

## The Body's Grace

<http://blog.wouldbetheologian.com/2008/07/bodys-grace.html>

I ran across an essay today by Rowan Williams, the present Archbishop of Canterbury and head of the worldwide Anglican and Episcopalian communion, entitled *The Body's Grace* (2002). It's full of well-written and witty reflections on human sexuality, and I won't deny that there's some real wisdom in it. But on the whole, Williams' essay saddened me. In this and subsequent posts, I'll explore why. In *The Body's Grace*, Williams argues for an ethic of mutual pleasure, risk, tragedy and comedy in sexual relationships. Although he doesn't quite come out and say it, it's clearly on his radar to provide a sort of theological framework for the Church's acceptance of sexual practices that have hitherto been frowned upon, i.e., premarital sex and homosexuality.

He acknowledges that nearly all sexuality is tinged with tragedy, but he argues that even in the midst of tragedy, we may find grace in unusual or surprising ways. With our sexuality, we discover that our bodies can be the cause of happiness to ourselves and to others. "Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted." This "body's grace" can only be found in the mutuality of risk and relationship.

My desire, if it is going to be sustained and developed, must itself be perceived; and, if it is to develop as it naturally tends to, it must be perceived as desirable by the other - that is my arousal and desire must become the cause of someone else's desire. . . So for my desire to persist and have some hope of fulfilment, it must be exposed to the risks of being seen by its object.

Although the overriding purpose of sexuality is mutual pleasure and desire, Williams believes that mutual risk and exposure are fundamental aspects of any appropriate sexual practice, even if they are pleasurable. Following the philosopher Thomas Nagel, Williams is willing to retain the idea of "sexual perversion" in connection to such practices as rape, pedophilia or bestiality, not because they transgress a creational norm, but because they are asymmetrical rather than mutual. "They leave one agent in effective control of the situation - one agent, that is, who doesn't have to wait upon the desire of the other." He very nearly draws the conclusion that conjugal sexuality without pleasure may deserve the same appellation: "If this suggests that, in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is a 'perversion' - well, that is a perfectly serious suggestion..." Similarly, masturbation, because it takes place in solitude, is less than ideal: "Solitary sexual activity works at the level of release of tension and a particular localised physical pleasure; but insofar as it has nothing much to do with being perceived from beyond myself in a way that changes my self-awareness, it isn't of much interest for a discussion of sexuality as process and relation, and says little about grace."

Williams' account of mutual faithfulness is similarly based on this idea of mutual risk and pleasure:

It should be clear that the discovery of joy means something rather more than the bare facts of sexual intimacy. I can only fully discover the body's grace in taking time, the time needed for a mutual recognition that my partner and I are not simply passive instruments to each other. Such things are learned in the fabric of a whole relation of converse and cooperation; yet of course the more time taken the longer a kind of risk endures.

In other words, to be truly open to the other, you must be open to a process of discovery that takes place over time, presumably, over the course of a lifetime. Marriage, a public commitment and a public blessing, gives a special life to this process, and enlarges the space and time in which a couple can explore the meaning of their relationship.

But conventional heterosexual marriage, Williams insists, is not the only way to find "the body's grace". "The realities of our experience in looking for such possibilities suggest pretty clearly that an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of sin and nothing else is unreal and silly." "The worst thing we can do with the notion of sexual fidelity,

though, is to 'legalise' it in such a way that it stands quite apart from the ventures and dangers of growth and is simply a public bond, enforceable by religious sanctions." "People do discover . . . a grace in encounters fraught with transitoriness and without much 'promising' (in any sense)." Furthermore, marriage itself need not be permanent if the partners have grown apart. "If this blessing becomes a curse or an empty formality, it is both wicked and useless to hold up the sexuality of the canonically married heterosexual as absolute, exclusive and ideal."

