

## The Unfamiliar Lord: A Meditation on Four Christ Poems by Rowan Williams

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*With the four poems discussed in this essay, Rowan Williams brings us deep into a land of both likeness and unlikeness. These thoroughly incarnational poems are not besotted with the baby Jesus, but rather turn our attention to ourselves as incarnated beings, as incarnations of the incarnation. What trepidations does the incarnation bring with it? What responsibilities does it ask of us, require of us? With beauty of language and intrepidity of speech, Williams has put into verse profound theological, soteriological, and anthropological considerations. By doing so, he considerably widens our normal theological pathway into a sturdy trail (though not a paved avenue). Williams invites us to walk with him, poetry's walking stick in hand, as we together explore the vast, known, and mysterious beauties of our incarnated earth, our incarnated Lord familiar and unfamiliar, our incarnated lives.*

*Split the wood  
and I am there, says the unfamiliar  
Lord. . . .*

(Rowan Williams, "Door")

### Introduction

Amid numerous books and articles on theology and history and pastoral spiritual guidance, Rowan Williams has published four books

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of poetry: *After Silent Centuries*,<sup>1</sup> *Remembering Jerusalem*,<sup>2</sup> *The Poems of Rowan Williams*,<sup>3</sup> and *The Other Mountain*.<sup>4</sup> Here I wish to focus on four poems that offer a more complete understanding of Williams as a modern spiritual, theological, and ecclesiastical guide, and of the *vade mecum* this explorer offers us. These four poems present us with an often unfamiliar Lord who, when read, understood, and emulated, can help us explore new territories in our faith. We see first the Lord who is always liminal (“Door”); this liminality leads to self-emptying as incarnated life (“Our Lady of Vladimir”) and another, new way of seeing (“Advent Calendar”). Finally, such insight and sight can lead to sacred opposition to the principalities and powers that resist the gospel and thwart God’s kingdom (“Easter Eve: Sepulchre”).

I. “Door”: *The Lord is Always Liminal*

1       A book falling open, the sliced wood  
           peels apart, jolting for a moment  
           over the clenched swollen muscle:  
           so that, as the leaves fall flat  
 5       side by side, what we read is the two  
           ragged eyes each side of a mirror,  
           where the wrinkles stream off sideways,  
           trail down the cheeks, awash with tears,  
           mucus, mascara. Split the wood  
 10       and I am there, says the unfamiliar  
           Lord, there where the book opens  
           with the leaves nailed to the wall  
           and the silent knot resolved by surgery  
           into a mask gaping and staring, reading  
 15       and being read. Split the wood; jolt  
           loose the cramp, the tumour, let the makeup run,  
           the sap drain, the door swing in the draught.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *After Silent Centuries* (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, *Remembering Jerusalem* (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Oxford: Perpetua Press, 2002; Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 2014). This volume was originally published as a collection of the first two volumes; the 2014 edition adds several new poems.

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Other Mountain* (Manchester: Carcanet Press Ltd., 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Williams, “Door,” in *The Other Mountain*, 31.

Let us now praise non-canonical books—and feelings, and thoughts. Canonicity can open a universe, but it can also throttle. You could well ask why an Archbishop of Canterbury, present or former, would write a poem inspired—inspired—by the *Gospel of Thomas*. This Gospel lies outside our ecclesiastical *agora*; its non-canonical title has the shape of a discarded *ostrakon*, a potsherd, with “Thomas” condemned, his name scratched on it. Ostracized from one point of view but, if you circle around it, then sit quietly with it in reflective study, holding it in your hand like prayer beads, liminal.<sup>6</sup>

Doorways, familiar or unfamiliar, are always liminal; they can be as quotidian as an entrance to a Target or Walmart or as uncertain (to an outsider) as the covering into a Native American sweat lodge. Each side of the doorway or flap entemples a reality. But the two realities ultimately instantiate and bear witness to a single truth: the sacred, if only we can see it, and enact it. As in liturgies taking place in a temple, church, or mosque, and in prayer, many lines, or at least words, of “Door” are a call and response, as when a paired line of a psalm reiterates, reinforces, or radically alters the meaning of the line before it. “Door” for this reader is more like a *limen* into a sweat lodge; its initial verses have the reader with his or her hand ready to pull the flap aside. The poem shows us the participant simultaneously outside and inside, as in the well-known icon *Christ of Maryknoll* by Robert Lentz, O.F.M.<sup>7</sup> When Campesino or Immigrant Jesus, his hands wounded by nails, cautiously lifts the line of barbed-wire fencing, is he looking outside, captive? Or is he outside, resurrected, seeking to get inside to harrow our modern, often institutional hells and set the captives free?

