the *Dryden Society*, he was cast in a comedy revue as a cleric vaguely resembling the Archbishop of Canterbury, and in a similar role in *The Erpingham Camp*, a dark comedy by Joe Orton.¹¹⁵⁷ For these roles, the future King borrowed from Williams a clerical collar, 'put up with a custard pie thrown at his face, and gave a sermon as he attempted to wipe cream out of his left ear.'¹¹⁵⁸

¹¹⁵² James Mitchell, letter to Williams, 15 July 1968 (Williams Papers).

¹¹⁵³ Robert Robson (1929-1995), historian, Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge (1956-1995).

¹¹⁵⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 296.

¹¹⁵⁵ John Betjeman, letter to Mary Wilson, 14 January 1969, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 358.

¹¹⁵⁶ John Betjeman, letter to R. S. Thomas, 22 December 1968, cited in A. N. Wilson, Betjeman (London: Arrow Books, 2007), 52.

¹¹⁵⁷ Joe Orton (1933-1967), playwright, author and diarist.

¹¹⁵⁸ Sally Bedell Smith, *Prince Charles: The Passions and Paradoxes of an Improbable Life* (New York: Random House, 2017), 37.

Williams and the then Prince Charles met for the first time on 4 January 1966, upon the Prince's initial visit to the college. Robin Woods, then Dean of Windsor, wrote to Williams before Charles's first visit, informing him that the Prince would come to Williams's rooms for an interview on the 22 December 1966, suggesting that he should share a room, rather than living on his own.¹¹⁵⁹ Upon becoming an undergraduate, Prince Charles started attending the Sunday evening series of lectures at St Mary's where the speakers included the voices of well-known personalities, among them Enoch Powell,¹¹⁶⁰ W. H. Auden,¹¹⁶¹ Duke Ellington,¹¹⁶² and Williams. Williams was remembered by the Prince as 'widely renowned not just as a mesmeric preacher, but for the unorthodox brilliance of his theological inquiry, illuminated by his immersion in the writings of Freud and Jung and his growing fascination with the "inner self"'.¹¹⁶³ Williams later told Charles's biographer that he always thought the Prince 'was a deep person': he noted that Prince Charles was interested 'in the source of life, [had] an openness of mind, a readiness to evaluate ideas, not taking things off the peg but thinking them out for himself. ... I always thought he had the makings of a saint when he was young: he had the grace, the humility and the desire to help other people.'¹¹⁶⁴ It is also claimed that Williams introduced the future King Charles III to the work of Carl Jung and encouraged his exploration of the 'inner self' with 'a spirit of radical inquiry'.¹¹⁶⁵

¹¹⁵⁹ Letter by Robin Woods to Williams, 20 December 1966 (Williams Papers).

¹¹⁶⁰ Enoch Powell (1912-1998), politician.

¹¹⁶¹ Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), English-American poet. In the 1930s in a relationship with the novelist Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) and later with the poet and librettist Chester Kallman (1921-1975).

¹¹⁶² Duke Ellington (1899-1974), American composer and jazz musician.

¹¹⁶³ Jonathan Dimbleby, *The Prince of Wales: A Biography* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 113.

¹¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶⁵ Bedell Smith, *Prince Charles*, 35.

Williams's 50th birthday on 10 May 1969 was celebrated at The Savoy in London, with James and Janice Mitchell. Mollie and Rab Butler then generously offered to host a farewell dinner for Williams; the party was an enjoyable evening but it also 'seemed inevitably something of a funeral wake'.¹¹⁶⁶ Betjeman composed a poem for the occasion; it begins after a dinner in Williams's room at Trinity:

*The moon was in the Cambridge sky
And bathed Great Court in silver light
When Hastings-Bass and Woods and I
And quiet Elizabeth, tall and white,
With that sure clarity of mind
Which comes to those who've truly dined,
Reluctant rose to say good-night;
And all of us were bathed the while
In the large moon of Harry's smile.*¹¹⁶⁷

On 1 July 1969, the Investiture of Prince Charles at Caernarvon Castle took place. The order of service became one of few Williams's cherished personal possessions.¹¹⁶⁸ Another party for Williams was then given by the Cobbolds¹¹⁶⁹ on the banks of the lake at Knebworth. The last dinner at Trinity was a private one, with Butler.¹¹⁷⁰

Williams tore up and burnt his letters and photographs: 'It was two-thirds a commonsense decision (I knew there would be precious little room at Mirfield for anything but essentials) and one-third ritualistic gesture signifying a break with the past.'¹¹⁷¹ However, in spite of this statement in his autobiography, there were certain valued personal items which Williams took with him to Mirfield.¹¹⁷² Williams now saw that the first part of his life journey belonged to the past: 'There is a sense in which the

¹¹⁶⁶ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 298.

¹¹⁶⁷ Wilson, *Betjeman*, 283.

¹¹⁶⁸ Williams Papers.

¹¹⁶⁹ John Cobbold (1927-1983) and Patrick Cobbold (1934-1994), businessmen.

¹¹⁷⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 309.

¹¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹¹⁷² The items deposited at the Borthwick Institute of the University of York contain private possessions of Williams, among them letters, his prayer book, and a number of photographs of his friends, young men, and adolescent boys.

best things in life have to be surrendered as well as the worst, the good as well as the bad. For it isn't only good food which grows stale and rotten if kept too long.¹¹⁷³ A former student summarized Williams's influence at Trinity in a letter which Williams kept among his few possessions till his death:

How many, many lives you must have influenced. For every one – and there must be many – who writes to try and thank you for your words and for your guidance, I am sure there must be a hundred others, no less deeply touched, who somehow just doesn't manage to get around to a letter of thanks. Mine to you is long overdue. You taught me as my tutor thirty years ago. You continue to do so.¹¹⁷⁴

Monk at Mirfield

Williams was not unknown to the Mirfield community. When his future brethren published *Mirfield Essays in Christian Belief* in 1962, reprinted a year later, his views taken from *Jesus and the Resurrection* (1951) were cited in the essay on suffering¹¹⁷⁵ by Hugh Bishop.¹¹⁷⁶ Influential yet highly controversial, Bishop was installed as Superior in 1966. His deputy was Donald Patey¹¹⁷⁷ and the Novice-Guardian was Eric Simmons¹¹⁷⁸ who later became the Superior and who 'by his wisdom and singlemindedness saved the Community from shipwreck and restored to it once again its sense of purpose.'¹¹⁷⁹

¹¹⁷³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 305.

¹¹⁷⁴ P.S., letter to Williams, 7 March 1968 (Williams Papers).

¹¹⁷⁵ Hugh Bishop, 'The Christian Attitude to Suffering', in *Mirfield Essays in Christian Belief*, by the members of the Community of the Resurrection (London: The Faith Press, 1962), 232.

¹¹⁷⁶ Hugh William Fletcher Bishop (1907-1989), member of the Community of the Resurrection (1940-1974), Principal of the College (1956-1966), Superior (1966-1974).

¹¹⁷⁷ Donald Weare Patey (1909-1991), member of the Community of the Resurrection (1948-1991).

¹¹⁷⁸ Eric Simmons (b. 1930) Superior (1974 to 1987), succeeding Hugh Bishop (Superior 1965-1974).

¹¹⁷⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 321.

The Community of the Resurrection was founded in 1892 by Charles Gore, later Bishop of Oxford, and its Rule was the brainchild of Walter Frere.¹¹⁸⁰ The house at Mirfield was bought by the Community in 1898 and a number of wings, and most notably a church designed by Walter Tapper,¹¹⁸¹ were added later. The history of the Community had been marked with controversies: Williams claims that in the 1930s, during its Anglo-Catholic period, Raymond Raynes as the Superior ordered the burning of a trunk of Gore's papers, as he thought them heretical.¹¹⁸² This was also the time when life-vows were introduced. For many years, the Community had houses in Southern Africa and a contemplative house in Sunderland, devoted to prayer only. It also used to have a hostel in Leeds for university students. When the Community was founded, there was a strong Protestant opposition against Anglican monasticism: it was claimed not only that it propagated 'romanising practices and doctrines,' but that it was also contrary to God's 'natural laws.' According to these critics, the 'suppression or perversion of natural love' by monastic vows led to 'corruption' and 'defilement.'¹¹⁸³ However, as with the Society of St John the Evangelist (1865), the Community of the Resurrection managed to maintain a close connection with the intellectual vigour of the universities while following a strict discipline.

When Williams arrived, Bishop represented those in the Catholic tradition who were ready to embrace the mainstream of the Church of England. Following his support for

¹¹⁸⁰ Walter Frere (1863-1938), the first Superior of the Community of the Resurrection (1902-1913), Bishop of Truro (1923-1935).

¹¹⁸¹ Walter John Tapper (1861-1935), architect.

¹¹⁸² Alan Wilkinson, historian of the Mirfield community, notes that this story was mentioned for the first time by Williams in his autobiography and confirms that the archives at Mirfield do not possess much extant manuscript material by Gore about the first years of the Community or about his personal life. Cf. Alan Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection: A centenary history* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 264, 364.

¹¹⁸³ Cf. *Norfolk News*, 24 September 1864, 12; Walter Walsh, *The Secret History of the Oxford Movement* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1897), chapter 6.

the Anglican-Methodist unity scheme,¹¹⁸⁴ he left the Anglo-Catholic group in the Church Assembly and its successor, the General Synod. In 1970, he became one of the three representatives of the Church of England to the newly created Anglican Consultative Council, an inner cabinet for the whole of the Anglican Communion. Under Bishop, the Community was fostering ecumenical relationships on all fronts; this included a visit by Cardinal Suenens of Malines¹¹⁸⁵ who came to Mirfield in 1969 to pray at the tombs of Gore and Frere, a retreat conducted by the Methodist Neville Ward¹¹⁸⁶ in 1971, and the Holy Week lectures in 1972 by Haddon Willmer,¹¹⁸⁷ a Baptist theologian from Leeds.¹¹⁸⁸ As soon as he became Superior, Bishop confided to Trevor Huddleston,¹¹⁸⁹ then Bishop of Stepney, that he was facing deep theological uncertainties, as he found it increasingly difficult to believe in the finality of the Christian revelation. The arrival of Williams was for him a reassuring event as he was no longer alone with unorthodox views. Williams, as someone for whom many traditional formulations had gone dead, was controversial enough and his reformulations of Christian faith and practice were highly original. Bishop regarded the New Testament ‘a screen on which all sorts of different things can be projected.’¹¹⁹⁰

The ongoing discussions on liturgical change bored Bishop as he still felt attracted to traditional forms of worship; in the end, however, he supported the reform. Similarly as in other religious communities, the seven offices were replaced by a fourfold pattern of Mattins (6.45am), Mid-Day Office (12.45pm), Evensong (8pm) and Compline

¹¹⁸⁴ The dialogue between the Methodist Church and the Church of England in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a proposal of a two-stage unity scheme which was endorsed by the Methodist Conference, however narrowly rejected by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1972.

¹¹⁸⁵ Leo Jozef Suenens (1904-1966), Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels (1861-1979).

¹¹⁸⁶ Neville Ward (1915-1992), Methodist minister.

¹¹⁸⁷ Haddon Willmer, Emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds.

¹¹⁸⁸ Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection*, 333-36.

¹¹⁸⁹ Ibid. Trevor Huddleston (1913-1998), Bishop of Stepney (1913-1998), then translated to the Province of the Indian Ocean.

¹¹⁹⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 314.

(9.45pm), and greater silence was observed thereafter until 9am.¹¹⁹¹ Concelebration was gradually introduced and private masses decreased, although Bishop ‘was one of those who could not see what difference it made whether a priest was assisting standing at the altar or in his stall’.¹¹⁹² Williams valued the opportunity for prayer provided by the cloister but he sat rather lightly to the monastery’s formal religious observances as he first found the Anglo-Catholic ritual of High Mass and Solemn Evensong ‘nauseating’.¹¹⁹³ Public worship had little attraction for him: ‘One day through some muddle there was nobody to say the Mass. By chance I happened to pass by that way. I found the old men in a state of desolation, looking like the people described by St. Paul as having no hope and without God in the world.’¹¹⁹⁴ Williams’s attitude towards organized worship would not change. He later wrote to *The Times*: ‘In general, detachment is far wiser either than fanaticism or the self-assertion which pretends or imagines that is pure religion and undefiled.’¹¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Williams was committed to examining himself and finding out what God wanted for him.

It is likely that Williams felt uncomfortable among people who did not share his background and verbal acuity; sustaining a presence with them must have been a trial for him. Williams wrote of the brethren: ‘A number of people looked as if they were exhibits lifted from some seedy wax-works show. Others might have stepped out of advertisements for smart commodities. ... The gift of God’s love is not reserved for good or religious people. God gives because He is like that. His gift is unconditional.’¹¹⁹⁶ Williams also expressed boredom with biblical scholarship and

¹¹⁹¹ Ibid., 315.

¹¹⁹² Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection*, 334.

¹¹⁹³ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 346.

¹¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁹⁵ H. A. Williams, ‘Letters’, *The Times*, 16 June 1976, 12.

¹¹⁹⁶ Undated text (Williams Papers).

systematic theology, and established no real connection to the theological college attached to the monastery. In *Who's Who*, he gave his recreations as 'idleness and religion'.¹¹⁹⁷

In spite of his outspoken dislike for Anglo-Catholics and organized public worship, Williams did not have another choice. The monastery put his life into a different perspective where every aspect of his personality was tested. He probably felt he needed to do something completely counter-intuitive, submitting to a new rhythm. Leaving Trinity at the height of a successful career was not enough; with his successful track record of publishing he could as well have simply retired. But he wanted to test himself even more, choosing a place where he would feel very much out of his comfort zone. On the other hand, apart from the ritual, it was widely accepted that compared to other monastic institutions, the discipline at Mirfield was 'hardly rigorous, so that its members may smoke, read novels, listen to gramophone records, watch television, visit friends and, when bored, disgruntled or depressed, absent themselves on holiday or on such work as taking retreats, hearing confessions, preaching or looking after nuns.'¹¹⁹⁸ And so it was that Williams opted for a kind of 'monasticism light'.

At Mirfield, Williams was supposed to be free of his former attachments but this was not easy. Some brethren were rather defensive; although he tried to keep a low profile, Williams soon became a target of hostile remarks since he was able to afford various luxuries which were out of reach of the regular members of the Community.¹¹⁹⁹ One of the brethren recalled that Williams did not have a proper novitiate and Bishop insisted over the head of the Novice-Guardian on curtailing the customary rigours.¹²⁰⁰ The

¹¹⁹⁷ *Who's Who 2019* (London: A&C Black, 2018).

¹¹⁹⁸ Francis King, 'Troubled soul', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 14 November 1982, 16.

¹¹⁹⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 324.

¹²⁰⁰ Green, 'Harry Williams CR: 1919-2006', 413.

publisher Robin Baird-Smith commented in the Appendix to *Living Free* (2006): ‘A recruit with Williams’ outstanding intellectual gifts was a prized addition to the community, and he was treated as such without having to undergo the full rigours of monastic discipline. This was probably not good for him; it was not good for the community.’¹²⁰¹ Many years later, at his funeral, the preacher observed that Williams’s arrival at the Community had been like ‘a star rugby player parachuting into the middle of a soccer game’.¹²⁰² Although he was initially viewed with suspicion, he eventually came to be regarded as a valuable counsellor and a rather original thinker, in spite of his ‘Friar Tuck-like’ appearance.¹²⁰³ Some even compared him to John Donne,¹²⁰⁴ an author of works where ‘the limits of orthodoxy were constantly being tested, debated, and redefined’¹²⁰⁵ and whose sermons were viewed as ‘uncomfortably ambiguous’.¹²⁰⁶

Gradually, Williams’s feeling was one of relief as the place was not anything like as bad he thought it would be. He was happier than he had been for some considerable time: he was put to work in the community kitchen for an hour every day. This assignment apparently pleased him as he deeply shared Algernon Moncrieff’s conviction: ‘I hate people who are not serious about meals. It is so shallow of them.’¹²⁰⁷ In his autobiography, he claims that to his own surprise, he did not miss alcohol but did not feel any better for not drinking, nor did it do anything to reduce his weight.¹²⁰⁸ Nevertheless, until late in his life, Williams had cases of claret delivered to

¹²⁰¹ *Living Free*, 164.

¹²⁰² Peter Bottomley, ‘I am sorry. I made a mistake’, *The Worthing Herald*, 5 April 2018, 6.

¹²⁰³ Beeson, *Round the Church in 50 Years*, 72. Friar Tuck was one of the legendary outlaws around Robin Hood, depicted as fat and enjoying food and drink.

¹²⁰⁴ *The Yorkshire Post*, 4 February 2006, 4.

¹²⁰⁵ Alison Shell, Arnold Hunt, ‘Donne’s religious world’, in *The Cambridge Companion to John Donne*, ed. by Achsah Guibbory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 67.