Apart from any awareness of revelation or of the Christian tradition generally, I have to say, I find Williams' account compelling. There is a great deal to be said for a sexual ethic based on mutual openness and risk, which is aware of the inevitably tragic dimension of human sexuality, and which acknowledges that true openness and risk can only take place within a long-term, committed relationship. This ethic has many points of contact with our culture, though it also offers at least a gentle element of critique. In this sense, Williams' essay reminds me of Ecclesiastes, which speaks from within a Wisdom tradition where God is in heaven and we are on earth, where God exists but does not speak. If we are bound to see our way forward on our own, bound by neither covenant nor revelation, we could do worse than to realize that "it matters to locate sexual union in a context that gives it both time and space, that allows it not to be everything."

It would be wrong to imply that Williams' essay is entirely secular. He doesn't precisely *ground* human sexuality in the divine life, but he certainly draws the connection. Human sexuality, he says, is a picture of God's desire for us:

The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, as if we were God, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this; so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.

The purpose of the Church, similarly, is so that we may be caught up into that element of the divine life: The life of the Christian community has as its rationale - if not invariably its practical reality - the task of teaching us this: so ordering our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.

And if we are members of the Church, learning about God's love for us and practicing love for each other, we are well positioned to experience everything that sexuality has to teach us about ourselves and our partner.

To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned or are learning about being the object of the causeless loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's child.

So Williams takes God into account, or at least, certain aspects of the divine economy. However, like Ecclesiastes itself, Williams neglects several critical aspects of our shared tradition, and this neglect, in my opinion, undermines his attempt to narrate a specifically Christian ethic of sexuality. Specifically, three different themes which figure prominently both in the Bible and in the long history of Christian ethical reflection are virtually missing from his account: (1) sin and judgment; (2) covenant faithfulness; (3) God's self-revelation in Scripture. I'll cover these with separate posts over the next several days.

## **The Body's Grace Critique #1: Sin and Judgment**

In general, Williams appears to be operating with an extremely weak doctrine of sin, and an even weaker doctrine of judgment. It is perhaps symptomatic of Williams' approach that the word "sin" appears only once in his essay, in the context of denying that the term should be applied to uncommitted sexual partnerships. He prefers the word "tragic", which he occasionally juxtaposes with "comic": "Nothing will stop sex being **tragic** and comic." "Paul Scott's Raj Quartet is full of poignant and very deep analyses of the **tragedies** of sexuality." "What seems to be the prophet's own discovery of a kind of sexual **tragedy** enables a startling and poignant reimagining of what it means for God to be united, not with a land alone, but with a people, themselves vulnerable and changeable."

Williams is aware that our sexuality is ambiguous, and is not an unmixed force for good. We may encounter "difficulties", he admits, if we pursue sexuality outside of traditional moral frameworks, but he seems to see these difficulties as ultimately positive. If we follow "conventional (heterosexual) morality", he writes, "the question of human meaning is not raised, we are not helped to see what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another, to enter the body's grace, because all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other." If we refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Williams seems to be saying, we shall never partake of that godlike knowledge of the consequences that follow. He very nearly says, "Let us sin so that grace may increase."

Missing entirely from Rowan Williams' account is a sense that in our sexuality we might ever be doing something *wrong*, worthy of guilt, something that grieves God and which should grieve us, something of which we must surely repent. The Christian account of life in the Spirit is a three-fold dialect of sin, repentance and restoration. Williams' essay very nearly ignores the first two elements of this dialectic, or minimizes them to an astonishing degree. I'm not entirely sure why this is missing from Williams, but it should be clear to anyone who has any inkling of Jesus' message that this is *not* missing there. The opening words of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of Matthew are, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." In the famous story of the woman taken in adultery (which I accept as canonical, whatever textual issues remain), Jesus' words to her are, "Go and sin no more." Jesus' first words to the paralyzed man in Matthew 9 are not "Rise and walk," but rather, "Be comforted, child, your sins are forgiven." And frankly, the full strength of all three elements is not missing from anybody who has ever committed a sexual sin and has found the grace to repent and receive forgiveness.