A first reading of “Door” has the reader standing outside, not knowing quite what to think. Unfamiliar with Native American spirituality or liturgies, in a world just as alien as the *Zeitgeist* of the *Gospel of Thomas*, such a person seeking inquiry opens the entrance, not knowing what to expect. Thus, during the first nine lines (1–9a) the reader—who is spiritually seeking—is standing outside, desirous yet hesitant; during the second half of the poem (9b–17) the reader

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<sup>6</sup> The meanings of the Latin *limen* for this essay are “a cross-piece, threshold, head-piece, lintel, sill: *primo limine*, at the outer threshold . . . A door, entrance . . . A house, dwelling, abode . . . a beginning.” Charlton T. Lewis, *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*; [www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.060%3Aentry%3Dlimen](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.04.060%3Aentry%3Dlimen).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://robertlentz.com/featured-icons-christ-of-maryknoll/>.

has crossed the threshold and is absorbing and learning from the rituals within. Williams accomplishes this simultaneity by pairing key words: book; open; sliced or split wood; jolting; clenched swollen muscle or cramp. The first half of the poem is mystery; the second half, answer—at least provisional answer. All poems, like all literature, including the Gospels, are ultimately provisional. Or at least, and best, liminal. The original ending of Mark's Gospel has thus long spoken powerfully to me: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). Poems, like ourselves, like the cells of our body, like the Christ of faith and history, are constantly remaking themselves. Williams has recently and forcefully emphasized that "Augustine's distinctiveness is the refusal to present a narrative that in any sense claims clarity or finality." In the *Confessions*, urges Williams, "the knowledge of the truth is always a knowledge of our incompleteness." Even more assertive: "Central to the whole enterprise of the *Confessions*" is "the repudiation of the 'finished self.'"<sup>8</sup> Andrew Goddard highlights Williams's "immersion in the apophatic tradition" that "emphasizes the limits and failings of all of our attempts to speak of God and, in Rowan's words, 'says you will never get it wrapped up, you will never have it completely sorted.'"<sup>9</sup>

Williams's poem "Augustine" reinforces and even deepens these prose understandings.<sup>10</sup> As in the poems below, in "Augustine" an unknown speaker offers imperative after imperative ("take," six times). But "shadow," which occurs three times, is the implicit imperative of the poem, substantive made imperatival: "the midnight dust under the window / paints me my shadow, light and cold"; "Take up / your shadow, read me"; "this shadow / is my shape for you." The poem ends with a question. Denying finality, it betokens incompleteness:

and when  
the hot dust scalds your eyes to tears,  
who is it weeps with you to soak  
your dust to speaking clay?

<sup>8</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 3, 8, and 13.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Goddard, *Rowan Williams: His Legacy* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2013), 21.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, "Augustine," in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 48–49.

And yet unfinishedness also summons; it invites and extends to us opportunity, as Augustine offers “movement into the very heart of mystery”:

Augustine never retreats from the conviction that we are more than physical and time-bound, but develops it in a highly distinctive way: the soul we discover, the inner self we come to recognize at the end of a process of rigorous intellectual and spiritual purification, is a self still opening out on to two unfathomably elusive horizons: the mystery of the infinite God and the constantly shifting and deceptive content of our human awareness of who we are and have been.<sup>11</sup>

A self still opening out. “Door,” with its epigraph from the *Gospel of Thomas*, begins with a book falling open; this book becomes “sliced wood” that “peels apart,” “jolting for a moment / over the clenched swollen muscle.” A finite verb works with two participles (“falling,” “jolting”) that can act as gerundives, verbal adjectives that note the “obligation, necessity, or worthiness of the action to be done.”<sup>12</sup> These words are the threshold of “Door,” the sweat lodge. The verbs at the end of the poem—“opens,” “leaves,” “split,” “jolt loose”—are not mere imitators or poetic bookends; they act as imperatives and instrumentals: the heated rocks, water, and steam of a sweat lodge prove re-assessors that cause the person on quest to look back and up in order to review “the real”—or what he or she presumes real in part 1—until reflecting more deeply in part 2 on what Jesus is telling us.