¹²⁰⁶ John Carey, *John Donne: Life, Mind and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 37.

¹²⁰⁷ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 317-18; Algernon Moncrieff is a character from *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) by Oscar Wilde.

¹²⁰⁸ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 322.

Mirfield¹²⁰⁹ and he was later remembered for the ‘delightful anecdotal humour with which he ... enlivened shared meals’.¹²¹⁰

Williams kept up his correspondence with his close friends who continuously assured him of help, since many of them felt that he might not have yet become reconciled to the prospect of spending the rest of his life in a religious community. John Mitchell clearly thought that Williams’s monasticism was just a phase when wrote to him in 1969: ‘There would be always a job here of some kind if you wanted to come out of Mirfield and find something which paid ... for a year or so while you decided what you wanted to do next. Keep this letter and remember. The offer is open indefinitely.’¹²¹¹ In another letter, Mitchell wrote to Williams, reminding him of his gifts:

You are a tremendously gifted healer of people, your touch is your chief gift. What you have to say or write intellectually is always important – though its chief importance is to you personally since your academic dexterity and attack give you one kind of reassurance and it’s silly to underestimate the value of that. ... But my point is: whatever you decide to do, wherever you live – whether among the religious or the sexy or others (most of us) less oriented to a single obsession – your touch is all that matters.¹²¹²

At the same time, however, some of Williams’s earlier problems persisted. In particular, sexuality remained an issue. In an unpublished letter of 1970, he confided to his psychotherapist:

The conflict emerges into consciousness, both as the sexual stimulation of blasphemy and as day-dreaming of a sort of contemporary Arabian Nights existence, where I am rich, life is full of pleasures laid passively on, and I am erotically and sexually satisfied by an ‘ideal’ male mate who is nobody I know at all intimately. ... Sickness is the price of life. And it is worth it since one can slowly discover the real life hidden and buried and at one time inextricably bound up with the sickness. The life is for keeps, the sickness temporary.¹²¹³

¹²⁰⁹ Interview with Fr Philip Nichols, 27 September 2020.

¹²¹⁰ Green, ‘Harry Williams CR: 1919-2006’, 413.

¹²¹¹ James Mitchell, letter to Williams, 2 July 1969 (Williams Papers).

¹²¹² James Mitchell, letter to Williams, 21 July 1971 (Williams Papers).

¹²¹³ Williams, letter to Dr Christopher H. Scott, 22 October 1970 (Williams Papers).

Through this period, Williams used every opportunity to spend time away from the monastery. On 24 February 1970, Robert Runcie was consecrated Bishop of St Albans at Westminster Abbey. Williams preached a sermon of ‘sadistic length’ and although he otherwise was in great demand as a preacher, his 45-minute sermon was thought to be too much of a good thing.¹²¹⁴ Runcie recalls the day: ‘It was forty-one or forty-two minutes, and I remember Michael Ramsey, at the end of practically every paragraph after the first quarter of an hour, picking up his mitre – and then putting it down again! When someone said to George Reindorp,¹²¹⁵ the Bishop of Guildford, “That sermon should be published”, he retorted, “Yes, as a book!”’¹²¹⁶

While writing about joy, prayer, and freedom, Williams continued his struggle to free himself from his own insecurities and compulsions. He had also a hunger for intellectual stimulation and a certain predisposition to restlessness. Not wanting to be just a monk, he longed to be a spiritual advisor to whom his readers could relate, someone who was not hiding his own weaknesses and struggles. Williams’s life was still fragmented: he equally liked to leave the cocoon of the Community, but he also longed to write and read. Realizing that writing could provide a cherished escape from the reality of the monastic community, he continued building upon his reputation as a prolific author. Some of Williams’s books written at Mirfield became best-selling titles. But writing did not come always easily; it had to be ‘ground out with immense labour’.¹²¹⁷

¹²¹⁴ *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2006, 12.

¹²¹⁵ George Edmund Weindorp (1911-1990), Bishop of Guildford (1961-1973), Bishop of Salisbury (1973-1981).

¹²¹⁶ Carpenter, *Robert Runcie*, 162.

¹²¹⁷ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 344.

His writing style was increasingly relational, experiential, and intimate, but he was never condemning or judgmental. Throughout his works written in the Community of the Resurrection one can detect the prominent theme of his spirituality: an invitation to his readers to the journey of knowing God and living life in relationship with him, as a way of transforming every other aspect of life. At Mirfield, Williams retained a natural ability for writing simple stories through which to communicate his messages. He continued avoiding complicated theological and philosophical arguments, but his writing was by no means trivial or simplistic. For his readers Williams remained approachable, someone they could relate to – this was the key to his continuing success as a writer.

X. A MONK, A WRITER

At Mirfield, Williams initially struggled, still vacillating between what he regarded his false self and his true self. Given his success as a writer and preacher, he was constantly tempted to live as if accomplishment and prestige were the basis of his value as a person. He realized that he could not function as he did before, but was nevertheless compelled to write and make public speeches. The time had to be used to put into words what he was learning. Step by step, Mirfield helped him to realize that being caught in the web of worldly pursuits was leading him into a pattern of false selfhood. He depended too much on his own accomplishments to prove his self-worth but, at the same time, he also longed for the approval and affection of others.

Believing that his own struggle with the false self was an accurate reflection of what many people experienced, Williams remained aware that psychology and psychotherapy could help people discover their false compulsions and become free of them – and Christian faith can then lead them to understand their self-identity as based on the love of God. His personal transparency about his own mental struggles gave him credibility as one who had been on the journey of self-discovery and could be a reliable guide to understanding how to live. It is therefore no surprise that shortly after becoming a member of the Community, in 1970, Williams first attempted to summarize his views on Freud and Jung.

What Freud and Jung mean for religion (1970)

In the opening part of a popular article published in *The Times*, Williams set out that he did not find Freud's criticisms of religion to be universally valid.¹²¹⁸ Nevertheless, according to Williams, psychoanalysis is capable of bringing the mind to that repentance which breaks down and destroys human pride. Looking back at his own psychoanalysis as an 'experience of repentance', Williams recognized that the fundamental change occurred slowly, and at the time was almost imperceptible. To work out one's own salvation requires 'fear and trembling'.¹²¹⁹ For Williams, psychology and theology remain two complementary disciplines. Indeed, psychotherapy cannot be properly understood without reference to God. The therapeutic process is always sacramental, meaning that God is working through and by means of it: 'therapeutic techniques have no power in themselves to do anything and their functionality is limited to unravelling and unblocking the channels of receptivity'. What is received 'does not come from the therapy, but from the grace of God; it is a characteristic of God to work outside the contrivances set up by men as his official channels'.¹²²⁰

Using the colourful language of the *Magnificat*,¹²²¹ Williams maintained that where Freud and Jung have been of the greatest assistance to religion is in their having '*scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts*'. This demonstrated that a great deal of religion was a mere attempt to make a cardinal virtue of what is, in fact, a radical evasion. What Freud and Jung provided for religious people was a *via negativa*,

¹²¹⁸ Williams, 'What Freud and Jung mean for religion'.

¹²¹⁹ Philippians 2.12 (KJV); cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: a dialectical lyric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939).

¹²²⁰ Williams, 'What Freud and Jung mean for religion'.

¹²²¹ Luke 1.46-55 (KJV).

sifting reality from the images and emotions by which it was first conveyed and then confused.¹²²²

Life in the Community helped Williams see many of his own handicaps. He continued struggling with the life of seclusion, torn between his newly discovered vocation to monastic life and his writing career. At the same time, it is likely that some of the brethren were condescending, expressing a certain distaste for someone who stood out. Living in a community requires generosity, honesty, and openness – Williams was, however, never too good at nurturing intimacy and did not always respond well to those with whom he was to share a home. For all these reasons, he did not understand his monastic vocation as a life of faith focused on God alone, eliminating all other relationships and becoming a hermit. Williams thus remained in constant touch with his Cambridge friends. Among others, the archives of Trinity College contain a correspondence between him and the second Lord Adrian on the occasion of Lord Adrian's father's death and the related memorial service.¹²²³

At that time, Williams still remained less than transparent about his sexual orientation and the related struggles. He preferred to keep his sexuality private although sexual wholeness remained one of Williams's favourite topics. When invited as a preacher back to Cambridge, he warned, in an unpublished 1971 sermon, about the dangers of 'mechanical' sex:

What we could call instant instinctual satisfaction can often cut us off from the most satisfying thing life has to offer – that deep personal communion with another in the giving and receiving of love, of which sexual intercourse is the

¹²²² Williams, 'What Freud and Jung mean for religion'.

¹²²³ Letters from H. A. Williams to R. D. Adrian, 6 August 1977, 1 October 1977. Papers of Lord Adrian (ADRN: Box 30), Trinity College Library, Cambridge.

supreme medium and expression. We shall have experienced the full potentialities of sex only when it has ceased to be one among other kinds of consumer goods and becomes what brings us the uniquely enriching mystery of deep personal communion.¹²²⁴

Published in 1972, Williams's foreword to W. H. Vanstone's¹²²⁵ *Love's Endeavour*, *Love's Expense*, contains a concise summary of Williams's theological outlook at that time. He returned to his claim that theological truth is the truth of God's relationship with human beings, and the fruit not of learning but of experience: 'In this sense all theology, properly so called, is written in blood ... the record of a man's wrestling with God'. Williams confirmed his understanding of theology as an attempt to communicate what has been discovered at great cost in the deepest places of the heart.¹²²⁶ The foreword testifies to the fact that Williams's thinking kept maturing. As before, he was not a systematic theologian and remained ever developing, creative, resisting the conventional categories of systematic theology. Williams continued viewing theology more as faith seeking understanding, its central purpose being knowing and experiencing God.

1972 was also the year when Williams was finally made a full member of the Community; Lady Cavendish came to Mirfield for the ceremony.¹²²⁷ In February of the same year he was to publish another widely read book, *True Resurrection*, which was reprinted twice within the following two months.

¹²²⁴ H. A. Williams, 'Life is Commitment', Sermon preached at Great St Mary's, Cambridge, 17 October 1971 (Williams Papers).

¹²²⁵ W. H. Vanstone (1923-1999), poet and priest.

¹²²⁶ William Hubert Vanstone, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense: The Response of Being to the Love of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977), xi-xii. In the book, Vanstone reflects on how humanity responds to the unfailing love which God has for his creation and which is displayed by God's self-emptying.

¹²²⁷ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 291-92.

True Resurrection (1972)

This book is the major exposition of Williams's thought on the theme of the resurrection, although the rest of this work echoes this concept in a variety of ways. On the one hand, Williams's theology remains Christological. Although he often writes of God, it is the second person of the Trinity who most fully reveals God and demonstrates how to be in relationship with him. On the other hand, Williams's spirituality remains relational, contained in the ordinary experiences of everyday living, in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. The combination of these two approaches results in his conviction that we can fully live in Christ by reaching out both to our innermost selves and also to fellow human beings.

In this bestselling book, Williams did not approach resurrection simply as an event in history, but as 'God's power to give life to the dead now in the present'.¹²²⁸ He set out to explore his own experience, using the apophatic method of speaking about God in terms of negation, and acknowledging that his approach was closer to Eastern Orthodoxy than that to Western Christianity. In this connection, Williams quoted the words of the late Timothy (Bishop Kallistos) Ware: 'Man is "a living theology."' ¹²²⁹

For Williams, when the resurrection is considered merely in terms of past and future, it is being robbed of its impact on the present. For 'where there is resurrection, there the Eternal Word has spoken'.¹²³⁰ Only if 'we have been aware of resurrection in this life,

¹²²⁸ Ibid., 373.

¹²²⁹ Timothy Ware, *The Eastern Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 225. Kallistos (born Timothy Richard) Ware (1934-2022), Eastern Orthodox bishop and theologian.

¹²³⁰ *True Resurrection*, 13.

and only then, shall we be able to receive the hope of final resurrection after physical death'.¹²³¹

Williams examines resurrection by categorising certain events as 'life-giving' or 'death-dealing'. Our lives are impoverished when we allow our minds to be restricted to a narrow set of functions; this impoverishment becomes intolerable when we are taken over by some ideology. As a result, we 'become slaves of a certain limited concept of mind' and 'need to be raised up to mind as the means of personal involvement'; that is the resurrection of the mind.¹²³² When, instead of being and becoming ourselves, we merely remain adequate performers of our assigned roles, it is an instance of a 'family murder'. We must not be afraid of enacting a counter-role, even if this involves becoming a rebel, for that counter-role can be life-giving. Similarly, a permissive society often requires conformity with its rules of freedom. On conformity linked with national identity, Williams brings up the topical example of contemporary Northern Ireland where individuals 'are successfully persuaded that they are Ulstermen or Irishmen first and people second. A man feels that he is just his nation'.¹²³³

In religion, Williams claims, we are too often presented with 'mystery processed and packaged in a collection of verbalized concepts', but what Jesus gave us were not doctrines but parables which appeal to the imagination and challenge the reader. Churches contribute to our mental slavery by their emphasis on sin and guilt while seldom building up personal identity which allows for the conflict between conscience and ecclesiastical authority; the rebellion 'against the Pope's pronouncement on the

¹²³¹ Ibid.

¹²³² Ibid., 78.

¹²³³ Ibid., 110-11.

contraceptive pill' seems to Williams like a notable exemption.¹²³⁴ Otherwise, 'the church, like the party, apparently possesses the truth as a branded product and the duty of its members is to sell it'.¹²³⁵ Churches must therefore 'die to the claim that they possess the truth in their doctrinal conceptualizations, in order to be raised up as witnesses to mystery', for 'having communion with the Eternal Word is *doing* the truth'.¹²³⁶ The acceptance of the principle of situational ethics remains a key: 'For if ethics were not situational . . . , we might now be claiming the divine sanction of Christianity for the most barbarous and inhuman régimes imaginable.'¹²³⁷ To make his point, he points out that, at the time of writing the book, treatment of Africans and workers had improved; capital punishment was no longer viewed as ethical; remarriage in certain circumstances was blessed by the Church; contraception was no longer always opposed.

In all its efforts, the Church must rely permanently on creative divine energy; quoting first J. N. Figgis that 'if the church should become really efficient, its days as a spiritual power would be at an end',¹²³⁸ Williams concludes that there is no virtue in inefficiency, for 'once the church concentrates its attention upon the excellence of its own machinery, it will almost certainly forget that all its power, its very excellence, depends upon being called into being by God, so that its sufficiency is always and only from Him.'¹²³⁹

¹²³⁴ Reference to the encyclical *Humanae vitae* of 25 July 1968, by Pope Paul VI.

¹²³⁵ *True Resurrection*, 114.

¹²³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹²³⁸ J. N. Figgis, 'A sermon preached before the University of Cambridge on 10th of November 1907', in *The Gospel and Human Needs* (London: Longmans, Green, 1909). John Neville Figgis CR (1866-1919), priest and historian.

¹²³⁹ *True Resurrection*, 9.

Naturally, for Williams, psychology plays an important part. Elaborating on the dualistic concept of mind and matter, or soul and body, Williams notes that Freud's approach to humans was dualistic, identifying both the biological urges (*id*) that must not be repressed and the conscious mind (*ego*), of which he wants to be the master.¹²⁴⁰ And so the mind or spirit is called to be the master and the body the servant: 'The trouble with servants, however, is that they seldom know their place.'¹²⁴¹ But if we make the body just a slave-machine, if we try to kill it, we 'do not exterminate it so much as consign to hell'.¹²⁴² However, while Williams invites the reader not to treat body as a slave-machine, warning that simply giving way to the urges of the body is not a solution, for 'a slave has to be educated for freedom'.¹²⁴³

Here, Williams addresses, for the first time at Mirfield, the topic of sexuality. He maintains that 'it has been demonstrated that sexual activity causes neither physical nor mental deterioration' and so, in view of reliable contraception, sex, objectively considered, can be 'regarded without fear as an extremely enjoyable and entirely harmless kind of behaviour'.¹²⁴⁴ However, if we apply the detached objective view of sex, it is often 'an empty show of communion' and after intercourse 'people feel less themselves not more'.¹²⁴⁵

Resurrection can be thus seen as means of overcoming (or at least mitigating) human suffering. Here Williams finds himself in agreement with Simone Weil: 'Suffering is the opposite of joy; but joy is not the opposite of suffering.'¹²⁴⁶ The traditional

¹²⁴⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

¹²⁴¹ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁴² Ibid., 29.

¹²⁴³ Ibid., 30.