Williams' neglect of the moral dimension of sexuality might be understandable if he is attempting to speak from within a purely contemporary framework, but it makes less sense if he is trying to speak from within (or to) the larger Christian community. The Christian message is frankly incomprehensible without a strong doctrine of sin, without a profound and troubling awareness of the frequency and the degree to which each of us transgresses against the divine will. I agree that sin and judgment *can* be overplayed (a famous sermon by Jonathan Edwards comes to mind), but this is hardly a pressing problem in Western culture today. Certainly the Bible uses these categories incessantly, and not just in the Old Testament; and it uses them frequently with reference to human sexuality. I could list the passages in question, but I have to imagine that anybody who's bothered to read this far knows them already. And of course, virtually the whole of the Christian tradition, in line with nearly every culture that has ever existed until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has held the same perspective.

Now, *of course* human sexuality is not inherently sinful, and sexual sins are not worse than other kinds of sins. In fact, Christian reflection going back at least to the Middle Ages (and perhaps earlier – I'm no Patristic scholar) has generally insisted that sexual sins are the least of all sins. There's a reason why Dante put the sexually immoral on the outer ring of Hell, reserving the inner circles and correspondingly creative punishments for, say, the sins of popes and kings. But the opinion that sex outside of heterosexual marriage is sinful has been "*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ad omnibus*" within the Church: it has been believed in all places, at all times, and by all. To the extent that this understanding of sin is missing from Williams' account, whatever his title and job description might be, he shouldn't be understood as speaking from within or for the Church.

## **The Body's Grace Critique #2: Covenant Faithfulness**

It's clearly a stretch for our current culture to understand why Christian thinkers have (until recently) held that certain pleasurable acts between consenting adults are nevertheless wrong. Western society has grown intensely individualistic in theory even as technology has rendered us intensely communitarian in practice. A contemporary secular understanding of sexuality will therefore be big on individualism, and any individualistic account of sexuality in the age of birth control will necessarily be weak on "sin". Sex outside of marriage no longer automatically implies pregnancy, danger, expense, shame and poverty. (I should note, though, that even when birth control is involved the risk of unplanned pregnancy is hardly negligible: it's about the same as your chances of dying when climbing Mt. Everest. The impact isn't quite the same, but as

anyone can tell you who has ever raised a baby, or had an abortion, or placed a child for adoption, it's substantial.)

Perhaps the fact that sex is less objectively risky these days should change how we view it; but perhaps not. Even under a purely secular thesis of evolutionary psychology, we're wired to think of sex as producing children, i.e., whether we realize it or not, having sex with someone reserves a place for them in our brain that says, "This person is important: I may be seeing their genes in my children each day for the next 18 years."

But of course, in Rowan Williams' essay "The Body's Grace", he's trying to speak, not as an unencumbered, post-modern, secular self, but as a Christian, indeed, an Archbishop, and from within a long Christian tradition of reflection on marriage and sexuality. It's therefore odd that Williams' account of marriage is entirely individualistic, and in fact seems to owe more to Locke's idea of a "social contract" (with a few psychological glosses) than to any Biblical framework. Williams does think that long-term commitment is important, but his explanation as to why this is so ends where one partner's body connects to the other. At least in this essay, for Williams the only parties concerned in a given marriage are the two individuals. This is the only explanation he gives for why two partners should remain faithful to each other:

I can only fully discover the body's grace in taking time, the time needed for a mutual recognition that my partner and I are not simply passive instruments to each other. Such things are learned in the fabric of a whole relation of converse and cooperation; yet of course the more time taken the longer a kind of risk endures. There is more to expose, and a sustaining of the will to let oneself be formed by the perceptions of another. Properly understood, sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another.

It's somewhat strange that Williams neglects the communal dimension of marriage. A stable family (and therefore marriage, and therefore sex) is a community affair, and marriage is thus an institution in which society has a quite legitimate and vested interest. But more to my point, I think it's especially odd that his essay neglects "covenant faithfulness", a Biblical theme which features prominently in Christian accounts of marriage throughout history.