At the end of the poem the earlier “jolting” becomes “jolt” and “sliced” becomes “split”: “split” and “jolt loose” are now imperative(s); and English nicely, at least here, leaves ambiguous how many are being commanded. Let, run, drain, swing, though third person, are still imperatival; someone, singular or plural, has to do the letting. There is no passivity here. With these imperatives / this imperative, the reader becomes the person listening to Jesus teach the gospel, and the good news here comes by way of the *Gospel of Thomas*:

<sup>11</sup> Williams, *On Augustine*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Gerundive, in *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House; [www.dictionary.com/browse/gerundive](http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gerundive).

Split a piece of wood; I am there.  
Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.<sup>13</sup>

What we read earlier as description—"cheeks / awash with tears"—is now third-person insistent; we are to take action: "let the makeup run / the sap drain." Let "the door swing in the draught," Jesus now commands us, just as in the beginning the book falls open.

The Jesus of the canonical Gospels is hortatory, to be sure, and enjoining. In his life and public ministry, he is outside the Jewish "canon" of his day, segregated not from Torah and prophets and *fellahin* but ostracized and attacked by the religious and political establishment. But most of the time we choose to ignore what he asks of us; likewise, many of the commands of the *Gospel of Thomas*, outside the canon, are so startling that perhaps we will actually pay attention—and act. This Jesus declares that he is interior, not obvious and blatant and open to our appropriations, lectionaries, and systematics. This Jesus is what we find beneath the stone, cryptic, yet answering from within the underbelly of rock, the inner warp and woof of wood.

The leaves of the book of this interior Jesus, given who we are, get, of course, "nailed to the wall"; our "silent knot," "the clenched swollen muscle" of who we are that braves the opening of the book and the slicing of wood. The adjectives "silent," "clenched," "swollen" suggest that our courage is involuntary, even resistant, angry. But our resistance, failure, does get "resolved by surgery" ("If your eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away," Matt. 18:9, NIV). To split the wood at the end of the poem now "jolt[s] / loose the cramp," "the clenched swollen muscle" of *our* imperative at the beginning of the poem. The cramp now, though, is also a tumor, excised by surgery ("If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away" Matt. 5:30, NIV). At the end, contrary to our quotidian urgencies and scribal exigencies, Jesus tells us to "let the makeup run, / the sap drain." Earlier, "wrinkles stream sideways, / trail down the cheeks awash with tears, / mucus, mascara" because, the book having fallen open, we have read "the two / ragged eyes each side of a mirror."

Perhaps the poem is suggesting that only ragged eyes—ours, Jesus', the poor whom we have always with us—have the power to move us, especially move us to action. The poem itself is "ragged."

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<sup>13</sup> *The Gospel according to Thomas* 77b; [www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas/gospelthomas77.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/thomas/gospelthomas77.html).

Here, the ragged eyes confront us with the Jesus of the *Gospel of Thomas*, the unlikely Lord, not the nicely dressed, neatly coiffed Jesus we usually encounter in our churches and in Bible stories for children, nor the crucified Jesus, bloody and agonized. Rather, the poem offers a *tertium quid*: How often do we stop to consider Jesus haggard and harried? Harried by the indifferent oppression and cruelties of the Romans and their Palestinian lackeys, made haggard by the religious segregationists and hierarchs of his day, made hungry by the incomprehension of those who follow(ed) him.<sup>14</sup> Harrowed and thus hallowed by *our* indifference *and* by God's nevertheless persistent ongoing activity and action through him.

But—Jesus *is* there. Jesus is *here*. Beneath the stone. Interior to the wood. Integral to us in heart, thought, and conscience; beseeching us for word *and* deed. Underneath the skin, if only we dig deep enough to bleed, hard-nailed to the wall, which is also Jesus' tree. And our door, if only we see it, made from that tree that, at the end of the poem "swing[s] in the draught." It's not unlikely that Jesus is also nailed to the wood of the door. "Draught" is ambiguous. So be it: no wind, *pneúma*, holy spirit, for us to pigeonhole and capitalize (and capitalize on). After all, the wind / spirit blows where it wills (John 3:8).

Now having "read" what Jesus is telling us, having purified ourselves, at least provisionally, in the sweat lodge, we are taking our learning (through book or ritual) out into the world. Perhaps here too, liberated, wind and spirit are always with us, often unrecognized, as was Jesus, at least initially, on the road to Emmaus: when Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to the two, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31). In this enacted parable, bread offers incarnation—and, in this case, reincarnation.

## II. "Our Lady of Vladimir": Incarnated Life as Self-emptying

Climbs the child, confident,  
 up over breast, arm, shoulder;  
 while she, alarmed by his bold thrust  
 into her face, and the encircling hand,  
 5        looks out imploring fearfully  
           and, O, she cries, from her immeasurable eyes,  
           O how he clings, see how

<sup>14</sup> Mark 3:21, 4:10–20, 4:35–40, 6:2, among many.

he smothers every pore, like the soft  
 shining mistletoe to my black bark,  
 10 she says, I cannot breathe, my eyes  
 are aching so.