¹²⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

¹²⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁴⁶ Simone Weil (1909-1943), French mystic. Cf. Simone Weil, *First and Last Notebooks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 69.

explanation of theologians which views suffering as partially caused by natural causes and partially as a result of the human wrong-doing remains for Williams inadequate. Quoting the Austrian-born American theologian and sociologist Peter Berger, Williams maintains that ‘the plausibility of Christianity stands or falls with the plausibility of ... theodicy’.¹²⁴⁷ Consequently, we need to accept suffering and receive it as a part of what we are in order to become ‘fuller, deeper, richer people’. Suffering, and the acceptance of the constraints of external reality, can even lead to freedom. Williams concludes that we do not have an answer for the existence of suffering: ‘But if, however vaguely and faintly, our hearts are even slightly stirred by the hope of resurrection now, it is a sign that the miracle is upon us.’¹²⁴⁸

Last but not least, Williams addresses the topic of death, warning that orthodoxies should be taken with caution, for ‘death remains the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns’.¹²⁴⁹ He maintains that ‘the miracle of our being given life beyond the grave is no greater than the miracle of our continually being given life here.’¹²⁵⁰ Physical death becomes ‘the last and final break with our past’; being open to the power and possibilities of life means being also ready for death, for ‘if we are aware of resurrection in the present, then we shall not be over-concerned about resurrection in the future’. Williams summarizes: ‘For the tabernacle of God is with men as the Eternal Word continuously takes his world to himself and raises it to resurrection and life.’¹²⁵¹

¹²⁴⁷ Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 78.

¹²⁴⁸ *True Resurrection*, 167.

¹²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 173. The quote (without attribution) is from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1.

¹²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 177-78.

¹²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

It should be noted that Williams's non-literal understanding of the resurrection as a realisation of a new potential in human life was not original. For Rudolf Bultmann, for instance, resurrection also has an abstract, non-literal meaning, but its content is rather different: for him, resurrection is understood as 'enjoying the freedom from sin' which entails 'crucifying of the affections and lusts of the flesh', and 'casting off the works of darkness'.¹²⁵² Accordingly, resurrection means for Bultmann 'the overcoming of our dread of suffering, and the perfection of our detachment from the world.'¹²⁵³ Another prominent German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann,¹²⁵⁴ maintains on the one hand that 'resurrection of the dead excludes any idea of a life after death'¹²⁵⁵ (which is something Williams never stated), but on the other hand there is a striking similarity with Williams when Moltmann describes resurrection as 'a wholehearted, unrestricted and unreserved assent to life, to the body and to the world'.¹²⁵⁶

Williams sent a copy of his book, with a covering letter, to Michael Ramsey, the Archbishop of Canterbury, explaining that it was not 'an attempt at dogmatic theology, but only a description of my own limited experience'. He used the opportunity to note that Ramsey was 'giving the church exactly the leadership it needs these days' for 'the only leadership possible is that of the faith in God's power which does not strenuously lay down the law or comfort itself by making a fair show in the flesh'.¹²⁵⁷

¹²⁵² R. Bultmann, 'New Testament and Mythology' in *Kerygma and Myth: a theological debate*, ed. by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper, 1961), 37-40.

¹²⁵³ Ibid.

¹²⁵⁴ Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926), German Reformed theologian.

¹²⁵⁵ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 170.

¹²⁵⁶ J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 210.

¹²⁵⁷ Williams, letter to Michael Ramsey, 31 January 1972 (Lambeth Palace Library, Ramsey 3, f. 282).

The book was widely reviewed. Writing in the *Church Times*, David Edwards appreciated that

Harry Williams has now written two books which show an honest mind in the closest touch with modern thought and experience; and a heart of deep, tested faith. ... This book expresses (as no introverted self-analysis could do) what is the result *for a pastor* of the new personal life, the deep joy renewing body and mind. ... This is such a merry book that many will share the author's evident pleasure that he has found a bough which suits him.¹²⁵⁸

However, not everybody was appreciative of Williams's approach: *Theology* published a rather more reserved review by A. E. Harvey¹²⁵⁹ who claimed that Williams had abandoned the essential core of the Christian message of the Resurrection and reduced the concept to a mere way of living, 'a set of values'. Harvey did not concur with Williams that the Eternal Word of divine truth is inherent in human beings and needs to be discovered by means of self-awareness. Williams replied in the same journal, stating that the purpose of his theology was to convey his own experience of the living reality and, accordingly, his claim was not to present objective theological truths. Returning to his concept of a contemporary 'resurrection', Williams maintained that this term could indeed be used to describe the experience of life being made new.¹²⁶⁰

Writing a decade after the publication and reception of the book, Paul and Linda Badham¹²⁶¹ complained of Williams that most people would regard the use of the term resurrection in such contexts as 'a crude joke', noting that it was 'hard to believe that a member of the Community of the Resurrection could give so banal and interpretation of the term'.¹²⁶²

¹²⁵⁸ David L. Edwards, 'Miracle of New Life', *Church Times*, 11 February 1972, 18.

¹²⁵⁹ A. E. Harvey, 'Untrue Resurrection', *Theology*, 631 (January 1973): 28-31. A. E. Harvey (1931-2018), a distinguished New Testament scholar, Warden of St. Augustine's College, Canterbury, later Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey.

¹²⁶⁰ H. A. Williams, 'Resurrection True or Untrue, reply to A. E. Harvey', *Theology*, 632 (1973), 96-97.

¹²⁶¹ Paul Badham (b. 1942), liberal Christian theologian, his wife Linda is mathematician.

¹²⁶² Paul Badham, Linda Badham, *Immortality or extinction* (London: SPCK, 1984), 20.

Williams certainly left himself open to the criticism that his readers without a firm grasp of Christian theology might have found themselves swimming in uncharted waters. There were many Christians who were themselves seekers: Williams's friend John Betjeman (who while a traditional Anglican churchgoer continued to ask many questions) observed striking similarities between *True Resurrection* and David Cecil's essay on the artist Samuel Palmer.¹²⁶³ He wrote to Cecil, using Williams's vocabulary: 'Reading your Palmer essay, I can see that the Resurrection is going on all the time and death is the Crucifixion which is also going on all the time in us and when hymns tell about "Christ within me" etc. it means death and resurrection in us.'¹²⁶⁴

1973 and 1974 were the years when the crisis surrounding Bishop's leadership of the Community escalated. The morale of the Community was sinking, and unwise expenditures were made; there were four or five departures of brethren as well as a growing lack of discipline. According to Williams, in 1974, the second highest ranking churchman of the Community, the Prior, received a call from Archbishop Ramsey who told him that, as the Community's Visitor, he could no longer put his confidence in Bishop as Superior. Hugh Bishop left the Community on the very same day, having announced that he could not live without his male partner.¹²⁶⁵

Williams's account is nevertheless disputed by Alan Wilkinson the historian of the Community, who believed it contains inaccuracies.¹²⁶⁶ According to Wilkinson, Bishop had a life-long aversion to institutional life (which explains why he and Williams were

¹²⁶³ David Cecil, *Visionary & dreamer: two poetic painters: Samuel Palmer & Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Constable, 1969). Lord David Gayscone-Cecil (1902-1986), historian and biographer.

¹²⁶⁴ John Betjeman, letter to David Cecil, 16 December 1969, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 393.

¹²⁶⁵ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 327-29; *Church Times*, 10 February 2006, 14.

¹²⁶⁶ Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection*, 369.

soulmates), even if he was seen by the public as the quintessential monk. This resulted in a painful tension between his inner reality and the expected public role. A source of tension was allegedly also his longing for a close personal relationship which was partially fulfilled by the former lay student Robert Towler,¹²⁶⁷ who also lived at Mirfield. Bishop left to live with Towler and later even appeared together with him on the BBC, explaining his difficulties with orthodoxy and publicly commenting on his withdrawal from the Community. In 1982, he asked his brethren for an apology for this misjudged step.¹²⁶⁸

During Hugh Bishop's tenure as Superior, Williams did not stay at Mirfield all the time: Betjeman recalls a trip with Williams in the spring of 1974.¹²⁶⁹ Following Bishop's departure, Williams requested that instead of taking the life-vows which were due in January 1975, he should only take vows for the next three years:

... however certain a man might be in the present that it was God's will that he should remain in the Community for life, that present certainty did not qualify him to dictate to God what the divine will must be for the rest of the man's life. And making the relative absolute is generally considered the essence of idolatry.¹²⁷⁰

Although Bishop was succeeded by Eric Simmons who remained Superior until 1987, there was a long period of turmoil and the novitiate had to be closed for three years. The Community was ageing and its spiritual life was deteriorating. However, thanks to Simmons's leadership, the Community was eventually able to overcome the crisis, bringing back the required order, reaffirming the importance of the spiritual life and of worship. Between 1987 and 1998, the Superior was Silvanus Berry¹²⁷¹ who completed

¹²⁶⁷ Robert 'Bob' Towler (1943-2020) was later a researcher of religious affairs and a commissioning editor of Channel 4. After the death of Hugh Bishop, Towler married, had children and converted to Roman Catholicism.

¹²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 340-42.

¹²⁶⁹ John Betjeman, letter to Edward and Prudence Maufe, 17 April 1974, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 477.

¹²⁷⁰ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 331.

¹²⁷¹ Silvanus Berry (b. 1924).

the transformation from a paternally-led community into one that was a truly fraternal. Under his rule, the Community discontinued its operations in Africa in 1983 and 1986. The overall decline of Anglo-Catholic vocations also affected the novitiate. Crispin Harrison¹²⁷² became Superior in 1998, and was succeeded in 2003 by George Guiver¹²⁷³ who was Superior when Williams died.

Williams's interests were by no means confined to theology and church matters; he was also an avid reader of newspapers (his preserved papers contain dozens of cuttings) and remained an observer of political life. Nevertheless, he remained above all an engaged writer. Benefiting from an uncanny way of addressing the hearts of his readers, the ripple effect upon the lives of others was remarkable. As Williams's correspondence attests, those who never met him felt they knew him.

Williams's views continued to be respected, as, for instance, in the context of the discussions of poverty in religious communities. His next influential book was cited in support of the position that the Rule of the Community did not speak of 'poverty' but rather of seeking for a brother 'to have the fewest and simplest wants that are consistent with health and the needs of his work'.¹²⁷⁴

Poverty, Chastity and Obedience (1975)

This volume (which was also published in the United States) is concise and is based on four University Sermons delivered in Cambridge and one in Oxford in 1974 and 1975;

¹²⁷² Michael Burt ('Crispin') Harrison (b. 1936).

¹²⁷³ George Paul Alfred Guiver (b. 1945), Superior 2003-2018.

¹²⁷⁴ Wilkinson, *The Community of the Resurrection*, 333.

while the Cambridge sermons were more general in their nature, the Oxford address used a more theological language. The cardinal virtues are examined as three ways of our growing as human selves, rather than viewed as ‘negative, kill-joy qualities by which tight-arsed old maids of both sexes try to stifle the life which is in you’, for properly understood, they are the ‘breath of life itself’.¹²⁷⁵

For Williams, poverty is not equal to penury or living at subsistence or starvation level; yet, he claims, human fulfilment cannot be reached ‘along the road of gratified greed’; in fact, we are ‘blessed’ by limited resources, the ecologists being ‘the prophets of the Lord’, with a message ‘of deliverance’. We are ‘the slaves of acquisitiveness’ and Williams attributes to poverty a certain positive quality in the sense of the recognition that the world is ours, without being anxious about acquiring – or losing – a bit of it: ‘Poverty takes pleasure in a thing because it is, and not because it can be possessed’ and thus ‘is able to taste the flavour of life to the full’.¹²⁷⁶ Poverty thus consists in the recognition of ample resources within ourselves to live a creative life; this ‘inner wealth’ is put at our disposal when we need it, but we never know it before the actual crisis for ‘the bank which is myself never sends me a statement of account’.¹²⁷⁷

Echoing earlier themes, the key word here is ‘receive’; we do not choose what we are, we can only receive it. This path to poverty, which displays an appreciation of its intrinsic value, is for Williams the true meaning of the beatitude about the poor in spirit.¹²⁷⁸

Chastity is for Williams also a fundamental attitude to life, although he does not hesitate to state that the term has been ‘castrated’. Chastity is examined on three levels:

¹²⁷⁵ Ibid., 37.

¹²⁷⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹²⁷⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹²⁷⁸ Cf. Matthew 5.3.

intellectual, emotional, and sexual. Growth in intellectual chastity is what should be the ultimate aim of university education, although scholars and scientists are often ‘playing popes’ by making ‘pontifical pronouncements’. Williams then moves to emotional chastity which consists for him in the attempt to discover genuine deep feelings and staying loyal to them. One of the signs of emotional unchastity is ‘the luxury of easy and evanescent emotion’ when instead of real feeling we find ‘the saccharine concoctions of sentimentality’ or the ‘undisciplined gushing of romantic rubbish’.¹²⁷⁹ Finally, Williams moves to sexual chastity. Apart from a short passage in *True Resurrection*, this is the first time after a number of years Williams was to write publicly on sexuality. His attitude remains situational as he claims that no authority or convention can dictate hard and fast rules, proposing (again) one simple question as a determinant: ‘Is what I am doing or propose to do, in the long run, life-giving or death-dealing?’¹²⁸⁰ Or, in, other words, ‘Am I exploiting somebody or allowing her (or him) to exploit me?’¹²⁸¹ The answer to this question remains for Williams the bottom line. This does not mean that he fully abandons the Christian ideal: in a relationship, ‘fidelity and steadfastness and loyalty’ remain the *sine qua non* of a deep communion. Thus ‘a permanent and exclusive sexual relationship between one man and one woman as the road to communion and hence to satisfying selfhood for both parties’ is the meaning of sexual chastity.¹²⁸²

At this point Williams finally felt ready explicitly to address steady homosexual relationships for the first time: while he believes that they are more difficult to maintain than heterosexual one, he claims having seen ‘permanent homosexual unions which are

¹²⁷⁹ *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience*, 66-67.

¹²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹²⁸² *Ibid.*, 73.

fulfilling to both parties, in which sex has been used as the vehicle and expression of deep personal communion'. This leads him to the question, 'when this happens, what are the reasons of doubting that the union is an expression of sexual chastity?'¹²⁸³ To conclude, Williams sums up that chastity, like generosity, is not 'a matter of all or nothing', but almost 'a matter of degree'. We should nonetheless aspire to the benchmark of the ideal: the more chaste we are, the nearer to selfhood we will have travelled: 'The flesh can never be made Word, but the Word is for ever being made flesh, and to know that is to find your true self. It is to be chaste.'¹²⁸⁴

Addressing the third virtue, Williams acknowledges that in spite of the abuses and misrepresentations of obedience by fascists and communists, as well as by the Christian religion, the notion does not lose its inherent value. For Williams, there is a test which can be applied to any situation which demands obedience; if authority is only external, then it is the essence of tyranny and true obedience to ourselves requires us to be disobedient. If, however, the external authority, upon investigation, is seen as an apparatus which enables people to be obedient to themselves, then such an obedience is the vehicle of personal freedom.¹²⁸⁵ The highest form of obedience is that to the self ('the me which is also greater than me'), shown most clearly in the total surrender of the self in death for others.¹²⁸⁶

Finally, in the *Hulsean Sermon*, Williams to a large extent summarizes his theological outlook, drawing on previously formulated concepts: while Western Christianity understands God narrowly as King, Father or Judge, the East (although this perception is also known in Christian mystics) sees God as 'the fount or source from which we

¹²⁸³ Ibid., 77.

¹²⁸⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹²⁸⁵ Ibid., 93-94.

¹²⁸⁶ Ibid.

continually flow'. God can be thus found as 'the ocean of which I am a wave, as the sun of which I am a shaft of light, as the tree of which I am a branch'.¹²⁸⁷ For Williams, this is illustrated by two key sayings of Jesus: '*I and the Father are one*'¹²⁸⁸ as well as '*The Father is greater than I.*'¹²⁸⁹ Williams returns to his 'epistemology of communion' (first mentioned in *True Resurrection* of 1972), speculating that the first Christians thought and felt in Jewish categories; at the centre of the inmost self of Jesus they found 'the encompassing mystery of Godhead' and this led them to discovery of their own identities: 'In Jesus ... they saw that man's relationship with the Divine belonged to a sphere in which self and not-self, identity and difference, were combined.'¹²⁹⁰ This led to St Paul writing 'I live, yet not I, but Christ who dwelleth in me.'¹²⁹¹ Williams concludes that transcendence means in the words of St Bonaventure¹²⁹² that God has 'His centre everywhere and His circumference nowhere': 'That is how He is more truly us than we are ourselves'.¹²⁹³

The book also marks an important move from the historical particularity of Jesus towards a certain kind of universalism: For Williams, Jesus is (merely) 'uniquely representative', for in him we can see 'what a human being most fully and truly is', 'what we all have in us to be'.¹²⁹⁴ The essence of Christianity therefore consists 'in its refusal to separate the seen from the unseen, the material form from the spiritual'.¹²⁹⁵ It appears that Williams was no longer ready to view Christianity as an all-encompassing

¹²⁸⁷ Ibid., 24.

¹²⁸⁸ John 10.30 (RSV).

¹²⁸⁹ John 14.28 (RSV).

¹²⁹⁰ Ibid., 113.