God's people have consistently understood their relationship to God through the lens of "covenant". This tradition goes back to the story of Noah, reaches through Abraham, Sinai, and finally to the "new covenant in my blood". This "new covenant" was predicted by Jeremiah, instituted at the Last Supper and on the cross, and is formally re-enacted each Sunday through the Eucharist in churches around the world.

In addition, this covenant between God and his people is understood through the lens of marriage, the covenant between a man and his wife. There are many passages where this image comes to the fore, but nowhere is it more profoundly expressed than in the book of Hosea:

When the LORD began to speak through Hosea, the LORD said to him, "Go, take to yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness, because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the LORD." (Hosea 1:2)

In the New Testament, the relationship is reversed: not only is light shed on the divine covenant through the human covenant of marriage, but new light is shed on the nature of marriage by observing God's covenant with us.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to

love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body. "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband. (Ephesians 5:22-33)

Covenant seems to be an example of the *analogia entis*, of the enlightening similarities which exist between God and His creation. We begin to understand the faithfulness which exists in God's own nature as we observe His faithfulness to His people through history, but also as we experience the faithfulness of one spouse to another in marriage.

Christian thinkers have universally understood marriage in this way, as a human covenant of divine origin, which is thus a suitable image of the covenantal relationship between God and His people. They have differed as to whether it is a sacrament or merely a divine institution, but none have sought to disagree with Paul's assessment that it is a mystery and a symbol of Christ's love for the Church.

If the husband die, with whom a true marriage was made, a true marriage is now possible by a connection which would before have been adultery. Thus between the conjugal pair, as long as they live, the nuptial bond has a permanent obligation, and can be cancelled neither by separation nor by union with another. But this permanence avails, in such cases, only for injury from the sin, not for a bond of the covenant. In like manner the soul of an apostate, which renounces as it were its marriage union with Christ, does not, even though it has cast its faith away, lose the sacrament of its faith, which it received in the laver of regeneration. (Augustine, On Marriage and Concupiscence)

Matrimony is instituted both as an office of nature and as a sacrament of the Church. As an office of nature it is directed by two things, like every other virtuous act. One of these is required on the part of the agent and is the intention of the due end, and thus the "offspring" is accounted a good of matrimony; the other is required on the part of the act, which is good generically through being about a due matter; and thus we have "faith," whereby a man has intercourse with his wife and with no other woman. Besides this it has a certain goodness as a sacrament, and this is signified by the very word "sacrament." (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica)

The third incomparable grace of faith is this, that it unites the soul to Christ, as the wife to the husband; by which mystery, as the Apostle teaches, Christ and the soul are made one flesh. Now if they are one flesh, and if a true marriage—nay, by far the most perfect of all marriages—is accomplished between them (for human marriages are but feeble types of this one great marriage), then it follows that all they have becomes theirs in common, as well good things as evil things; so that whatsoever Christ possesses, that the believing soul may take to itself and boast of as its own, and whatever belongs to the soul, that Christ claims as his. (Luther, First Principles of the Reformation)

But in order to press the matter more on the priests, he calls their attention to the fact that God is the founder of marriage. Testified has Jehovah, he says, between thee and thy wife. He intimates in these words, that when a marriage takes place between a man and a woman, God presides and requires a mutual pledge from both. Hence Solomon, in Proverbs 2:17, calls marriage the covenant of God, for it is superior to all human contracts. (Calvin, Commentary on Malachi)

It is the divine intention that persons entering the marriage covenant become inseparably united, thus allowing for no dissolution save that caused by the death of either husband or wife. (Westminster Confession of Faith)

In this covenant of grace, we may see the cream of God's love, and the working of his bowels to sinners. This is a marriage covenant. "I am married to you, saith the Lord." (Thomas Watson, Body of Divinity)

In addition to marriage, the Bible also provides various resources for thinking more specifically about sex. Its approach is surprisingly multifaceted, much more so than many modern thinkers. Sex is for procreation

(Genesis 2:28), for pleasure (1 Corinthians 7:5, the entire Song of Solomon), and for comfort (Genesis 24:67; 2 Samuel 12:24). But primarily, sex is explained as the sign and seal of the marriage covenant, and in this way, sexual fidelity is a symbol or image of God's covenantal faithfulness to us.

Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!

For the wedding of the Lamb has come,

and his bride has made herself ready.

Fine linen, bright and clean,

was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.)

**(Revelation 20:6-8)**

No longer will they call you Deserted,

or name your land Desolate.

But you will be called Hephzibah,

and your land Beulah;

for the LORD will take delight in you,

and your land will be married.

As a young man marries a maiden,

so will your sons marry you;

as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,

so will your God rejoice over you.

**(Isaiah 62:4-5)**

For this reason, sex outside of marriage, especially adultery, is identified directly as faithlessness to God.

During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it.

**(Jeremiah 3:6)**

The adultery of which Jeremiah speaks is both literal and figurative: the inhabitants of Israel and Judah were having sex with sacred prostitutes and thus were unfaithful to their spouses, and because they were doing this in disobedience to God's command, and were worshiping other gods, the same act showed their unfaithfulness to God. The same identification of faithlessness to divine and human spouses is made in Ezekiel:

The LORD said to me: "Son of man, will you judge Oholah and Oholibah? Then confront them with their detestable practices, for they have committed adultery and blood is on their hands. They committed adultery with their idols; they even sacrificed their children, whom they bore to me, as food for them. They have also done this to me: At that same time they defiled my sanctuary and desecrated my Sabbaths. On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house. **(Ezekiel 23:36-39)**

Or as Paul puts it in **1 Corinthians 6:15-20**:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy

Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

The understanding which lies under all these passages is that sex is the sign and seal of the covenant of marriage, and that sex with anyone besides your spouse is a violation not only of your spouse's trust, but of God's. As the writer of Hebrews says:

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. (**Hebrews 13:4**)

Paul is very clear on this in **1 Thessalonians 4:3-8**:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

The key is to note that sexual immorality is a wrong against one's brother, because it takes advantage of him (or her). Presumably part of the reason is because of the risk of unwanted pregnancy, but also because it's a violation of the marriage covenant (even if you're not yet married, it wrongs your future spouse); and in so violating the covenant with our partner, we violate our covenant with our God.

Anyone who thinks of marriage as a covenant can understand sex as the sign and seal of the marriage covenant, though of course, only Christians can understand it as a symbol or sacrament of the divine love of Christ for His Church. However, it seems that anyone who *is* a Christian should give pretty serious consideration to this particular understanding of sexuality. Certainly the New Testament teaches us that "sexual immorality" (typically πορνεία in Greek) is a serious sin, and the understanding of sexual fidelity as a symbol of divine fidelity helps to explain why its writers are so insistent on this point.

In other words, it's disappointing that Rowan Williams ignores this lengthy and venerable line of Christian thought on the relationship of sex to marriage and, indeed, to God. I wish I had a better explanation for this neglect than that if he had done otherwise, it would have shown the main point of his essay in rather a dubious light.

### **The Body's Grace Critique #3: God's Self-Revelation**

The Judeo-Christian tradition has (nearly) always found it wise to include the book of Ecclesiastes in their canon, but there's a certain irony in its presence. Ecclesiastes is located in a Book which claims to be the very word of God; and the community which helped Ecclesiastes into the canon did so on the premise that Ecclesiastes was itself a divine word. But Ecclesiastes starts from the perspective that God does not speak to men. "God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few," is a typical observation. Missing from Ecclesiastes is any understanding of revelation, covenant, or divine action within history: in other words, nearly the whole of the rest of Scripture. You can argue about the wisdom of including such an irreligious writing in such a religious Book, but whether you think that was a good idea or bad, you can't dispute the fact that Ecclesiastes' perspective is unique within the canon. With very few exceptions, the rest of the Bible proceeds from the idea that God has uniquely revealed Himself to humanity, starting with an obscure desert tribe descended from "a wandering Aramean". The Bible tells the story of how God extended His revelation through the writings of that tribe as it became a nation, and finally, uniquely, fully, how God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, "the image of the invisible God." Furthermore, the Bible witnesses to a series of covenants that God made, on His own initiative, with the people of our world. This revelation, and these covenants, were not universal, abstract and philosophical, but specific, concrete and historical.