The child has overlaid us in our beds,  
 we cannot close our eyes,  
 his weight sits firmly,  
 15 fits over heart and lungs,  
 and choked we turn away  
 into the window of immeasurable dark  
 to shake off the insistent pushing warmth;  
 O how he cleaves, no peace  
 20 tonight my lady in your bower,  
 you, like us, restless with bruised eyes  
 and waking to

a shining cry on the black bark of sleep.<sup>15</sup>

“Incarnation,” though indispensable and sacred in its speech, has the dubious honor of being both dauntingly ecclesiastical and soporifically clichéd. But read “Our Lady” aloud and listen to, hear the intimacy, the immediacy, of what-takes-flesh. Compared with Williams’s words, John’s “lived among us” (John 1:14), though equally radical, is pale fire; it lacks the kinetic immediacy of *Our Lady of Vladimir* (a twelfth-century icon) and Williams’s equally moving understanding. With the very first words, the poet inverts normal word order: “Climbs the child.” With the child’s “bold thrust / into her face” and “encircling hand,” his clinging and smothering, Our Lady in the poem’s first stanza descends from—or is pulled from—her throne as *Panayia* (All-Holy One), Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, and becomes an overstressed mom: she is “alarmed”; she “looks out imploring fearfully”; she “cries.” “I cannot breathe,” she says, “my eyes / are aching so.”

Although the poet does not mention them, any woman who has borne a child and any attendant empathetic partner will recall the distended belly, the aches and pains, the aching breasts, the sickness, the

<sup>15</sup> Williams, “Our Lady of Vladimir,” in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 30.

travail of labor, the blood, the afterbirth, the dread waiting for post-partum normalcy or deformity. But traditional *kenosis*, “Christ’s self-emptying,”<sup>16</sup> in its radicality in the flesh, now becomes partial, and even misleading. What we have to imagine (one purpose of a poem)—and then *live* (the chief purpose of the gospel)—is God as woman emptying *herself* / her self.<sup>17</sup> The incarnation—and thus our salvation, however one construes it—requires no less. Dare we apply Christ’s self-emptying, *Mary’s* self-emptying to ourselves? “Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’” (Luke 1:38). If we do, what fullness will we find? As James Baldwin asks us, “Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature.”<sup>18</sup> But what if it, and we, fulfilled, were not out of order but rather incarnating God’s order? What if we could say, with Paul, “When I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ” (Romans 15:29).

As with “Door,” “Our Lady of Vladimir” reprises words and phrases, sometimes the same, sometimes similar, from the beginning to the end of the poem. The two long stanzas have sets of siblings.

In the first line of stanza two (“The child has overlaid us in our beds”), “our” at first quite naturally indicates the parents of the child; in the first five lines of stanza two “our” and “we” occur three times. But in lines 19–20 of stanza two the person or persons representing a group (“us, restless with bruised eyes”) also kept awake, represent all of us: we are *all* parents to the incarnation. At the end of stanza two (19–23), then, we speak to “my lady” in her “bower,” but the focus shifts from her fairy-tale boudoir to our more prosaic, and pained, beds. We, like Mary, are at least initially oppressed by the incarnation. How often dare we admit this? Even in our most interior confessionals? Perhaps especially not there. The afflictions caused by the child in stanza one, through parallelism and pairings in stanza two, now afflict us too. The child, in fact, is in bed with us, almost overpowering us (“overlaid us in our beds”), as he well could have

<sup>16</sup> See Philippians 2:7, *ekénōsen*.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Goddard counts *kenosis* as one of the “themes within Rowan’s thought that shaped his ministry as archbishop,” and Williams’s study of Russian Orthodox spirituality led “to the centrality of *kenosis* as the heart of the divine life which in turn reveals what we are called to in our lives” (Goddard, *Rowan Williams*, 20–21).

<sup>18</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962, 1993), 9.

in a stable or a poor Galilean or Judean home. He is not distantly cribbed in his own nursery with intercom or nannycam and wallpaper of shepherds and sheep, a night light, and a twirling mobile featuring a bright, magian star.