¹²⁹¹ Galatians 2.20 (KJV).

¹²⁹² The concept also appears in the medieval *Liber XXIV philosophorum*. The authorship of the book is uncertain, and is thought to be composed in the 4th century AD. The book contains twenty-four statements about God, among them *Deus est sphaera infinita cuius centrum est ubique, circumferentia nusquam*.

¹²⁹³ *Poverty, Chastity and Obedience*, 118.

¹²⁹⁴ Ibid., 23.

¹²⁹⁵ Ibid., 22.

and self-imposing narrative, but rather as an open narrative offering orientation in the contemporary world.

Despite its controversial content, the volume was generally very well received. The review in *Theology* noted that ‘the sermons read well’, ‘their meaning is clear’, and their argument ‘flawless’, for ‘virtue means strength and it is by the development of these strengths of poverty, chastity and obedience that we can grow to full human selfhood’.¹²⁹⁶ Although discussion of sexuality was by then no longer a taboo for a theologian, Williams’s words in *Chastity* found a wide resonance. The reviewer for *The Telegraph* noted: ‘With perceptiveness and a winning style Fr Williams expands his themes and links them to everyday happenings. His plain words on sexuality and the recognition that, with 100 per cent. safe contraceptives, a new sex age has dawned, are important warnings to official Christianity.’¹²⁹⁷ For one Quaker reviewer, Williams dealt ‘with profound themes in a most human and illuminating manner, coloured throughout by delicious tinges of humour’, showing ‘a refreshing openness to accept insights from these sources, and in their light to modify, where necessary, the traditional Christian approach’.¹²⁹⁸

Eileen Mable, Williams’s editor, wrote in the *Church of England Newspaper* that he was ‘rediscovering the full, positive implications of the so-called monastic virtues’, having ‘the enviable gift of seeing old truths freshly, as for the first time, and of being able to share his discoveries with his readers’.¹²⁹⁹ The liberal wing of the Roman Catholic press was also predictably complimentary. *The Tablet* wrote: ‘Sprightly

¹²⁹⁶ J. M. Rae, ‘Other Notice: Poverty, Chastity and Obedience: The True Virtues’, *Theology*, 662 (August 1975), 443.

¹²⁹⁷ Cecil Northcott, ‘Religion and a new life-style’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1975, 16.

¹²⁹⁸ George H. Gorman, ‘The True Virtues’, *The Friend*, 16 May 1975, 26.

¹²⁹⁹ Eileen Mable, ‘Meditating on the true virtues’, *Church of England Newspaper*, 2 May 1975, 12.

without being frivolous, down to earth without being banal, sensitive without sentimentality, the preacher really does carry conviction.¹³⁰⁰ Criticism was nevertheless voiced, from a more conservative Catholic standpoint, about ‘a disquieting element’ in the ‘otherwise excellent book’, arising from ‘the small place given to devotion to the historical Jesus’; Paul Lakeland¹³⁰¹ noted in *The Month* that there is surely more to it than the ‘analogy of feeling’, which expresses ‘our response to God’s attractiveness in terms of what is humanly lovable, which is all that Williams will admit’. According to Lakeland, Williams did not sufficiently acknowledge that ‘our feeling for the historical Jesus grows more out of the realization that he is the source of our understanding of the special relationship between what we ultimately are and that in us which is greater than ourselves’.¹³⁰²

Williams continued to believe that as he shared his spiritual journey through his writings, others might find in them help for their own journeys. He decided to reach out again, with courageous honesty. Realizing that one’s life does not move in a linear fashion towards perfection but vacillates back and forth, Williams revisited some of his personal tensions and insecurities. Although he was gradually settling into the Community, he was still facing the same inner battles that had been stirring inside him for many years. His writing during this time focused on the idea of epistemology, discovering truth and living in relation to it.

¹³⁰⁰ Thomas Corbishley, ‘My me is God’, *The Tablet*, 3 May 1975, 23.

¹³⁰¹ Paul Lakeland (b. 1946), theologian, former Jesuit priest known for his liberal views on clerical celibacy.

¹³⁰² Paul F. Lakeland, ‘Reviews’, *The Month*, 24 July 1975, 11.

***Tensions* (1976)**

The fruit of this writing process was *Tensions*, a book which became a spiritual classic. Based on addresses given to members of Westcott House, Cambridge, at their annual retreat, its subject is the internal conflicts experienced in the process of establishing one's personal identity.

The title points at the tension between two different types of human experience: meeting God as 'Wholly Other' and discovering Him as the ground of being, 'the source from which we continually flow.'¹³⁰³ These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, but complementary – and linked by internal tensions. While tension is usually viewed as misfortune, Williams holds that it is 'the price of life' and can be healthy and creative: 'Tension is coterminous with the universe itself,' for 'the material world ... is the product of tension, and the material is ... a pointer towards the personal, the human, and the spiritual'.¹³⁰⁴ This necessity of tension and even conflict was summed up in Jesus's warning '*I came not to send peace but a sword*'.¹³⁰⁵ The existence of tensions and the resulting conflicts have therefore a positive value, since they are a sure sign of being alive. Conflicts and tensions should be sought, not avoided or merely endured, for they lead to a new life.

Similarly, for Williams truth is always dynamic, 'like a spotlight, not a floodlight' and 'the tension of faith is one of the most exciting and stimulating things life has to offer.'¹³⁰⁶ Our ability to make statements about God is necessarily limited. Although 'consequent demand' is being made that Christian doctrines be treated as it were as

¹³⁰³ *Tensions*, 14.

¹³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

¹³⁰⁵ Matthew 10.34 (KJV).

¹³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

‘photographs of Reality’, it can be argued that they are no more than ‘a collection of hints and guesses’ which is all that earthly things are able to provide. Our security of knowledge is necessarily bogus: ‘For in the realm of knowledge, ... to be invulnerable is not to be immortal. It is only to be dead.’¹³⁰⁷ This limitation of our knowledge has been well expressed in the Eastern Orthodox tradition of the apophatic way of negation, by the scholastic way of analogy, and by the way of paradox, favoured by the Reformed tradition.

Williams agrees, without a specific attribution, with Barth (whom he finds being both a ‘prophet’ and a ‘poet’) that calling God ‘Father’ is not to speak of God anthropomorphically, but to speak of man theomorphically. Following on from his controversial statement that ‘we can love God and our neighbour only at the expense of also being able to hate both of them,’¹³⁰⁸ Williams does not hesitate to tell the reader that ‘our obedience to God requires us to fight Him’ for ‘whatever God wants in our relationship with Him it certainly isn’t respectability.’¹³⁰⁹

Our rebellion against God may even involve, at time, refusing to believe in Him. For Williams, Jesus’s cry on the Cross about being forsaken was an expression that ‘by his willingness ... to become an atheist that he consummated his love for God.’¹³¹⁰ Many ‘God-associated things’ which include religious formularies, practices, the Church, the Bible and others are relative, merely ‘ludicrously inadequate echoes of God, many of them downright caricatures’.¹³¹¹

¹³⁰⁷ Ibid., 60.

¹³⁰⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹³⁰⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹³¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

¹³¹¹ Ibid., 34.

Accordingly, when speaking of God, Williams maintains that we must distinguish between knowledge *about*, provided by theological understanding but always ambivalent and uncertain, and knowledge *of*, which is a form of love. Both types of knowledge are essential: 'Knowledge about is dead without knowledge of. But knowledge of runs into bankruptcy without a plentiful supply of knowledge about.' The contrast between these two types of knowledge corresponds to the contrast between theology and prayer; the former is the attempted description of our experience of God, the latter is the very experience of the communion with Him. Alluding to a concept developed by Martin Buber,¹³¹² Williams finds that in prayer, the tension is found between our 'personal encounter with God in a sort of I-Thou relationship' which is a sort of a private affair, and 'the willingness to lose ... one's identity ... to be made one with God's relationship to all creation'.¹³¹³

The reader is encouraged to disassociate God from established representations: 'He ceases to be anything at all. He is absent when I pray. I am there alone. There is no other.'¹³¹⁴ And when this happens, we are invited to discover God as our deepest and truest self: 'I cannot see Him, because He is my eyes. I cannot hear Him because He is my ears.'¹³¹⁵ In human relationships, the split between object and subject can be overcome only partially. In the relationship to God, however, it can be overcome totally. This is what Incarnation is about: God and man being one identity: as our true selves 'we are God's outgoing self-givingness', 'we are His love'.¹³¹⁶ In the end, we

¹³¹² Martin Buber (1878-1965), Austrian-born Israeli Jewish philosopher.

¹³¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

¹³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

are invited to fight for our independence against the established concepts of God in order that our personal identity may be discovered and affirmed.

A robust faith must be also prepared to take on board doubt, to accept tensions of competing truths: religious triumphalism is ‘the cowardice which runs away from conflict under the disguise of bogus assurance’ whose child is mere zeal.¹³¹⁷ Doubt is not an enemy to be overcome, but is rather a friend necessary for the enrichment of our faith; the tension between doubt and faith is by all means creative. Even Jesus passed as man ‘through the grave and gate of doubt’ to his ‘risen and indestructible knowledge of God’.¹³¹⁸

Williams discerns a permanent tension between commitment and enquiry; what we love must be scrutinized, criticized and sometimes even attacked – he points at the earlier controversies surrounding *Essays and Reviews* and *Lux Mundi*.¹³¹⁹ In this context, Williams appreciates the way in which the Roman Catholics have recognized and accepted this since Vatican II, observing that the process ‘was initiated by a pope who by temperament was one of the most traditional of men’, and who was reprimanded by the *Church Times* for preparing himself for the council by going on a pilgrimage to Loreto.¹³²⁰ When Williams published *Tensions* in 1976, he could not yet foresee a different, more reserved, perspective on Vatican II which would become discernible two years later, when the pontificate of John Paul II commenced.

Similarly, Christian doctrines remain for Williams more like theoretical models of science, being neither literal pictures nor useful fictions: ‘Doctrines cannot escape

¹³¹⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹³¹⁸ Ibid., 49.

¹³¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

¹³²⁰ Ibid., 54.

reformulation as society changes, just as scientific models cannot escape reformulation as scientific attitudes change.¹³²¹ Christian doctrines are thus merely ‘symbolic representations’ of what is not directly accessible to our thought; as such, they are to be taken seriously, but not literally. It is mandatory to hold our creative imagination and critical intelligence in tension so that we may ‘catch a glimpse of transcendent truth’.¹³²²

Encouraging the reader to rebel against the common understanding of God, Williams is only one step away from appreciation of at least some merits of evil in the world.

While evil ‘by its nature is mysterious as well as terrible’, nevertheless ‘in the death-dealing quality of evil there is something without which ... we cannot have an absolute fullness of life’.¹³²³ ‘Great works of art hint to us that Satan and Sanctus are one. But until we arrive at that vision in its fullness we shall remain in conflict upon our life-giving cross.’¹³²⁴ Williams’s originality was clearly not boundless: here we see an instance of Williams returning to an expression used years ago, for he used the same words, with reference to his own personal state, in the sermon *What the Devil?* published in 1963.¹³²⁵

Nonetheless, the overall mood of the book is never too pessimistic. Williams also seeks to identify a certain experience which everybody shares – and finds it in laughter which must necessarily involve the ability to laugh at ourselves, for when we do so, we accept ourselves: ‘Self-acceptance in laughter is the very opposite of self-satisfaction or pride.’¹³²⁶ He suggests that ‘laughter is the best and clearest reflection we ever get in

¹³²¹ Ibid., 68.

¹³²² Ibid., 71.

¹³²³ Ibid., 38.

¹³²⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹³²⁵ Williams, ‘What the Devil?’, *Sermons from Great St. Mary’s*, 118-19. Cf. p. 241.

¹³²⁶ *Tensions*, 111.

this world of God's love for His creation. In laughter we see the Celestial City in what is more than a passing glimpse.¹³²⁷ Laughter also has a metaphysical dimension and it is Eternity who has the last laugh: 'For that is the final joke – the resurrection' when 'the fool has popped up again like a Jack-in-the-box and is dancing about even more vigorously than before and even more compellingly'.¹³²⁸ Williams then reveals to the reader that in Mirfield, the monks sit in order of seniority and the places occupied by the oldest men are known as 'Cemetery Row': 'That Community jokes make the hottest kind of evangelism look by contrast like the negation of God. For through the joke of Cemetery Row there rings the laughter of the universe, and there isn't much laughter in hot gospel unless you see how funny it is.'¹³²⁹

Williams's frankness and willingness to disclose emotional fragility, doubt and trouble resonated well with his readership. Following the publication of *Tensions*, Williams's therapist wrote to him in a private letter:

As I read on I found myself laughing out loud – though alone – and at the same time shuddering at the number of sacred cows you were shattering – though never blatantly or crudely but nevertheless devastatingly. ... Apart from sympathizing with you over the near intolerableness of Religion as such ... particularly did I love the last crack – and merely because I felt it applied to me. I have some feeling of having been promoted into Cemetery Row myself – another solemn occasion for solitary laughter.¹³³⁰

The book, in which Williams attested to the necessity of doubt, tension and conflict as indispensable elements of the personal quest, was widely acclaimed, with only a few voices expressing mild criticism. The absence of critical voices (unlike at the time of

¹³²⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹³²⁸ Ibid., 118.

¹³²⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹³³⁰ Dr Christopher H. Scott, letter to Williams, 8 April 1976 (Williams Papers).

the publication of *Soundings* in 1962) attests both to the fact that by then Williams had firmly established himself in the British theological publishing landscape and also to the changing nature of the religious landscape.

The secular daily press was quick to react to the publication of a new book by a popular author: *The Daily Telegraph* observed that Williams ‘rightly stresses the healing value of accepting the uncertainties of life and faith, and the vicious side-effects of fanatical certainty so often illustrated in the dark passages of church history’ and that the chapter on laughter and humour ‘ought to be compulsory reading in success and failure because laughter snaps tension quicker than the speed of light.’¹³³¹ In the first review of *Tensions for Theology*, Lord Hailsham appreciated that the book provided ‘a valuable corrective to much of the conventional piety which takes refuge in cut and dried dogmatic beliefs couched in the technical philosophical or theological language of a former age’. However, he also suggested that Williams’s book suffered from ‘a manifest weakness’, which saw in his ‘failure to observe that the search for truth could be significant and purposive only if one arrived at something at least approaching certainty, at some kind of an objective judgment of moral and spiritual values.’¹³³² In another review in *Theology*, written four years later, the young Rowan Williams praised Williams for writing *Tensions* ‘with all his customary wit and simplicity’ and commended the ‘fine’ section on ‘intelligence’ properly understood as intuitive and unitive knowing. The book had ‘more vigour and astringency’ than some of his more recent publications, and was ‘as delightfully readable as ever’.¹³³³

¹³³¹ R. Robson, ‘Tensions – the new point of fear’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 30 March 1976, 8.

¹³³² Lord Hailsham, ‘Tensions’, *Theology*, 671 (September 1976), 310-12.

¹³³³ Rowan Williams, ‘Book Review: The Joy of God’, *Theology*, 691 (January 1980), 70-71.

A Jesuit reviewer felt the ‘book does not so much preach to the converted, as provide a shoulder on which they can lean’.¹³³⁴ For others, *Tensions* was simply a book that ‘should disturb those who feel comfortable and secure in their faith, and greatly reassure those who do not’.¹³³⁵ The theologian and writer Norman Power, a regular contributor to *The Observer*, *The Guardian* and other periodicals, assured its readers that ‘there is no mistaking the quality of this book’ and ranked it among notable spiritual works: ‘If you enjoy Chestertonian paradoxes, if you were helped by C. S. Lewis’s *Letters to Malcolm*, this book is for you.’¹³³⁶ It was noted that Williams ‘sums up neatly and vigorously the thought of the greatest Christians through the ages and should encourage any reader to see even in his failures and faults the sustaining power of God.’¹³³⁷

The book remains a practical critique of Christian faith as an objective certainty, demonstrating that the object of such a faith may not necessarily be God at all. It helped many readers explain some of the incongruities in their religious experience, explaining that much that appears to be virtue – in particular a certain vehemence and fervour – is in fact avoidance of genuine, authentic faith, and an expression of self-centredness.

Tensions can be certainly read in more than one way. Eileen Mable, Williams’s editor, appreciated in her review¹³³⁸ that Williams is ‘a courageously honest man’ but her judgment that Williams was ‘a deeply happy one’ remains somewhat problematic. The

¹³³⁴ Peter Hackett, ‘Book Reviews’, *The Month*, 1989, 14.

¹³³⁵ See, Diocese of Southwell, September 1989, 3.

¹³³⁶ Norman Power, ‘The Value of Stress’, *Birmingham Post*, 10 April 1976, 12. In *Letters to Malcolm*, a book by C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) published posthumously in 1964 (London: Bles), Lewis addresses prayer as an intimate dialogue with God.