The most serious critique of Rowan Williams' essay *The Body's Grace* is that it privileges Ecclesiastes over the rest of the canon, and over the rest of the Christian tradition. I don't mean that he references Ecclesiastes extensively (or at all), but rather, that his perspective in this essay reflects the Preacher's emphasis on experience and the same exclusion of revelation. Williams' defense of homosexuality and extramarital sex makes some sense if you don't believe that God has spoken in any specific or significant way through Scripture. He says repeatedly that we must deal with "the realities of our experience" and must "[recognize] the facts of a lot of people's experience", and it would be hard to deny this. But as Christians, we must also reflect on what Christians of all ages have called the Word of God: certainly we have no choice but to understand Scripture in light of our experience, but we must also take care to interpret our experience in light of Scripture. If Williams claims to speak as a representative of the Church, it's disturbing to see the carelessness with which he treats the very revelation of God on which the Church claims to be founded.

Here's an example of what I mean. This essay, which is well-crafted and clearly comes from Williams' heart, contains the reflections on human sexuality of an Archbishop, reputed to be one of today's premier theologians. This is an issue which is controversial to the world at large, and is threatening to rend his own flock in two. And in this essay, Williams discusses a play by Shakespeare at some length, a series of novels by Paul Scott at some greater length, and the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel quite extensively; but only very briefly, at the tail-end of his essay, does he engage with Scripture, and then only with a few exceedingly general passages that, after some substantial wrangling, could vaguely support his point. He ignores the numerous, specific, and embarrassingly unambiguous passages which point in exactly the opposite direction. It's almost as if Williams doesn't believe that Scripture is of any particular relevance to a Christian's thinking on this very personal, intimate and complex issue.

Now, I'll grant that it's not always clear how to use Scripture. Indeed, it's become increasingly clear to me that the primary challenge facing the Church today is to arrive at a common understanding of how Biblical authority functions in a contemporary context. The Reformation consensus on the nature and use of Scripture has been largely discarded (and perhaps discredited), at least in academic circles and mainline denominations, and no similar consensus has arisen to take its place. Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, by and large, are still trying to use the older models, but it's difficult to maintain both inerrancy and engagement with the larger culture when there's so much academic and cultural pressure against inerrancy (not to mention good arguments). But once you discard inerrancy, it's difficult to stick with *sola scriptura*. In my experience, folks tend to end up influenced more by the culture than by Scripture and tradition, or they're forced into a sort of Roman Catholic / Orthodox understanding of Scriptural authority, heavily supplemented by tradition. This is a widely acknowledged problem, and there are a variety of creative proposals being made these days. Of course, these proposals all start with the necessity of engaging the text in some fashion, and Williams' essay makes only a feeble attempt at doing so.

I'm reluctantly led to the conclusion that Williams believes the substantial guidance Scripture gives us on our sexuality is of little accuracy and less relevance. God's revelation figures into his theology of sexuality primarily as a gloss, and it does not fundamentally touch any point in his argument.

In my first post on Williams' essay, I said that my primary reaction was sadness, and this realization is why. I confess that this is the only piece by Rowan Williams that I've read, and it may not be indicative of the thrust of his work more generally. I understand from other folks that he's actually a competent and influential theologian, so hopefully this essay is inconsistent with the rest of what he's up to theologically. But to the extent this essay reflects his larger methodology, I worry that Williams is removing himself from any real connection to the great traditions of Christianity. That would be a sad thing for the Anglican communion, as well as for the Church universal. Ecclesiastes is a great book and a tremendous work of art. There was a time it kept me a Christian when nothing else would. Maybe it even makes sense to start your theology there. But it would be a barren and incomplete theology that went no further.