In this “immeasurable dark” we try “to shake off the insistent pushing warmth” of this baby, this Christ Child, this incarnation with all its demands on *us*. The poem calls on each reader, whether parent or not, to imagine him- or herself into the incarnational bed. This poetic insistence of the incarnation reminds me of walking our colicky infant daughter for what seemed like hours, up the hallway, down the hallway, an echo chamber whose noise drowned out the joys of gestation, childbirth, and warm infancy. The incarnation makes parents of us all. Now it is up to us not only to accept but to welcome, embrace, both its joys and responsibilities; they are inseparable. Otherwise, we become poor parents, not only to the child / Child, but to God—and (dare we say it?), more importantly, to our fellow human beings, each of whom is a child of God, an image of the Image, an incarnation of, for, and to the Sacred.

We, like Mary, with our incarnated responsibilities, are “restless with bruised eyes” from the night’s ill sleep, “waking to / a shining cry on the black bark of sleep.” The mistletoe in stanza one is a succubus on the tree’s “black bark,” the dark wood now our beloved little vessel of repose and rest, freed for a moment from incarnation’s demands. Yet now the “cry” is not something you want to curse and throw a shoe at. No, the cry is “shining,” like the dawn and stars that Psalms and Proverbs laud and magnify, like the lodestar coming to rest once over royal David’s city.<sup>19</sup>

Our nativity scenes have much not wrong, but incomplete. Our birth stables, our annual crèches, give us Jesus securely swaddled—*after* the blood has been wiped away (blood that Mary, and we, will have to absterge much later on a skull-riven hill), *after* the afterbirth has been blessed and buried. But the visitors from the east remind us, if we dare look (see Matthew 2:12), that Herod and his murderous appendages are strip-searching and body-cavity investigating all the homes of Bethlehem looking for child sacrifice. And let us remember also that the tax census that Luke gives as the reason for the Holy Family’s journey to Bethlehem (2:1–3), whether it occurred at the time of Jesus’ birth or at another, was a head tax to collect money to

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<sup>19</sup> Psalm 148:3, Proverbs 4:18, Matthew 2:1–10.

pay for Rome's and Herod's depredations. If we can bear to look, the incarnation demands that we, just as the oppressed in Jesus' day, ask how much of our taxes go to a "domination system," where the "Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world," with its up-to-date killing fields and the consequent starvation of our own people.<sup>20</sup> If we do not ask, the birth narrative is merely an annual prop stored in a sacristy closet or a pretty relic sitting unlabeled on a bottom shelf in a dust-curated museum of forgotten antiquities and superannuated curios.<sup>21</sup>

"Our Lady of Vladimir" and Williams's interpretation ask us to sacrifice ourselves as parents to the incarnation. The poem asks that we give ourselves to the *whole* incarnation, which, with his images, Williams at least suggests, if not urges. We can do no less. We can do no more. If, awakened by strange lights and noises, we dare get up from our beds and look out to the torches held aloft by Herod's modern assassins, following some recent scholars and social activists we just may ask ourselves: What is the domination system that oppresses us and to which we offer our obeisance? Who are the principalities and powers that kill the incarnation, not once long ago in faraway Judea, in David's royal city, but here and now, on a daily basis?

If the eucharist re-presents, each and every time, Jesus' last meal with the disciples, so too it represents the meal's aftermath. We bear witness to, and participate in, both: we are people both of the upper room and the garden of Gethsemane, of Easter morning and martyrdom. We need to understand, therefore, that the incarnation will not raise itself; the incarnation—and the garden's subsequent abdication and flight—requires our breastfeeding and caregiving, our own incarnated, incarnational, kenotic almsgiving. At the manger and at the cross, and during all our days, enfleshed. Enfleshment, as we have seen, bears concomitant resistance to it. And the need for us to bear witness both to the good news and against the world's domination system. In Williams's poems the church calendar, Advent and Easter, can give us a new way of seeing that then can lead to our own sacred witness and opposition and, in that opposing, concelebration.

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<sup>20</sup> Walter Wink, "The Myth of Redemptive Violence," *The Bible in Transmission* (Spring 1999): 1; <http://www2.goshen.edu/~joannab/women/wink99.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> See Tim Vivian, "Christmas Context—What Mary Might Say to Walmart," *Bakersfield Californian*, December 21, 2013; [www.bakersfield.com/news/opinion/2013/12/22/tim-vivian-christmas-context-what-mary-might-say-to-walmart.html](http://www.bakersfield.com/news/opinion/2013/12/22/tim-vivian-christmas-context-what-mary-might-say-to-walmart.html).

## III. "Advent Calendar": Another Way of Seeing

He will come like last leaf's fall.  
 One night when the November wind  
 has flayed the trees to bone, and earth  
 wakes choking on the mould,  
 5 the soft shroud's folding.