¹³³⁷ ‘Mainly on Religion’, *The Yorkshire Post*, 15 April 1976, 11.

¹³³⁸ Eileen Mable, ‘Reviews’, *Church of England Newspaper*, 30 April 1976, 15.

book is certainly an appreciation of the value of a personal quest and a testimony to a painful personal experience. Nevertheless, Williams was far from being happy. Her statement comes as a surprise for, as Williams's editor, she must have known him personally.

The January 1976 issue of *Theology* brought Williams's most sustained contribution to Christological discourse. By then, the formulations of secular theology in *Honest in God* no longer seemed so stimulating and new topics were being explored, among them liberationist, feminist and process theology. The tenor of the academic theology of the 1970s has been described as sceptical and revisionist, just as the mood of previous decade had been secular.¹³³⁹ An emblematic work in the academic theology of this period was the collection *The Myth of God Incarnate* edited by John Hick¹³⁴⁰ which rejected the traditional Christian concepts of the Incarnation and the Trinity.

Williams's article was entitled 'Incarnation: Model and Symbol'. In it, he critiques the notion of models as the vehicles of theological thought, focusing on the doctrine of the Incarnation and proposes his own concept: Williams believes that doctrine is just a 'representational picture' and the Chalcedonian definition needs 'a certain degree of revision'. For him, the literalist descriptive doctrine of incarnation must be understood as only one of the available pictures; we must not be 'prisoners of any one particular model'. Williams then offers his own concept, without claiming its exclusivity, drawn from the relation between a knowing subject and the object he knows, whereby the act of knowing involves a split between them, 'even if the knowing subject is the self'.

¹³³⁹ Densil Morgan, 276.

¹³⁴⁰ John Hick (1922-2012), theologian and philosopher of religion. Cf. John Hick (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977).

Williams admits that this model was first systematically explored by Martin Buber.¹³⁴¹ For Williams, a personal relationship involves a dynamic interchange where the personal identity of one person is expanded to include partially that of the other. If other people and one's self remain unknowable as objects, this applies *a fortiori* to God; our only objects of knowledge are doctrines and creeds. If we want to know something about God, he must become at least a part of us as the knowing subject. Williams agrees with Friedrich von Hügel that 'God loving Himself in and through us is alone our true self,'¹³⁴² and suggests balancing the model of personhood with the model of the ground of all being as a possible way to avoid anthropomorphism. For Williams, Jesus is 'no theory or abstract construct', but 'flesh and blood localized in time and space' and returns, as in his Hulsean Sermon, to citing '*I and the Father are one*'¹³⁴³ as expressing not only the oneness of man and God but also actualizing 'our potentiality as the sons of God'. To the academic question whether Jesus is exclusive, William somewhat ambiguously replies: 'The particular symbol which is Jesus may have for us an overwhelming power of meaning which, so far as we are concerned, excludes all other unrelated symbols. And this may be true of the group of civilisations to which we belong.'¹³⁴⁴

A discussion in the pages of *Theology* followed. In the May issue,¹³⁴⁵ Michael Ramsey wrote that Williams seemed to wish to have his cake and eat it on the question of history: '[H]e wrote that we know too little about the historical Jesus but then he admitted that Jesus is set before us as flesh and blood localized in time and space.'

¹³⁴¹ Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (London: T & T Clark, 1937).

¹³⁴² Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925), influential Austrian lay theologian and apologist. Cf. Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element of Religion* II. (London: Dent, 1908), 38-39.

¹³⁴³ John 10.30 (RSV).

¹³⁴⁴ H. A. Williams, 'Incarnation: Model and Symbol', *Theology*, 667 (January 1976), 6-18.

¹³⁴⁵ Michael Ramsey, 'Incarnation: Model and Symbol', *Theology*, 669 (May 1976), 161-62.

However, another correspondent found Williams's essay a real 'break-through', with Williams breaking 'through the walls of partition' between Christianity and the other religions.¹³⁴⁶ Anthony Herbert wrote that Williams, in his 'pellucid prose', 'has raised so many hares that his dog is tempted to dash after them all' and disagreed with Williams's 'apparent philosophical and theological relativism'. Angela Tilby¹³⁴⁷ questioned, among others, Williams's comparison of the Incarnation and Atonement as being apprehended only through non-literal models and maintained that they are both models related to experienced reality. She further argued that Williams did not take paradox seriously enough.¹³⁴⁸

In the July 1976 issue of *Theology*,¹³⁴⁹ Williams replied to Ramsey that one needs to differentiate between how Jesus is set before us in the gospels and knowledge of him as a historical person. Williams further explained that psychology was not the sole interpretative tool, but it was one that had been much neglected and needed to be fully used. Addressing Tilby, Williams argued that he understood Incarnation and Atonement as models of divine activity in the world, but 'obscured and destroyed, and yet always uncontrollably arising anew'. He then concluded that paradox is only one way of describing the relation of the Divine to the human, together with those of negation and analogy; Christianity does not have to depend on paradox, and Williams sees no virtue in paradox as such.

¹³⁴⁶ Rosemarie Wedell, 'Incarnation: Model and Symbol', *Theology*, 669 (May 1976), 162-63.

¹³⁴⁷ Angela Tilby (b. 1950), Anglican priest and theologian.

¹³⁴⁸ Angela Tilby, 'Incarnation: Model and Symbol', *Theology*, 670 (May 1976), 164-65.

¹³⁴⁹ 'H. A. Williams Replies', *Theology*, 670 (May 1976), 227-29.

As a member of a monastic community, Williams needed to deal with both corporate and individual prayer. He continued to find solace in it, although his practices did not always take the prescribed forms. Prayer was, in his understanding, not just a purely mental activity, a means of addressing God – but rather a primary means of connecting with the love of God. In an unpublished letter to his psychoanalyst, he had previously confided to him:

In the deepest depths of the Unknown I am loving and worship love – the strong, most intimate, most tender, outgoing feeling for the attraction of the beauty which is in everything but chiefly in everybody. It is in experiencing this feeling that I am most aware of selfhood, most satisfyingly and certainly myself. And this is my experience when I pray. Prayer seems to me a love of one's own value which makes possible the love of value everywhere.¹³⁵⁰

While corporate prayer remained something of an obstacle, the monastic environment stimulated Williams to publish, seven years after the letter, a separate volume entirely dedicated to this topic.

Becoming What I Am (1977)

Becoming What I Am is a collection of sermons on prayer delivered by Williams as a guest preacher at St Mary's, Bourne Street. (The venue, still a stronghold of Anglo-Catholicism in Central London, casts doubt on Williams's claims of how much he still detested Anglo-Catholics). He divides prayer into several categories, not unlike Jung who divided prayer into four acts or attitudes: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and petition.¹³⁵¹ Williams opens the book with an admission that he finds prayer often 'extremely difficult', sometimes 'very boring' and always 'rather baffling'. An idea

¹³⁵⁰ Williams, letter to Dr Christopher H. Scott, 22 October 1970 (Williams Papers).

¹³⁵¹ C. G. Jung, 'Transformation Symbolism in the Mass', in *Collected Works*, xii (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 201-73; cf. C. R. Bryant, *Heart in pilgrimage: Christian guidelines for the human journey* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980), 10.

expressed in his previously published sermon *On Belonging*¹³⁵² is reiterated, namely that the only prayer ever needed is that of the blind beggar ‘*Lord Jesus, that I may receive my sight*’.¹³⁵³ For Williams, prayer is a gradual process: ‘Like a wise parent, God will not give us everything at once because everything at once would not simply be bad for us but would literally destroy us, driving us insane.’¹³⁵⁴ Sometimes we believe that God looks a bit grey; in those moments, God will probably ‘clap upon our eyes a pair of dark sunglasses’ as we are in danger of seeing more than we can stand.¹³⁵⁵

Writing on practical aspects of prayer, Williams stresses the requirement of simplicity and relates it to our authenticity: ‘We draw near to simplicity to the degree in which we become our full true selves’.¹³⁵⁶ At the same time, he acknowledges the necessity of a certain degree of formality in prayer, including the formality of the schedule as the time set aside for prayer, as well the formality of the procedure when we pray. Williams then presents a colourful image, inspired by Friedrich von Hügel, that prayer can be compared to ‘sucking a lozenge’; it is like going through a book, not in the ordinary way of getting through it: we do not swallow what we read immediately, but we keep it in our mouth and feel the flavour, as with a lozenge.¹³⁵⁷

He goes on to ask whether prayer should be understood as a petition. On the one hand, ‘there is a certain spiritual snobbery which thinks itself above asking God for things,’¹³⁵⁸ although such prayer is attested by the petition of Jesus in Gethsemane. On

¹³⁵² Published in *More Sermons from Great St. Mary's*.

¹³⁵³ Luke 14.81; Mark 10.51 (KJV).

¹³⁵⁴ *Becoming What I Am*, 10.

¹³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³⁵⁶ Cf. Ephesians 4.13.

¹³⁵⁷ *Becoming What I Am*, 36.

¹³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

the other hand, true prayer must be distinguished from ‘its perverted parody’ which is magic, that is, manipulating the supernatural to serve our own purpose. Williams concludes: ‘We find our true selves very largely by the natural child-like trustfulness of the prayer of petition. So don’t let us be taken in by the spiritual snobs. Prayer does mean asking for things.’¹³⁵⁹

By his own admission, for Williams, the most important element of corporate prayer life at Mirfield was nevertheless the intercessions, the prayerful concern for other people. He does not understand them as giving God instructions about what to do, but as a two-way process by which we receive from those we pray for as much as they receive from us: ‘In the final me separability is transcended so that the whole company both gives and receives from each other.’¹³⁶⁰ The real basis of intercessions is the communion of saints; we are deeply interrelated as was expounded in St Paul’s teaching about us being members of the Body of Christ.¹³⁶¹

In the end, Williams sees all types of prayer coalescing into one loving response of ours to God’s love; prayer as ‘a living whole’. We live in a sacramental universe where God’s transcendence is mediated to us by God’s immanence: ‘The world is charged with the grandeur of God.’¹³⁶² But there is also the glory of God revealed in the darkness of Calvary: ‘Prayer is fully facing the loathsome reality of all these evil things and seeing within them the greater reality, the ultimate reality, of God’s glory; the transforming, converting, lifegiving power of His love, even in the corpse of a murdered man.’¹³⁶³ Accordingly, prayer should not be understood as a form of

¹³⁵⁹ Ibid., 50.

¹³⁶⁰ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 364.

¹³⁶¹ I Corinthians 12.26.

¹³⁶² Ibid., 68. Williams omits the attribution to the opening line of *God’s Grandeur* (published 1877) by George Manley Hopkins (1844-1899).

¹³⁶³ *Becoming What I Am*, 69.

escapism, but as entering into the realm of reality and, passing from partial insights into living in the context of the whole, seeing things from God's perspective. We need to put away our cosy feelings and remember the living Lord saying to Mary Magdalene – Williams uses again his own translation, dating back to 1951¹³⁶⁴ – '*Noli me tangere: do not cling to me.*' 'He must be within me as my truest self and not beside me like a friend'.¹³⁶⁵

The book was dedicated to Betjeman and Lady Cavendish; Betjeman wrote to Williams that she 'had tears in her eyes of delight when she saw your book and its dedication at breakfast on her table yesterday. ... You could not have chosen a fairer or better title.'¹³⁶⁶

Becoming What I Am remains evidence that Williams gradually developed a style of writing that was accessible and conversational. He demonstrated that prayer was not just a pious decoration of a churchgoer, but the innermost activity of human heart. In *Theology*, Alan Ecclestone – whose own book, according to Williams,¹³⁶⁷ was one of the best books on prayer – felt that the tone of *Becoming What I Am* was 'liveliness'. He returned Williams's compliments by writing that the book had 'preserved the personal immediacy' of its author, together with the 'most strict, economical handling of anecdote and advice and reflection': 'The simplicity that comes from a lifetime's effort gets across in a winning way. You recognize a master but his skill in doing job is encouraging, not daunting.'¹³⁶⁸

¹³⁶⁴ This translation of John 20.17 is used also in *Living Free*, 29-30, and in *Jesus and the Resurrection*, 90.

¹³⁶⁵ *Becoming What I Am*, 77.

¹³⁶⁶ John Betjeman, letter to Williams, 19 January 1977, in Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 525-26.

¹³⁶⁷ Alan Ecclestone, *Yes to God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1975).

¹³⁶⁸ Alan Ecclestone, 'Book Review: *Becoming What I Am*', *Theology*, 680 (March 1978), 150-52.

Apart from addressing prayer, Williams returned in 1977 one last time to his treatment of psychotherapy, offering his views on its relation to repentance in his short article 'Psychotherapy as Repentance' published in the journal *Christian*. Starting from his own experience, Williams found that psychoanalysis delivered him from the narrow moralistic perversions of repentance, and had shown that repentance is as wide and continuous as life itself.¹³⁶⁹ In the depth of his own self, he discovered a presence which – he claims – paradoxically was both him and, at the same time, not him, a reality infinitely greater than his individual identity, and yet a reality which not merely included him as a whole: 'I discovered that I am both a self and a Self.'¹³⁷⁰ In terms of the Christian vocabulary, I discovered the Christ in me and the Christ was more truly what I am than my individual identity could possibly be.'¹³⁷¹

Williams was increasingly ready to declare his intention of remaining at Mirfield for life, but still was not prepared to make the final step. The situation concerning the duration of his vows was repeated in 1978, but this time he was told that this was the last opportunity to take vows for another period of only three years.

The link with Cambridge was still very much alive. A year later, Williams delivered the address at the memorial service for John Burnaby where he praised his old friend

¹³⁶⁹ Williams, 'Psychotherapy as Repentance'.

¹³⁷⁰ The language Williams uses is not dissimilar to the effects of the drugs expanding consciousness such as psilocybin and LSD in the 1960s. This 'mind-expansion' was a part of the changing paradigms of the era, one of the interconnected elements of social transformation, not only in Britain. Cf. Ralph Metzner, *The Expansion of Consciousness* (Berkeley: Regent Press, 2008); Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Doubleday, 1969).

¹³⁷¹ Williams, 'Psychotherapy as Repentance'.

for his conservative approach to liturgy and his lack of enthusiasm for modern translations of the Bible ‘because he thought the translators too often confused English that was intelligible with English that is merely feeble and flat’.¹³⁷² For many years, Williams shared this approach which reveals an inherent conservatism, almost always quoting from the King James (Authorized) Version.¹³⁷³

¹³⁷² Williams, ‘Address delivered at the memorial service for John Burnaby at Trinity College Chapel on 29 April 1978’, 177. Cf. footnote 1.

¹³⁷³ With the notable exception of his Hulsean Sermon in which he uses RSV, most likely because of the academic audience.

XI. THE LATE YEARS

Having his final vows postponed for the last time, Williams used this period to write *The Joy of God*, published in 1979. Mirfield had been transformative, and Williams was perhaps not as self-righteous as before when, in a conversation recorded that year, he admitted that we would ‘all be a bit nicer in the next life’ for ‘we would all have learnt so much in this.’¹³⁷⁴

In his writings, Williams continued to communicate complex theological concepts and ideas in a structured and easily comprehensible manner, but he nonetheless managed to remain profound. He managed to recognize the spiritual thirst of his readers, offering them reassurance when they were often disillusioned by the official Church. His output started resembling a mosaic, each piece significant in itself but also contributing to the whole, providing a coherent vision of his spiritual life.

The Joy of God (1979)

This approach is reflected in the sub-title of the book *The Joy of God*, ‘Variations on a Theme’. The book is a collection of sometimes very short chapters, each attempting to analyse the routes to and origins of true happiness, while pointing to the underlying presence of God’s joy.

Within the Trinity, Williams finds a particular quality which he calls the ‘Joy of God’: ‘His eternal life is Joy.’¹³⁷⁵ This offers a new way of speaking of God as Trinity, ‘with otherness and identity combined’, using an image ‘which underlines His eternal Being

¹³⁷⁴ Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 517.

¹³⁷⁵ *The Joy of God*, 46.

as vibrant and inexhaustible Joy.¹³⁷⁶ This Joy consists of ‘a responsiveness to otherness’ which issues in ‘self-giving to otherness’. In God’s Joy we perceive ‘the presence of joy in all things and that should assure us that God’s Joy within us is a true and valid way of seeing and knowing.’¹³⁷⁷

Williams also further addressed his preferred approach to epistemology. Without explicitly referring to ‘the way of knowing as communion’ as he did in *True Resurrection*, he maintained the concept, formally distinguishing between two ways of knowing; on the one hand, there is the lower way of Deliberation (formerly understood as *ratio*) which is the brain-power of ‘putting two and two together’, using ‘only the mind and not the guts’, employing only the conscious and not the unconscious self. On the other hand, there is the higher way of knowing, Intelligence (formerly called *intellectus* and close to the biblical Wisdom), not inspecting an object from the outside, but entering it and abolishing the distinction between the object and the subject. Good art always requires Intelligence and not merely Deliberation which Williams also called, with Iris Murdoch,¹³⁷⁸ ‘discursive intellect’: ‘Good art accepts and celebrates the defeat of the discursive intellect by the world. Bad art falsifies the world so as to pretend there is no such defeat.’¹³⁷⁹

The exposition on joy gave Williams another opportunity to address sex. Here, Williams believes that it is ‘perhaps more important than anything’ to recognize God in our sexual feelings:

Let us thank God for our sexual feelings, for in them He is turning duty into pleasure so that we may be really in rapport with the people who attract us, even though we may be innocently unaware of the nature of the attraction, since

¹³⁷⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹³⁷⁷ Ibid., 50-51.

