



Rowan Williams Rebounds

by Jonathan Aitken

THIS TIME LAST YEAR, shares in Archbishop Rowan Williams on the imaginary stock exchange of spiritual leadership were plunging with the same trajectory later experienced by Lehman Brothers in the real stock exchange. According to ecclesiastical bears in the summer of 2008, the Anglican Communion was about to break up over the issue [of gay bishops, the Lambeth Conference would be a disaster, and Williams was hastening the inevitable schism by maladroit pronouncements such as his controversial (although much misquoted) endorsement of some aspects of sharia law.

Fortunately, the measurements of Mammon are not applicable to archbishops of Canterbury. But if they were, the present incumbent of the throne of Augustine might now be given the Wall Street accolade of a “turnaround stock.” For the commentators who were disparaging Williams a few months ago have changed their tune.

“Dear Rowan, You are on a roll” began a recent encomium in the *Guardian*, citing the effects of his sermons and statements on the global economic crisis. The March issue of the *Atlantic* gave the archbishop a 7,000-word rave review, saying that “his distinctive theology and leadership style may offer the only way to open the Anglican church to gay people without breaking it apart.” These articles are but two manifestations of a groundswell of opinion inside and outside the communion. For whether grudgingly or admiringly, there is relieved acceptance that Williams has pulled his church from the brink of schism and

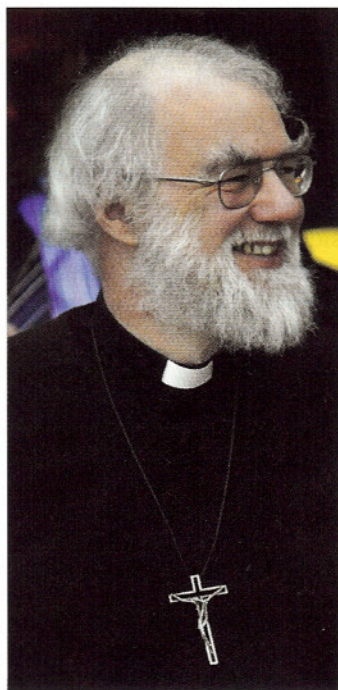
given it a new agenda of outward-looking spiritual priorities.

Sadly, some ultra-conservatives share neither the relief nor the acceptance, but that may not matter too much since for the time being they have managed to marginalize themselves. By boycotting the Lambeth Conference last July, the 200

absent bishops led by the hard-line Nigerian primate Peter Akinola created a vacuum. It was filled by not by Williams exerting authority (unlike the pope, the archbishop of Canterbury is merely an advisory *primus inter pares*) but by Williams offering guidance. It worked. The 650 bishops who did attend followed Williams’s lead away from divisive resolutions toward a “covenant of shared principles” and a new “pastoral forum” for resolving future crises.

The bottom line, to revert to Wall Street jargon, was that there was no meltdown of the 80 million strong Anglican Communion, as its Jeremiahs had been predicting. The moderate center held. There were no expulsions and no explosions at either end of the spectrum on the divisive issues that have caused such

tension between the American and African provinces. Most of the 140 bishops representing the liberal ECUSA (the Episcopal Church in the United States of America) sat quietly and listened with what was perhaps a new degree of sensitivity as their more conservative brother prelates from Asia and Africa explained what pain had been caused by the consecration of the openly gay Gene Robinson as bishop of New Hampshire.



Although this is not a controversy that will go away, Williams did succeed in creating an atmosphere of prayerful civility in which the opposing positions could be more thoughtfully reflected upon. "In some parts of the Communion homosexual relations are taboo, in others a human rights issue," was the conference's succinct summary of the impasse in its final communiqué. Yet an admitted impasse is a great deal better than the trading of Internet insults, which had previously seemed to be some bishops' preferred method of debate. So Williams deserves the credit for lowering the temperature and strengthening mutual understanding. That may not sound like great progress, but in the context of impending schism it certainly was.

Without alienating the moderate conservatives Williams pointed the church's compass toward a global Anglicanism in which Christ-centered diversity and quiet tolerance should become preferable to personalized division and noisy judgmentalism. The journey toward such a middle-way consensus may still have its detractors and deserters. But as the pilot who weathered the storm and kept his ship tighter and more united among those who stayed onboard, Williams did well. He was justified in saying at the conclusion of the conference, "It was all that I had prayed for—and more."

IN THE YEAR SINCE LAMBETH, Rowan Williams has deftly moved Anglicanism's priorities away from its introverted concerns about the sexual orientation of bishops toward more important global issues. Archbishops of Canterbury deliver prestigious lectures rather than papal encyclicals, but Williams carries the intellectual clout to get his words well reported and heeded across the 38 international provinces of his church. One outstanding example was his Ebor Lecture in March, "Renewing the Face of the Earth: Human Responsibility and the Environment." Starting from biblical texts such as Leviticus 25:23 ("The land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants"), Williams called for "a radical change of heart, a conversion" on our environmental stewardship of God's earth in order to avoid "the ultimate tragedy that a material world capable of being a manifestation in human hands of divine love is left to itself as humanity is gradually choked, drowned or starved by its own stupidity."

No paraphrase or quoted excerpt can do justice to Williams's best speeches because they have to be studied in their magisterial totality. Yet they

are increasingly being recognized as a new agenda for spiritual action. This is because in the heart of Williams's cerebral complexity there usually lurks the ambush of an unexpected thought or call. He has developed the skill of waking up his religious listeners, jolting the politicians, and providing secular journalists with a good story.

"We need spirituality, not a spending spree," was the *London Times's* headline on the archbishop's Easter sermon. Ostensibly this was a reminder of the virtues of monastic life, which has been the focus of renewed interest in Europe thanks to several recent television series. "Accepting voluntary limitation to your acquisitiveness, your sexual appetite, your freedom of choice doesn't look so absurd after all

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as a path to some sort of stability and mutual care," said Williams. His espousal of monastic values was interpreted by the media as setting the church on a collision course with the G-20's and Barack Obama's preferred solutions of massive bailouts to stimulate credit and consumerism. This is a clash of spiritual against political judgment that deserves to be applauded.

In this context, it is appropriate to remember that Anglicanism was founded on the protests that became Protestantism. Williams is right to be protesting and distancing his church from the secular politicians who are so quick to spend taxpayers' billions on bailouts and credit expansion yet so slow to protect the environment. Far from being a voice crying in the wilderness, Rowan Williams may be hitting his stride as the spiritual leader who has held his church together and given it new 21st-century priorities well rooted in the ever-relevant and revolutionary teachings of Jesus Christ. ☞

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