He will come like frost.  
 One morning when the shrinking earth  
 opens on mist, to find itself  
 arrested in the net  
 10 of alien sword-set beauty.

He will come like dark.  
 One evening when the bursting red  
 December sun draws up the sheet  
 and penny-masks its eye to yield  
 15 the star-snowed fields of sky.

He will come, will come,  
 will come like crying in the night,  
 like blood, like breaking,  
 as the earth writhes to toss him free.  
 20 He will come like child.<sup>22</sup>

As with "Door" and "Our Lady of Vladimir," Rowan Williams uses repetition and similitude in "Advent Calendar" to jostle, perhaps even jerk or startle us out of our common ways of seeing. When Thomas Merton looked at the statues of Buddha at Polannaruwa, he exclaimed that he was "suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, . . . became evident and obvious. . . . Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."<sup>23</sup> *Kenosis* bears compassion. To this we must add Merton's famous epiphany at Fourth and Walnut: "It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in

<sup>22</sup> Williams, "Advent Calendar," in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions Books, 1968), 233–234.

a special world. . . . There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”<sup>24</sup>

An Advent calendar, as familiar as those statues of Buddha are alien and potentially threatening, can get us into another way of seeing and, with Merton, another way of being. The monosyllable that “Advent Calendar” rotates around is “like,” as in *A is like B*. As with the two poems discussed above, the title is incipit, not consummation, a first step into a world of discovery. But the title here is also misdirection: an Advent calendar, at least in the United States, summons up images of children and dancing sugar plums, of a multitude of colorful little doors with narrative and chocolate behind each. Hardly liminal, it seems at first. But the preposition “like,” occurring seven times in the poem, gives fair warning: *like* does not equal *is*. “Like,” modeling the Jesus of the parables, makes comparisons, and thus invites further comparisons, thus creating similitudes, thus making a reality of its own, into which the poem invites us.

There are no sacred hymns in “Advent Calendar,” no “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” no “Once in Royal David’s City.” Christ’s *adventus*, his *parousía*, is like “last leaf’s fall,” “frost,” and “dark.” Christ, like many Native American creation beings, is autochthonous. Unlike Christ’s “second” coming in Easter, Christ’s first coming is in the bleak midwinter, when “wind / has flayed the trees to bone,” frost shackles “the shrinking earth” and, most memorably, when “December sun draws up the sheet / and penny-masks its eye to yield / the star-snowed fields of sky.”

What we have is the hope that Christ will come. For Christians, the hope of Advent is a womb that will give birth, through death, to the hope of resurrection—and the resurrection of hope. As the late Daniel Berrigan exhorts us still, “We want to test the resurrection in our bones. To see if we might live in hope.”<sup>25</sup> Berrigan was a poet, so perhaps he means more with “in our bones” than a first, clichéd, reading suggests: hope, and its maculate conception, resurrection, are marrow, guarded and guided by bone. As if sensing our despair or near-despair about the difficulties of maintaining hope and living

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1968), 153–155.

<sup>25</sup> Stephen Kelly, “Do Not Be Ruled by Fear, but Faith,” *Sojourners* (August 2016): 20.

resurrection, the last stanza of “Advent Calendar” begins with an emphatic trinitarian “He will come, will come, / will come. . . .”

Hope as *Sanctus*. Yes, but this advent will not, does not, come with reindeer and tinsel and children dressed up like sheep and angels. This Christ comes “like crying in the night / like blood, like breaking.” Our Lady of Vladimir wants to shuffle off the immortal coil of Mother of God, and that of mortal mother; likewise, in the same poem, as the incarnational parents we want “to turn away” from what enfleshment means. So too, in “Advent Calendar” the earth becomes our stand-in, since we, like Jesus, are autochthonous (Genesis 2:7); she, like a being from an ancient myth, “writhes to toss him free.” It’s not like God standing behind Jesus and pushing him into the breach; it’s more like God pulling us out of the breach—or the ditch, the trench, the sewer, often self-dug—to Jesus.

And this is why “He will come like child.” Jesus can come *only* as child. We know what happens to adults who go up against Herod and the Temple authorities—our Herodians and Quislings now, just as much as in Jesus’s day, as when Christians support preemptive war, torture, mass deportation, and the gutting of the social safety net. As William Stringfellow continually points out in his writings, there are lots of ways of inflicting death: silence is a form of suicide.<sup>26</sup> The twentieth century reminds us that silence can also be the abused and abusing lover of genocide. In contrast with such silence, the first line of each of the first three stanzas is strongly declarative, and could be read “He will come” like “last leaf’s fall,” like “frost,” like “dark.” We have seen in the first three stanzas that there is nothing sentimental about Advent’s arrival; in the last stanza there is nothing partial about “crying in the night,” “blood,” and “breaking.”