¹³⁷⁸ Iris Murdoch (1919-1999), novelist and philosopher.

¹³⁷⁹ Cf. Iris Murdoch, ‘Against Dryness’, *Encounter* XVI (1961), 16-20.

our sexual feelings include a ragbag which few of us think of scrutinizing too closely or even dare to.¹³⁸⁰

Williams maintains that it is tragic that in our unconsciousness, ‘there lies the fantasy of God as the jealous rival of what sexually attracts us instead of His being, as He is, the creator’,¹³⁸¹ which leads to the ‘fantastic overestimation of virginity’ in the Catholic tradition. He finds that there is something ‘nauseatingly hypocritical’ in Christians being in pious horror at the excesses of the permissive society, when they have tried persistently to keep God out of sex: ‘It is a harvest of their own sowing that they are now reaping, and the hell they abhor is in large part a hell of their own lighting up.’¹³⁸²

Williams then moves on to revisit another topic, that of our ‘truest self’ and ‘the ground of our being’. He also introduces a new concept which he labels the ‘logic of superabundance’. In Williams’s understanding, superabundance is God’s continuous and increasing gift of Himself to us, where concupiscence – clutching onto things, and onto God – is totally absent.¹³⁸³

The tension between affliction and joy moves Williams to address activity in the world. He warns his readers of the heresy of Utopianism which offers a false identity, claiming to fill the hole in the human heart with something less than God. What is called for is ‘down-to-earth realism and common sense’ rather than ‘the folly of expecting sinners to behave as saints’: ‘The foolishness of mental masturbation in the form of idealist dreams of a totally impracticable character is sterile except in its possibility of causing unnecessary harm’.¹³⁸⁴

¹³⁸⁰ *The Joy of God*, 39.

¹³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 123-24.

However, Williams lived up to his reputation for never missing an opportunity to add a provocative Christological statement, seemingly unrelated to the concept of joy at all. He now presents the doubting Jesus: ‘Did not part of the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane consist in his awareness of the haunting possibility that there may have been some fundamental mistake in the embodiment he had tried to give to the kingdom of God?’¹³⁸⁵

While these statements were provocative, making Williams a boundary figure in the theological landscape, he remained a faithful priest. He was not a man to be controlled and the life in the Community revealed many of his shortcomings and flaws. Nonetheless, he was nonetheless essentially a person of great intelligence, wit and – when he wanted to be – a delightful companion.¹³⁸⁶ As someone relentlessly searching for both liberty and love, he was to be forever torn between his inner desires, longings, and his spiritual vocation. It was difficult to integrate these two aspects of his life, except in his books which managed to connect the earthbound and the spiritual. Nevertheless, at this time, Williams finally became somewhat at ease with his homosexuality and ready to address it publicly.

¹³⁸⁵ *The Joy of God*, 89-90.

¹³⁸⁶ Interview with Fr A.P., a former member of the Community of the Resurrection, on 8 November 2022.

Michael Harding Memorial Address (1979)

In 1979, Williams was invited by the Gay Christian Movement to speak publicly on the topic of homosexuality in the second Michael Harding Memorial Address.¹³⁸⁷ The invitation was arranged through Martin Preston,¹³⁸⁸ another well-known friend of Williams and one of the founding members of the Gay Christian Movement (later Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, nowadays incorporated into OneBodyOneFaith) in the United Kingdom. Having studied at Trinity, Preston is likely to have met Williams there. In an unpublished letter of 31 December 1988, Preston wrote to Williams: ‘Reading your sermon “Repentance” in *The True Wilderness* was one major [step], where I started to learn to affirm after all the years of negation. Years later it actually got put into practice, when I not only accepted my gayness but did something about it!’¹³⁸⁹

The 1979 address – which has not been widely publicized – is the most comprehensive piece by Williams addressing homosexuality; he was now sixty and a monk. In it, he admitted that ‘discrimination against gays does exist, and the fact that it is spasmodic ... does not make it any more tolerable’ and ‘discrimination against gays, like that against coloured people or Jews, should always be resisted – in the name of God and the justice which is His righteousness.’ The view Williams presents is his personal one, and he makes the point (valid even some forty years later) that ‘the Anglican officials seem unable to come to an agreement’. Williams comes back to his previously

¹³⁸⁷ H. A. Williams, *The Gay Christian Movement and The Education of Public Opinion* (London: Gay Christian Movement, 1979).

¹³⁸⁸ Martin Preston (1931-2020), first Baptist and later Anglican clergyman and gay activist.

¹³⁸⁹ Martin Preston, letter to Williams, 31 December 1988 (Williams Papers).

formulated prohibition of sexual exploitation which can be found even in a heterosexual marriage. What matters for him is giving oneself away to another person – whereby whether that person is of the opposite or of the same sex is spiritually irrelevant. The body must be regarded as ‘the sacrament of the self, by means of which the self finds physical expression to the mutual enrichment’. For Williams, the fact that at the first Lambeth Conference after the Second World War the Anglican bishops approved the use of contraceptives by married couples signifies that they declared that sexual acts are not necessarily tied to procreation and thus they ‘opened the door to an understanding how, with regard to gay couples as well, sex could be the most sacred expression of profound love’.¹³⁹⁰

Williams not only approves sexual relations between gay people, but even sees them as desirable since by claiming that ‘those who through fear or slavery to convention refuse to give physical expression to their love are setting limits to their self-giving when it is the nature of true love to be without any limit. In that sense, they are being less than Christian.’ While he admits that there are some people called to celibacy as the road to their most adequate fulfilment, he is perfectly aware that ‘for most gays, as for most straights, the celibate road is the wrong road and would ... lead not to fulfilment, but to frustration and despair.’¹³⁹¹

Williams stresses the importance of protest, but finds the education of public opinion even more important. At the same time, he makes a point against developing a ghetto mentality, for ‘that is the way in which gayness becomes an obsession’. Applying the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, Williams finds that one of the contributory factors in the break-up of gay relationships is ‘that it is easier to project an ideal self upon a person of

¹³⁹⁰ *The Gay Christian Movement and The Education of Public Opinion.*

¹³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

the same sex than upon the person of another'. Disagreeing with the way 'in which gays sometimes rub other people's noses in their own private and sexual lives' he finds that 'the degree of exhibitionism is in inverse proportion to the degree of love'.¹³⁹²

Observing that many people are afraid of gayness, Williams believes that the main reason is the repression of their own homosexual component, for 'almost everybody is a mixture' of a heterosexual and a homosexual component and for many, homosexual feeling is 'a siren call back to an adolescent paradise which no longer exists'. It remains, however, 'the vocation of Christian gays to work with intelligence and sensitivity on behalf of, not against, those who condemn them' and Williams remains confident that 'by and large things are moving in the right direction' and the churches are playing their part 'in overcoming fear and prejudice, bringing light where there is darkness, reconciliation where there is enmity, and all because the love of Christ constrains them'.¹³⁹³

When interviewed at Mirfield by the *Yorkshire Post* in 1982, Williams described his current feelings on sexuality in the following words which are consistent with his previous stance:

I still feel that unless you share your life deeply with another individual you are to some extent not fully mature and lack that sense of belonging to somebody which is to me vitally important for all of us. But I'm 63 now and I've accepted not sharing my life with someone and accepted the necessity of being alone. The aspect of homosexuality which did trouble me was ghettos, its gay bars. They never in any way appealed to me, so I never missed them. What I did miss was a unique relationship with another person.¹³⁹⁴

¹³⁹² Ibid.

¹³⁹³ Ibid.

¹³⁹⁴ Michael Brown, *The Yorkshire Post*, 1982 (exact date unknown) (Williams Papers).

Soon afterwards, Williams had to decide whether to take his life vows or leave Mirfield altogether. This presented him with a dilemma: to leave would be ‘a spiritual and perhaps even moral suicide’, to take life-vows was against his conscience.¹³⁹⁵ In the end he decided for ‘the lesser of the two evils’ and took life-vows in January 1981. On this opportunity, he confided in his *Yorkshire Post* interview:

What I believe to be God’s will for me now is not necessarily going to be what I believe to be God’s will for me always. To take life vows is to make the relative absolute – to dictate to God. ... Personally, I would certainly like a return to the practice of Gore who did not have life vows.¹³⁹⁶

In the same year, Williams was also invited to deliver a lecture at the University of Manchester,¹³⁹⁷ where he formally identified epistemology as the instrument or agent by means of which theological work is done. Coming back to the distinction between *intellectus* (Intelligence) and *ratio* (Deliberation) he had expressed in *The Joy of God*, Williams warned from the tacit and unexamined assumption that the discursive reason was the only intellectually respectable instrument at the theologian’s disposal. Most Christian thinkers are, according to Williams, ‘imprisoned in a doctrinal straightwaistcoat [*sic*]’, by the doctrine that the Lord is fully and finally revealed only in one line in history; this doctrine is ‘some sort of solid lump plonked on earth for our benefit’.¹³⁹⁸ Theology needs to be aided by a partner in dialogue; by Williams’s own admission, psychology was, by 1981, ‘an old hat’ and he identified more recent partners in the discourse as sociology or linguistics of the Chomsky¹³⁹⁹ school.¹⁴⁰⁰

¹³⁹⁵ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 330-32.

¹³⁹⁶ Michael Brown, *Yorkshire Post*, 1981 (exact date unknown) (Williams Papers).

¹³⁹⁷ Williams, ‘Whither Theology?’.

¹³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹⁹ Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), American analytical philosopher and linguist.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Williams, ‘Whither Theology?’.

On 29 July 1981, Williams was invited to conduct some of the prayers at the wedding in St. Paul's of the then Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer.¹⁴⁰¹ Somewhat improbably, Margaret Thatcher¹⁴⁰² confessed to being an admirer, a fact that gave Williams, who often enjoyed the company of Conservatives, much pleasure.¹⁴⁰³ The Duchess of Devonshire¹⁴⁰⁴ recalled a dinner at her London home before the royal wedding, to which Williams was invited: 'Harry was worried about his clothes: an old grey cotton overall worn over a short black cassock that stopped well above his ankles and gave him the droll appearance of an overgrown French schoolboy.'¹⁴⁰⁵

A year later, Williams took part in the memorial service for Rab Butler, his address being 'deeply moving and extremely apt'. On this occasion, he again met Margaret Thatcher who once more confided that she 'had read virtually all [his] books and derived a good deal from them'.¹⁴⁰⁶ According to Trevor Beeson, this was because '[Williams's] deeply personalized interpretation of Christianity fits very well with her own highly individualistic view of life and deep distrust of any corporate approach to human problems.'¹⁴⁰⁷

Back in Mirfield, Williams clearly recognized the difference between the conviviality he experienced with the dons at Trinity and the rather reserved attitudes of monastic life at Mirfield; there was no opportunity to get to know the other brethren as one had

¹⁴⁰¹ Diana Frances Spencer (1961-1997), later Princess of Wales, the first wife of King Charles III (then Prince of Wales).

¹⁴⁰² Margaret Hilda Thatcher (1925-2013), a politician and stateswoman, Prime Minister (1979-1990).

¹⁴⁰³ *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2006, 12.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Deborah Vivien Cavendish (1920-2014), Duchess of Devonshire, a socialite and writer.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Deborah Devonshire, *Wait for me! Memoirs of the Youngest Milford Sister* (London: John Murray, 2010) 310.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Trevor Beeson, 'Chapter and Work', *The Sunday Times*, 29 November 1998, 21.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Trevor Beeson, *Window on Westminster* (London: SCM Press), 171.

at Cambridge: ‘That is why, in spite of everything Mirfield has given me, I still regard Trinity as my home.’¹⁴⁰⁸ He was clearly missing the grandeur of an Oxbridge college, the formal dinners, graces, good food, wine and port – and the presence of young male undergraduates.

On the other hand, he also remained convinced that if men were emotionally capable of marrying (by which he then certainly meant marrying a woman), they should do so. In his autobiography, written some ten years after Bishop’s resignation and the disclosure of this love affair, Williams wrote that although his brethren at Mirfield had made the renunciation of married life in full freedom, for most of them there had been nothing voluntary about it.¹⁴⁰⁹ Those in religious communities were thus for him largely people who had been prevented from marriage by their emotional hang-ups: they were either homosexual or they had been wounded in their sexuality in another way. He must have realized that he was one of them, a man of too many hang-ups, someone who used to live out his homosexuality but who was ultimately unable to find a committed loving relationship. In this fundamental and defining aspect of his personality, he had certainly more in common with his fellow monks than with the dons of Cambridge who may have provided a more cheerful company but who would, when the dinner was over, too often return home to their families. With all these considerations in mind, Williams felt that the time had come for him to explain his life-long struggle with the Church and the organized religion in the form of an autobiography.

¹⁴⁰⁸ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 333-34.

¹⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 337.

Some Day I'll Find You (1982)

While the contents and structure of the book, as well as the reactions to it, have already been discussed in Chapter II, it can be summarized that apart from describing his personal experience, the book also addressed the more general questions of the meaning of our individual existence and its relation to God and organized religion.

The frank tone of the autobiography shocked readers as it was not usual for a priest in the Church of England, in particular for someone who was very much an establishment figure, to declare publicly that he was a homosexual. Strongly accentuating the element of intellectual doubt, Williams gradually realized that his past understanding of the Christian faith was a caricature; while he did not reject Christian belief, he struggled to become more than a superficial Christian. In the book, Williams confessed that being a Christian meant much more than organized religion; in fact, it was its antithesis: it meant knowledge of one's utter dependence on God who can be encountered in one's inner self. While the book contains many anecdotes and is full of name dropping and snobbery, its underlying story is an account of a journey of a man who fell for a false god, before finding true God in his humanity – although that account remains necessarily subjective.

In the end, Williams found Mirfield to be after all a place of acceptance, a place where he felt he was being supported. In 1984, Williams's permission to officiate was renewed – and he continued to celebrate Holy Communion.¹⁴¹⁰ His need to belong was at least partially catered for, having behind him the prayers and the good will of the

¹⁴¹⁰ Permission to Officiate dated 5 February 1984 (Williams Papers).

Community as a whole. In wider society he was also widely acclaimed. In 1983, David Edwards wrote in the *Church Times* that

Harry Williams has now written seven books which may be categorised very roughly as preaching, but never has he come closer to revealing what are the prayer and love which he has reached after his own full exploration of the tensions of our time. The Church of England, which just now is starved of personal religion, is becoming ever more deeply indebted to him.¹⁴¹¹

In 1984, Eileen Mable edited a selection of Williams's writings published under the title *True to Experience*, in which, according to a review, he was 'revealing about the perils of the prodigiously devout who project unwanted sanctity on to fallible religions'.¹⁴¹²

At Mirfield, Williams's life was far from secluded; he had a number of visitors, among them Loveday, his old headmaster,¹⁴¹³ and Prince Charles (who visited at least twice).¹⁴¹⁴ Williams's papers contain the text of Prince Charles's BBC Radio 4's first *Thought for the Day* delivered on 1 January 2000, although there is no other correspondence from St James's Palace. Among Williams's influential friends was also the socialite Casilda Marquesa de Santa Cruz, the wife of the Ambassador of Spain between 1958 and 1972. She met Williams in Cambridge together with Mollie and Rab Butler on several occasions.¹⁴¹⁵ His extensive correspondence with the Duchess of Devonshire dates back to 1965 when she wrote to Williams, thanking him for a book, and her willingness to 'break the rule of a life time' and giving it a try.¹⁴¹⁶ The correspondence lasted for many years, the Duchess affectionately signing as 'Debo'. In 1990 she wrote, 'how infinitely you are missed by me and all my family,'¹⁴¹⁷ and in

¹⁴¹¹ David L. Edwards, 'Personal Faith', *Church Times*, 25 March 1983, 14.

¹⁴¹² 'True to Experience', *The Tablet*, 18 August 1984, 21.

¹⁴¹³ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 321.

¹⁴¹⁴ Interview with Fr Philip Nichols, 27 September 2020.

¹⁴¹⁵ Casilda Marquesa de Santa Cruz, letter to Williams, 11 April 1972 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴¹⁶ Deborah Devonshire, letter to Williams, 22 January 1965 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴¹⁷ Deborah Devonshire, letter to Williams, 7 July 1990 (Williams Papers).

1996 she sent Williams a letter in spite of her eyesight making her handwriting ‘almost impossible to read’.¹⁴¹⁸ It is quite telling of Williams’s snobbery that among the few possessions which Williams kept until his death there were so many letters from aristocrats.

The loss of the possibility of taking holidays was something to which Williams found it difficult to adjust: ‘It isn’t one of my rights to have a holiday in the sun, and the uncertainty of it sometimes makes me feel gloomy.’¹⁴¹⁹ Williams nevertheless always found time for his friends facing difficult times: when John Robinson was diagnosed with cancer, Williams would visit him.¹⁴²⁰ Even though he no longer took holidays in the sun, Williams continued to rely on the generosity of his friends: Betjeman gave him a key to his London flat in Radnor Walk, Chelsea, so that he could stay there when in London or passing through; the house was also shared by two of Betjeman’s other close friends, Philip Larkin¹⁴²¹ and his girlfriend Monica Jones.¹⁴²² In the posthumously published book *Living Free*, Williams recalls that when staying in Chelsea he would go to church at St Luke’s, Sydney Street, where he would find God’s presence in Holy Communion.¹⁴²³ In the end, Williams still managed to find his way to the best restaurants in Chelsea. There, with the assistance of good company, an excellent meal and fine wine, ‘he continued to discern what he believed to be the Word of God in the joys as well as the sorrows of human life’.¹⁴²⁴ Williams and Betjeman

¹⁴¹⁸ Deborah Devonshire, letter to Williams, 30 April 1996 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴¹⁹ *Some Day I’ll Find You*, 342.

¹⁴²⁰ James, *A Life of Bishop John A. T. Robinson*, 303.

¹⁴²¹ Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985), poet, librarian and novelist.

¹⁴²² Monica Jones (1922-2001), Larkin’s companion, university lecturer.

¹⁴²³ *Living Free*, 78.

¹⁴²⁴ *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2006, 12.

remained close; following Betjeman's heart attack in 1983, Williams helped to reinforce his faith.¹⁴²⁵

Later in 1983, when John Betjeman died, Williams was invited to preach at his memorial service (Prince Charles reading the First Lesson) and the Dean of Westminster wrote to him privately to say that his address was 'sensitive, personal and highly perceptive. ... By universal assent the whole service was a great occasion and the deep affection, admiration and respect in which John Betjeman was held shone through it all. I felt that he was the major performer.'¹⁴²⁶

At Mirfield, Williams's literary career came to an end: in the last 24 years of his life, he published nothing, perhaps led by his deep conviction that perfection cannot be attained this side of eternity. When the writer and journalist Sheila Upjohn met him in 1983, she wrote that

now that he is a monk at Mirfield, Harry Williams has no possessions. He occupies a room that is 10ft. by 7ft. It has space for a bed, a table and an upright chair. Part of his daily chores may involve washing up after 40 or 50 people. Does he do this because he wants to deny himself? Not at all.¹⁴²⁷

Williams decided to lay down his pen, except to write to friends who were away. No one at Mirfield got very close to him. In his last years, he was bedridden, and frightened of being forgotten and left alone; his friends would find him often sad and lonely. But as Bishop Hare Duke¹⁴²⁸ noted, 'there may be many thousands who regret

¹⁴²⁵ Betjeman, *Letters*, II, 549.

¹⁴²⁶ Letter by Edward Carpenter to Williams, 9 July 1984 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴²⁷ 'Challenge, alarm – and hurt', *Eastern Daily Press*, 4 February 1983, 6.

¹⁴²⁸ Michael Geoffrey Hare Duke (1924-2014), Bishop of St Andrews, Dunkeld and Dunblane (1969-1994), a noted radical maverick in the Scottish Episcopal Church.

that we never found the opportunity to tell him how much we owed him, and how much we loved him'.¹⁴²⁹

At the same time, Williams continued to give public addresses and attend some conferences. In 1985, Williams was sitting as an observer at a talk given by Metropolitan Anthony¹⁴³⁰ at Windsor. The Dean of Windsor, Michael Mann,¹⁴³¹ wrote that the participants appreciated his critique and insight from a different angle: 'The feedback I have had was that it was one of the best days of the entire fortnight's course; and this is very largely due to your own contribution.'¹⁴³²

At Mirfield the relationships remained far from easy. Upon the end of his tenure as Superior in 1987, Simmons wrote an unpublished letter of apology to Williams which explains that their relationship was not idyllic. In the letter, he explained that he had not been told the nature and the symptoms of the breakdown which Williams suffered before coming to Mirfield believing that the recovery was full and secure:

From that ignorance proceeded all the insensitivity and total lack of intelligence and comprehension with which you were subsequently treated by me. I am deeply sorry and profoundly ashamed of it all – and have been for these many years. I am not trying to shift the blame for what had happened to my predecessor. I have to take responsibility for the hurt and distress which the Community through me has caused you. ... What has happened cannot be so easily put to one side.¹⁴³³

Williams replied to this letter apparently in a conciliatory way so that Simmons could later write that he believed that whatever 'unfinished business' there had been between them, it was now 'dealt with', and thanking Williams for his 'generosity of spirit – a

¹⁴²⁹ *The Guardian*, 20 February 2006, 14.

¹⁴³⁰ Anthony of Sourozh (1914-2003), bishop in the Russian Orthodox Church, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Diocese of Sourozh covering Great Britain and Ireland.

¹⁴³¹ Michael Mann (1924-2011), Bishop of Dudley (1974-1976), Dean of Windsor (1976-1989).

¹⁴³² Michael Mann, letter to Williams, 12 March 1985 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴³³ Eric Simmons, letter to Williams, undated, probably 1987 (Williams Papers).

touch of like magnanimity would not be out of place for the rest of us in our attitudes to one another in CR'.¹⁴³⁴

In December 1988, *The Evening Standard* published a piece 'The turbulent priests and the palace' which claimed that 'Prince Charles ... has long tended towards the smells and bells of High Anglicanism. One of his closest friends is the strict Anglican monk and author Harry Williams, whose monastery once played host to the intensely spiritual prince.'¹⁴³⁵ The article, which also mentioned the ordination of women, prompted Peter Bottomley MP to ask Williams in a letter, 'This little piece does not *say* you oppose the ordination of women. Do you? I doubt it.'¹⁴³⁶ Williams's reply, however, remains unknown. However, throughout his writings, he never advocated the possibility of holy orders for women and his comments on the only female preacher he invited to Trinity College Chapel indicate a certain misogyny. Given how liberal Williams was otherwise on many aspects of the traditional church teaching, it would be hard to interpret his possibly negative stance on the possibility of ordination for women as an expression of religious conservatism: it was more probably an ingrained prejudice against women of someone who was all too happy in the male-dominated Anglican churchiness of that time. It remains a stance which is nowadays regrettably not uncommon among many homosexual Anglo-Catholic clergy.

Williams himself summarized his theological views (which were clearly anything but conservative) at the end of his life in the following words, published posthumously:

I myself am a radical, a Protestant *vis-à-vis* most establishments, especially doctrinal establishments, and I try to keep myself aware of the blindness which will be inevitably mixed up with my criticisms and protests. Like a hungry dog

¹⁴³⁴ Williams, letter to Eric Simmons, undated, probably 1987 or 1988 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴³⁵ 'The turbulent priests and the palace', *The Evening Standard*, 14 December 1988, 8.

¹⁴³⁶ Peter Bottomley MP, letter to Williams, 14 December 1988 (Williams Papers).

straining at the leash, I am myself straining at the leash to tell you what I think.¹⁴³⁷

In his old age, Williams was unable to find in creedal statements anything ultimate about belief or unbelief; they were no more than ‘all too easily misleading attempts’ at pointing to realities ‘which can no more be intellectually encapsulated than sunlight can be carried in a string bag’.¹⁴³⁸ He continued to ridicule the cultural differences between individual churches: ‘Those who considered themselves to belong to the ecclesiastical Eton did not want to debase the currency by taking on the traditions of those they considered to belong to the ecclesiastical Mill Hill.’¹⁴³⁹

The posthumously published *Living Free* also reveals that towards the end of his life, this criticism of established churches led Williams further in his readiness to embrace non-Christian religions. For Williams, none of the great religions of the world can make any more ‘imperial claims’ and he sees, in the end, an emergence of a new world religion, ‘a sort of new Catholicism, based, unlike the old, not on dogma but upon the practice of prayer and contemplation’, for ‘the actual experience of God is identical; the truth being necessarily clothed in each case with the only doctrinal garments available.’¹⁴⁴⁰ Karl Rahner’s concept of ‘anonymous Christians’¹⁴⁴¹ is for Williams, however, ‘a makeshift solution intended to preserve the Christian claim of sole possession of the full and final truth’. Instead, Williams appreciates the ideas of John Hick, arguing for a Copernican revolution in the Christian estimate of other religions in order to abandon exclusivist claims and rather to ask whether a particular person in

¹⁴³⁷ *Living Free*, 23.

¹⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹⁴⁴¹ Concept introduced by the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904-1984) who believed that non-Christians may have accepted the salvific grace without having explicitly recognized Jesus as their personal Saviour.

‘ego-orientated’ or ‘Reality-orientated’: salvation consists of the change from the first state to the latter one.¹⁴⁴² Williams then turns his attention to contemporary affairs: what differentiates Muslim militancy from Christian militancy is ‘that from the point of view of Western Culture the Muslims are two or three centuries out of date because no secularist tradition has taken root among them’.¹⁴⁴³

Writing before the abolition of apartheid, Williams notes that South Africa was criticized with ‘howls of execration’, yet there were double standards for tyranny and denials of freedom that passed unnoticed in black African states.¹⁴⁴⁴ These comments tend to support Trevor Beeson’s¹⁴⁴⁵ view of Williams as ‘a high Tory.’¹⁴⁴⁶ Williams remained in many respects a political conservative who enjoyed luxuries of life and loved to rub shoulders with the rich and famous.

Williams also points to another difficulty with speaking of God in personal terms, using the images of hierarchy and royalty. He maintains that in Catholic images, God is king, the Trinity ‘a sort of a royal family’ and the Virgin Mary ‘co-opted into it as Queen Mother’, and the hymns of the Catholic variety continue to represent heaven ‘as life at court’, where princes and nobles can be asked to catch king’s ear, and appeals are made to the Queen Mother to intercede with her son. On the other hand, Protestants abolished the idea of a celestial court and replaced it by the ‘notion of absolute monarchy’; this is seen in the Preface to the Authorized Version of the Bible which is addressed to ‘the most high and mighty Prince James’ who is subsequently invoked as the ‘most dread sovereign’.¹⁴⁴⁷ Likewise, fathers are no longer the stern and remote

¹⁴⁴² John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

¹⁴⁴³ *Living Free*, 87.

¹⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Trevor Beeson (b. 1926), former Dean of Westminster.

¹⁴⁴⁶ Beeson, *Window on Westminster*, 171.

¹⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-23.

figures they once were and brides no longer promise to obey their husbands, and domestic servants (where they still exist) are no longer considered inferior to their employers. But the sacred books and liturgies are saturated with these images, the result being ‘a sense of unreality in much ecclesiastical worship, as when an outsider finds himself among a group of strangers who have their own slang and jokes as they play their own private game’.¹⁴⁴⁸

In the end, Williams would come to the Community Church only for Christmas, certain feasts and professions and funerals of his fellow brethren. His weight increased and he was unable to walk; food had to be brought to him: ‘There remained in him a vein of irrational anger which he (or a not fully integrated element in his personality) could use to intimidate or manipulate.’¹⁴⁴⁹ For practical reasons, Williams had to be assigned one of the rooms on the lower floor to enable him to access the church at all, assisted with a walking frame.¹⁴⁵⁰ Prince Charles wrote that each Christmas he continued to receive a letter from Williams who was ‘surrounded by books and increasingly immobile’, and who no longer wished to be visited as his life was coming to an end: ‘His essence may have evaporated, but his heartening and profoundly sympathetic insight into our humanity and into the relationship between God and Man – what he called “our identity with Life Universal, with God” will live on through the power and presence of his words and through the affectionate memories of his old undergraduates.’¹⁴⁵¹

¹⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 125.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Green, ‘Harry Williams CR: 1919-2006’.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Interview with Fr Philip Nichols, 27 September 2020.

¹⁴⁵¹ *Living Free*, vii.

On 30 January 2006, Harry A. Williams died aged 86. His death was peaceful.¹⁴⁵² On 6 February, a solemn Requiem Mass was celebrated at the Community Church at Mirfield, followed by cremation.¹⁴⁵³ The night before, his body lying in the open coffin was received into church, and put under the giant pall the Community uses when one of its own dies, ‘held up over a frame, and known inevitably, in community slang, as the Wendy House’.¹⁴⁵⁴ The funeral party included ‘some handsome toff boys’, ‘a scattering of smart ladies’ including Lady Runcie¹⁴⁵⁵ and the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire, and ‘someone representing the Prince of Wales’.¹⁴⁵⁶ The music included the hymn tune *Coe Fen*, named after a grazing meadow on the River Cam, and a glorious *Kontakion*, a hymn performed in the Orthodox and Eastern Catholic church tradition, sung as the body left the church.

Five years later, the former Prince of Wales was asked to write the preface to *Living Free*, where he remembered Williams as ‘a memorable figure amongst what seemed to be a veritable galaxy of extraordinarily talented and eccentric individuals’ who ‘proved to be a star; a man of intense humanity and warmth whose humour and originality created an aura of approachability’.¹⁴⁵⁷ He recalled ‘his courageous willingness to open up his inner soul and being and to speak from the heart about his own experience of the vicissitudes, complications and agonies of life’ which ‘struck a powerful and immediate chord’.¹⁴⁵⁸

¹⁴⁵² Interview with Fr Philip Nichols, 27 September 2020.

¹⁴⁵³ *The Yorkshire Post*, 4 February 2006, 4. Williams was one of the few brethren who had been cremated as, at that time, the capacity of the graveyard was limited; the graveyard has been extended since.

¹⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵⁵ Angela Rosalind Runcie (1932-2012), the widow of Robert Runcie.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Richard Coles, *Bringing in the Sheaves: Wheat and Chaff from My Years as a Priest* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2016), 79.

¹⁴⁵⁷ *Living Free*, v.

¹⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, vi.

XII. CONCLUSION

In the 1960s, Williams played a prominent part in the radical questioning of traditional Christian belief that emanated from the University of Cambridge. His teaching and preaching always sprang from his own personal experience rather than from received dogma and he gradually managed to establish a reputation as a modern, thoughtful, profound, yet witty theologian who attempted to reinterpret traditional doctrines without entirely stripping them of their content. Theology was too often merely presumed and then relinquished in favour of the description of his experience and awareness, so that analytical reason was for Williams always subservient to the mystery of faith. Although his argument was sometimes insufficiently disciplined, out of his thoughts emerges, for many readers, an immanent, active and dynamic God emerges, ever ready to enter our lives.

A polemicist against any attempts by the Church to domesticate and possess the truth of the gospel, or to substitute the observance of ritual for true Christian discipleship, Williams refused any attempts to present Christianity as a pre-packaged dose of ‘cheap grace’.¹⁴⁵⁹ His writings developed, however, the emphasis on the existential challenge of the gospel and the inner quest for God which can be identified already from his very first writings. Throughout his life, Williams remained first and foremost an astute diagnostician of the human condition, preaching the gospel on the basis of his personal painful and penetrating experience.

¹⁴⁵⁹ A term coined by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. by R. H. Fuller (London: SCM Press, 1948), 3.

Williams wrote with perception and was capable of expressing deep religious, psychological and spiritual insights using contemporary, simple language, often in a modern idiom, and with telling quotations, in texts full of lively allusions and epigrams. His texts remain a testimony to a stimulating and honest inner dialogue, although (or perhaps because) they convey more uncertainty than certainty about fundamental existential questions. His identity was spiritual and non-institutional, improvised, and always very personal rather than religious in the traditional sense, full of unswerving personal awareness and (eventual) self-acceptance. Gradually, Williams developed a constructive understanding of this experience which was convincing for many.

According to contemporary voices, what Williams produced was not an answer to any one of the uncertainties of modern life, but ‘a personal religion to help us live with them and even laugh at them; at any rate, to grow mature through the acknowledged experience of them’. He taught a faith ‘which sits lightly both to formal creeds and to their denials’ and suggesting ‘that any particular doctrine need not be a mere fiction, but cannot be more than a useful model’.¹⁴⁶⁰ He ‘was a superb preacher who never preached at you, a remarkable moralist who never moralised, offering subtle and brilliant explorations of the most perplexing moral problems’.¹⁴⁶¹

His acclaimed autobiography is not a photographic portrait, for there is a different underlying motivation. In describing his own life, Williams was not simply presenting objective facts and relationships but presenting a view of himself as well as an order of values that was his own. Nevertheless, an autobiography should not be judged merely upon the accuracy of the facts but also upon our experience of the distinctive quality of

¹⁴⁶⁰ Edwards, ‘Personal Faith’.