Historically, we do not know when Jesus was born, but “Advent Calendar” surely suggests, even ensures, that symbolically, mythically, the incarnational Christ can come only when both the earth and we are at our own incarnated weakness, crying out for birth and rebirth. Which is always. Williams ends the poem by declaring that Christ “will come like child.” Christ can come *only* as a child comes—naked, helpless, born (and borne) into the incarnational arms first of his

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Wylie Kellermann, ed., *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 345.

mother (each mother a *theotókos*), then his often flailing yet fully compassionate parents (*theotókoí*), then our own, and then into the fury, madness, and possible redemption of the incarnate world. The incarnate Word brings to life and redeems the incarnate world, this incarnate, God-given maelstrom.

With the three poems discussed so far, Rowan Williams has, with often striking originality, brought us deep within a land of both likeness and unlikeness; our familiar Lord is not much present, at least until one dares break the surface—but if one does dare, there he is! Beneath the stone, inwooded. This essay began with the extracanonical *Gospel of Thomas* (“Door”), but here I want to emphasize how thoroughly orthodox these poems are, because they are so very incarnational. One of the chief virtues of the sound and sense of these poems is that the focus on the incarnation here is not besotted with baby Jesus, but turns its attention to *us* as incarnated beings, as incarnations of the incarnation. What trepidations does the incarnation bring with it, what responsibilities does it ask of us, risk of us, require of us? With beauty of language and intrepidity of speech, Williams has put into verse profound theological, soteriological, and anthropological considerations. By doing so, he has considerably widened our normal theological-spiritual pathway into a sturdy if challenging trail—not a paved avenue, never. This entryway invites us to walk with him, poetry’s walking stick in hand, as we together explore the vast, known, and mysterious beauties of our incarnated earth, our incarnated Lord familiar and unfamiliar, our incarnated lives.

As beautiful as this is, though, Advent always asks us to look over the horizon. Not necessarily to three crosses on a bone-quarried hill, but rather to the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry: the temptation. Mark’s Gospel (1:12–13) offers no details about the temptation of Jesus by Satan; Matthew (4:1–11) and Luke (4:1–13), by contrast, have fuller and similar narratives—filling in Mark’s silence with a terrifying and yet victorious religious myth. But Luke, unlike Matthew, finishes his story with perhaps the most frightening line in the New Testament: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). If we are brave enough to face it, the devil’s opportune time is now, always. The advent, then, the incarnation, requires opposition, sacred opposition, to the devil’s wiles and machinations.

IV. "Easter Eve: Sepulchre": *The Incarnational Sacramentality of Opposition*

- 1 Constantine knew, of course, just what he wanted:  
smooth verticals and marble, crushed glass rolled underfoot,  
room for archangels with their orbs and wands,  
space for cool power to stroll, relaxed and heavy-footed,
- 5 Out to the little scented hedges, under a cross that shimmers,  
silver and rubies, soft shadows lapping at the ankles.  
He cut and smoothed, levelled and piled and spread:  
light; crystal; breezy veils; a new, enlightened holy hill.
- 9 History (or something) disagreed. The centuries squared up,  
exchanged curt, recognizing nods, moved in,  
folded and packed, crumpled and stripped and boxed:  
the shadows shook themselves, lurched up and smiled
- 13 From a new height; people found other things  
to do with silver. Air from the marble lungs  
is punched out, and the colonnades are crushed and processed  
into a maze of ditches, damp stone capsules,
- 17 Whorls, cavities, corners with don't-ask smells  
and fairground decoration. A collapsing star, screwing its stuff  
into the dark: soaring heat, density, a funnel  
spinning towards the opposite of anything.

\* \* \*

- 21 Saturday afternoon, the bodies squashed, wet, boxed,  
breathing into the shadows full of smells and tinsel;  
flame leaks and spits out of the singularity,  
sparks a cracked bell. Iron, rope, smoke
- 25 Pant in the tight dark, a light-footed,  
high-strung passing. Afterwards we breathe,  
dry off the sweat and crying, ask what history  
is after, bullying us into walking, into this oppositeness.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, "Easter Eve: Sepulchre," in *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 77.