¹⁴⁶¹ Stephen Brooke, ‘H. A. Williams’, 21.

life presented. It should be viewed as the relationship of the dynamic identity of the individual parts where the author is both the author and the subject of the book.

Throughout his writings, Williams continued in his application of discernibly Christian terms to prosaic – and sometimes banal – contexts of everyday life: ‘Acceptance of the commonplace as the vehicle, the sacrament, of the eternal is at the very heart of Christianity.’¹⁴⁶² The religious provenance of a term was for him not a reason to dismiss it if he understood it differently: established terms such as ‘Resurrection’ or ‘Cross’ were allowed to function beyond parochial boundaries, encompassing new, secular manifestations. His focus was no longer the events of Calvary nor the afterlife, but rather the present potentiality of our lives, viewed through the lens of his humanity and carrying his unmistakable mark of personal experience. Nevertheless, his writings lack a developed Christology (his 1976 exposition in *Theology* remaining a notable exception) and Williams never sufficiently addressed the doctrine of atonement.

His writings can perhaps be characterized in two complementary ways: given that Williams draws substantially on Tillich, they can be seen as an example of ‘answering theology’, attempting to answer the questions implied in a particular situation with the answers implied in the eternal truth of the Gospel. Williams’s approach closely reflects that of Tillich whose theology ‘makes an analysis of the human situation out of which the existential questions arise, and it demonstrates that the symbols used in the Christian message are answers to these questions’.¹⁴⁶³ John Robinson, on the other hand, views Williams’s writings more broadly as an example of incarnational theology

¹⁴⁶² *Becoming What I Am*, 23.

¹⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 62.

based on relationships.¹⁴⁶⁴ When quoting from the work of Julian of Norwich, Robinson writes that this could be written ‘by a Tillich or a Jung or a Harry Williams in our day. Knowledge of God, self-awareness and integration of the shadow side are all facets of the same thing.’¹⁴⁶⁵

Similarly, using the narratives of religious conversion and deconversion, Williams’s life can, on one level, be interpreted as a deconversion – an inversion of traditional religious conversion – and a rejection of faith understood as a ‘pre-packaged religion’ and cumulating in his breakdown. This experience of disillusionment and rejection resulted in further spiritual quest and development. Williams continually subjected his faith and theology to revision, reinterpretation, and, finally, a renewal, finding faith in God indwelling one’s true self, the ‘real me’. In his study on religious deconversion, John Barbour writes that ‘every conversion is a deconversion, and every deconversion a conversion’¹⁴⁶⁶ and Williams’s life can be viewed as exemplifying this insight. His ‘turning from’ and ‘turning to’ are two alternative perspectives on the same process of personal metamorphosis, stressing both the rejected past of the old self and the convictions of the reborn self.¹⁴⁶⁷

Williams’s journey also fits into the scheme of deconversion as presented by Heinz Streib.¹⁴⁶⁸ In his 2014 study, Streib starts with the narrative of a *pursuit of autonomy*, characterized by a gradual process of stepping out from the previously taken-for-granted religious environment into which one was born or brought by one’s parents as

¹⁴⁶⁴ John Robinson, *The Roots of a Radical* (London: SCM Press), 1980, 55. Robinson puts Williams into this category together with the theology of the British-born Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Haughton (b. 1927).

¹⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 149.

¹⁴⁶⁶ J. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 2-3.

¹⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴⁶⁸ H. Streib, ‘Deconversion’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. by L. Rambo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271-96.

a child; this corresponds with Williams's reaction against the evangelical faith of his mother. The second narrative, *debarred from paradise*, reflects the disappointment of high expectations and abandonment of earlier hopes; in his brief encounter with Anglo-Catholicism, Williams failed to find fulfilment but instead found himself obsessed with sin, self-contempt and self-humiliation. The third narrative, *finding a new frame of reference*, involves searching for and finding new guidance. Williams discovered a new referential framework in psychoanalysis which he gradually made into the central tenet of his theology. Finally, the fourth narrative, *life-long quests—late revisions*, is described as leaving a religious environment due to its failure to meet one's spiritual needs and expectations. Williams left Cambridge at the time when he was a successful writer and sought-after speaker, to continue his never-ending quest; the instinctive protection granted by his detachment from organized worship, perhaps a kind of religious voyeurism, remained with him permanently: 'However sincerely I am, with one part of my being, joining in a religious service or talking religion with a conventionally pious group, with another part of my being I am a spectator'.¹⁴⁶⁹ Williams's journey thus included all of these elements: leaving the religious environment in which he was growing up, a period of a bitter disappointment with 'prefabricated religion', finding refuge in sex, a total breakdown and intensive psychotherapy resulting in disavowal and disaffiliation, and an ongoing quest for a new spirituality. The pain and bitterness resulting from the loss of his confidence in organized religion led in the end to comfort in the recognition that only when illusions are destroyed, a more authentic life be experienced. In this sense, his deconversion resulted in a deep internal re-conversion. At the end of his life, Williams arrived at a point when, without excessively contradicting traditional theological beliefs, he sought

¹⁴⁶⁹ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 86.

not to replace them but went beyond them, aided by the gift of his extraordinary imagination. His 'epistemology of unknowing' points at a very personal, yet credible way of encountering and experiencing God.

Williams was necessarily a man of the second half of the twentieth century. He saw the great potential of psychoanalysis as a means of exploring obstacles to spiritual growth. This interest in psychology and psychotherapy resulted from his experience of a mental and emotional breakdown which led to disintegrating of his old Self. The experience of healing, renewal and reconstitution that followed gradually led to a healthier acceptance his life experiences. The encounter with the Jungian school of psychoanalysis also helped him to master the transparent metaphor, a metaphor which is so harmless one can see through it and yet it reveals. Williams developed a theological interpretation of the ambivalence of human nature, seeing at its core inner conflicts and tensions providing deep, almost mystical insight into the interdependence of good and evil, which in the end led to spiritual growth and personal maturity. His reconciliatory treatment of tensions postulated a diagnosis of human polarity which went well beyond presenting therapy as a suitable cure for psychological and emotional disorders.

Thanks chiefly to Williams, psychology became, for a while, such a staple of the contemporary theological thought that Montefiore would reproach Robinson for ignoring it, believing then that 'the new Reformation, when it comes, will surely start from the Freudian revolution'.¹⁴⁷⁰ Nonetheless, psychoanalysis and theology kept developing; by ruling out spiritual reality as a component of the self, Freud had

¹⁴⁷⁰ H. Montefiore, 'Bolshie Bishop', *The Guardian*, 21 March 1965, 16.

measured the effectiveness of his therapeutic strategy purely by assisting his clients in the task of reaching ego maturity. Post-Freudian psychology, on the other hand, became more open to the reality of religious projection of the self as an authentic expression of the struggle within the ego for a transcendent object with which it can identify. Williams's writing on psychoanalysis shows that therapy can be enlisted in the service of religious practice, provided that it is not enlisted with the wrong intention: assuming that therapy has a theological pretension, we could possibly find this in its questioning authority understood as a God-given function of the human soul.

Although Williams was aware of the limitations of psychoanalysis, some readers gained the impression from Williams's writings that analysis was the only way of achieving inner harmony and finding God. Consequently, he was criticized for apparently replacing Christian spirituality and the doctrine of salvation with some form of inner-experience psychological religiosity and concepts of psychological health as if the effects of grace were superseded by personal growth. His writings, however, in particular the 1970 article in *The Times*, suggest that Williams never stopped believing that the Christian gospel proclaims that the new birth can be found in trust in the redemptive work of Christ, not in a psychological insight or increased emotional health. As Vande Kemp noted, while psychotherapy can have the effect of leading the person to awareness of his or her needs for self-transcendence, apart from an explicit proclamation of the gospel, 'it does not identify the person's ultimate need for a relationship with God nor confront the person with the need for confession or the acceptance of Christ's redemptive work.'¹⁴⁷¹

¹⁴⁷¹ H. Vande Kemp, 'Spirit and Soul in No-Man's Land: Reflections on Haule's "Care of Souls"', *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 11, 12 (June 1983), 119.

While Williams's thoughts on psychoanalysis, and his emphasis on the individual, are unable to provide any definitive answer to religious questions, they continue to offer valuable insights based on his painful personal experience. He may have never finished his personal project of the dismantling of the infantilizing, organized and institutionalized religion which found a remarkable resonance in the 1960s, his psychoanalytic deconstruction of the dysfunctional relationship of religion with idolatry is nevertheless largely transferrable and his exploration of the shared territory between theology and psychology retains its relevance.¹⁴⁷²

Williams's views were often ambiguous. Many of his readers may well have agreed with the final line of one of the letters his psychotherapist wrote to him: 'You have to remain a mystery to me.'¹⁴⁷³ For this reason, he was occasionally rightly criticized for the lack of the theological affirmation of the personal and historical Christ and for failing to account for his normative particularity. At times, he seemed to have replaced the doctrine of salvation with psychological health or, at least, he appeared to have equated these two terms. At other times, Williams came too close to equating the salvific transformation with a psychological process while not treating sufficiently the abiding negative sides of humanity unveiled by psychoanalysis. A superficial reading could even suggest that at times Williams abandoned Christianity completely and fell into the trap of making God in man's image. After all, he was the writer who agreed with Feuerbach that 'man abstracts and alienates from himself all that is best and strongest without him, and, projecting it upon the heavens, calls it God' and that Christians 'do that with regard to the figure they call the risen and ascended Jesus.'¹⁴⁷⁴

¹⁴⁷² Williams's 'theology of experience' continues e.g. in the writings of Mark Oakley (b. 1968), Anglican priest, author of *The Collage of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001).

¹⁴⁷³ Dr Christopher H. Scott, letter to Williams, 3 April 1975 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁷⁴ *Some Day I'll Find You*, 47.

Others have detected in Williams's writings a constant self-indulgent streak. As David Edwards summarily remarked, Williams could be misunderstood as a hippy guru preaching sensuality.¹⁴⁷⁵

Nonetheless, Williams's books provided practical help and guidance 'for those who are puzzled and dismayed by the apparent irrelevance of conventional statements of Christian belief and by their seeming inadequacy to show that the frustrations of pain and of inner conflict have a creative purpose'.¹⁴⁷⁶ Given his prevailing homosociality (which he seemed ready to break only in favour of women who were rich or otherwise especially prominent), neither his thinking nor his language were inclusive, yet he was, at least during his lifetime, also a guide for many a female reader. Elizabeth Cavendish was prophetic when she wrote to Williams that his writing 'will help and comfort thousands of doubters like myself who can never accept religion as put over by most'.¹⁴⁷⁷ Indeed his experience, painfully resulting from self-destruction and unhappiness, inspired many.

Williams's papers contain a number of testimonies to that. In a letter from 2003, for instance, a reader who came from a 'keen, conservative evangelical' background wrote to Williams that for eight years he was a member of a men's group facilitated by a psychotherapist who was also a priest: 'I am having to face up things in my own life which I find very, very difficult; and I wanted you to know for your own encouragement what a huge help your book [*The True Wilderness*] is being to me in looking at myself in an honest way'.¹⁴⁷⁸ Another reader, a vicar, confessed that he had had a nervous breakdown and spent eighteen months in depression and was currently in

¹⁴⁷⁵ Edwards, *Tradition and Truth*, 24.

¹⁴⁷⁶ W. G. Robinson, 'Reviews', *British Book News*, June 1976, 417.

¹⁴⁷⁷ Elizabeth Cavendish, letter to Williams, undated (Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁷⁸ R. B., letter to Williams, 12 April 2003 (Williams Papers).

long-term therapy. He admitted that he had shunned Williams's writings as 'unacceptably un-partisan' but the breakdown was a watershed moment:

As I read in *Some Day I'll Find You* I now know that unless one can be true to one's lived experience and go where reality leads, one can never really live, and worse, may be guilty of failing to allow others around you to live fully either. A bitterly hard lesson, but essential. You have helped me enormously, dear Father – dear Harry, if I may – and I will always be grateful.¹⁴⁷⁹

On a similar note, Bishop John Austin Baker¹⁴⁸⁰ recalled in a letter a conversation he had with Williams: 'You said "I have come to accept that I shall be never completely healed in this life." I want you to know that these words have been an immense encouragement to me personally, with my own unhealed areas, and also to some who come to me for spiritual direction and have needs to which they are applicable.'¹⁴⁸¹

Williams's correspondents were not just men. A female reader wrote a letter to Williams thanking him for his books which helped her to finally feel, at 51, like a grown-up woman: 'Thank you for being my companion along the way. ... I have learned how to love, myself and others, I have learned how to receive rather than merely accumulate, but mostly I have learned how to listen to the small still voice of my God.'¹⁴⁸²

Williams gave his books their power by not being abstract or pedantic. He persistently set his readers on a trail, inviting them to examine themselves. Another telling testimony came from someone who was 'a former student of the College at Mirfield, though a complete and utter failure as a Priest – twice. Nothing scandalous, just incapable of fulfilling the role with integrity. What your books are doing is freeing me

¹⁴⁷⁹ I. Y., letter to Williams, 17 February 2003 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁸⁰ John Austin Baker (1928-2014), Bishop of Salisbury (1982-1993).

¹⁴⁸¹ Bishop John Baker, letter to Williams, 25 August 2000 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁸² C. T., letter to Williams, 21 December 2000 (Williams Papers).

from institutional religion and giving me the courage to make my own pilgrimage.¹⁴⁸³

A reader from Australia who ‘had to come to terms with society’s response to the fact of [his] homosexuality’ wrote to thank Williams for his biography, ‘an offering born of generosity and kindness’.¹⁴⁸⁴ Similarly, one of Williams’s many obituaries acknowledged that while there must have been many homosexual priests over the centuries, few can have been as sensitive as Williams, and none was so eloquent, for ‘he distilled from his great suffering a spirit of realism, of compassion for fellow humans, and of awareness that God loved him and all the rest’.¹⁴⁸⁵

It is perhaps unfair to judge Williams by today’s understanding of sexuality and identity. Although his books demonstrate a strong involvement with the world, he was no gay rights activist, preferring to hide in the wings until the air was clear. Nevertheless – or perhaps, exactly for this reason – the background to Williams’s life remains familiar to many clergy whose own lives have been beset with the struggle for self-acceptance, realizing that while they are sexually different, they remain faithful believers in the Gospel, refusing to share the view of those who believe that Christianity and homosexuality cannot be reconciled.

When he heard Williams preach in 1976 at a wedding, Robin Baird-Smith noted that he ‘showed a profound understanding of the nature of marriage and Christian marriage such that most heterosexual priests would be incapable of. There is a lesson here for those contemporary Anglican bishops who wish to extirpate homosexual clergy from their dioceses.’¹⁴⁸⁶ For Baird-Smith, Williams was ‘one of the very few outstanding

¹⁴⁸³ C.W., letter to Williams, 13 June 2001(Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁸⁴ R.W., letter to Williams, 1 February 2005 (Williams Papers).

¹⁴⁸⁵ ‘H. A. Williams’, *Church Times*, 10 February 2006, 14.

¹⁴⁸⁶ *Living Free*, 166.

Anglican theologians of the post-war years', together with Michael Ramsey, Alan Ecclestone, W. H. Vanstone and Rowan Williams.¹⁴⁸⁷

Finally, we might ask: will his work last? Attempting to answer this question, Angela Tilby aptly noted our problem of living

in an age in which people appear to have no vocabulary for interiority, a time when selves are perceived as partial and fragmented, when as Don Cupitt would argue, all is surface, there is no depth. Do people still feel homesick for the divine, as Williams clearly did and does? Are they still capable of the spiritual seriousness which he proposes? If so, then his writings give a poignant and lasting expression to the existential loneliness of the human person, and show that loneliness might ultimately be assuaged within the mystery of God's sacrificial love.¹⁴⁸⁸

Williams's life and work are testimony to someone for whom his breakdown and years of psychoanalysis opened a new perspective on Christianity, reflecting a deep concern for the dynamism of Christian faith. There was much in Williams's life on which he remains silent, and much in himself and his circumstances of which he was ignorant. But these omissions do not invalidate his work, which reveals vividly and penetratingly the manner of understanding which arises from understanding oneself. Here is an author who is successful in making his readers feel that the story of his relationship to God is not the story of just one isolated aspect of his being, but that of his whole personality.

'If you ever hear or read him, you will feel that a funny thing is happening on the way to Heaven. Life.'¹⁴⁸⁹ These words summarize Harry Williams's life story: that God does not wait for us to be perfect, but takes us and uses us just as we are. Heaven is not

¹⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 167.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Angela Tilby, 'When Harry met Salvation', *Church Times*, 28 July 2000, 13.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Kenneth Robinson, 'Reviews', *The Listener*, 25 March 1976, 12.

to be found somewhere else, but is rather our earthly life seen for what it most truly and deeply is.

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