With the poetry of Waldo Williams as touchstone, Rowan Williams reminds us that “poetry resists.” With the political climate in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States in 2017, Williams’s words are especially relevant:

[Waldo Williams] imagined his own work as a form of quiet but unyielding resistance to a hectic inarticulate violence in the mind, the feverishness that overflows in personal aggression as in wars and pogroms of all kinds. The centenary of the outbreak of the First World War—with little sign of fever abating—is a good time to remember him and to think about how poetry resists.<sup>28</sup>

And the Word became Empire. Most Americans, I suspect, do not see the United States as an empire; thus they do not understand, or even glimpse, the ramifications, the machinations manifest and oblique, of empire. Such short-sightedness and ignorance, though unrecognized, is especially cruel and catastrophic for Christians, who so often entirely miss the connection between the empire that taunted, persecuted, and killed Jesus and empire that crucifies him still. Is empire, therefore, anti-incarnational?

What, then, does one do with a poem that begins with “Constantine”? One sees right away Constantine’s hubristic certainty as opposed to the uncertainties of the three poems discussed earlier: “Constantine knew, of course, just what he wanted.” Of course he did. He wanted

smooth verticals and marble, crushed glass rolled underfoot,  
 room for archangels with their orbs and wands,  
 space for cool power to stroll, relaxed and heavy-footed,  
 Out to the little scented hedges, under a cross that shimmers, . . .

From our perspective, we know that Jesus’ cross did not shimmer—unless it was from sunlight glancing off blood and bloodstains, the ubiquitous imperial bloodstone. Unless we fly Gnostic, the “Constantinian church” *is* incarnational. But is it not also anti-kenotic? Can there be true incarnation without *kenosis*? Constantine filled the *kenosis*, the divine emptying, with “smooth verticals and marble, crushed glass rolled underfoot.” What a poem

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *The Other Mountain*, 8.

does, though, is make Constantine's backfill present progressive. Thus the poem implicitly asks: How are we so different? When virtually every American politician, even those with sense and sensibility, closes every speech with "And God bless the United States of America!" have we not filled *kenosis* with "space for cool power to stroll," false gods and idolatries? Dare we, as Christians, be iconoclasts like Jesus, like Paul?

But Rowan Williams the poet chooses not to use an image-smashing sledgehammer; he takes a different approach, a non-dualistic one, just as he does with "Door," "Our Lady of Vladimir," and "Advent Calendar." With "Easter Eve," Williams answers in poetry our simplistic bumper-sticker demands with images as sharp as Satan's claws. Constantine's Holy Sepulchre, built for Empress Helena his mother in 325–326, with its "cross that shimmers / silver and rubies," becomes, incarnationally, with the holy land's first pilgrims,

whorls, cavities, corners with don't-ask smells  
and fairground decoration . . .  
. . . the bodies [of pilgrims] squashed, wet, boxed,  
breathing into the shadows full of smells and tinsel . . . .

The sharp images remind me of those in "Our Lady of St. Vladimir." Incarnation, the incarnation(s) of the unwashed hoi polloi, now transfigure imperial Christology. Holy pilgrims (that is, we) bear their smell, their stink, as Constantine and his court, betinseled, parade their royal jewels. "Don't-ask smells" ironically resuscitate Lazarus four days in the tomb.<sup>29</sup> But—and this is important, for Williams and for the poems under discussion—it is not a binary either-or but rather a counterpoised both-and. No matter how much we bejewel the cross, we know, somewhere, that Jesus writhes just beneath.

Constantine forever represents the powers-that-be, which can devolve into Ephesians' principalities and powers (6:12), Walter Wink's domination system. On August 6, 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the nuclear annihilation of Hiroshima, such powers at the (Episcopal) National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. tried to muzzle, dog-collar, handcuff, and ankle-bracelet Daniel Berrigan and others from speaking Jesus' truth to nuclear holocaust. One shudders at the Cathedral's anti-incarnational bureaucratise: "Washington National Cathedral has no

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<sup>29</sup> See John 11:1–44.

official view on the history or morality of the first atom bombs or on any foreign or military policy.”<sup>30</sup> Or on *any* foreign or military policy? Statements like this come from those whom Dante sees in the vestibule or anteroom to Hell; those whom Dante’s translator John Ciardi calls “the opportunists,” neither in Purgatory nor in Hades, always timid and prevaricating; those who are ever indecisively liminal, liminality no longer kenotic but criminal—in Dante’s words, those who “are the nearly soulless / whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.”<sup>31</sup> Nearly soulless. Is that what the institutional church, and its denizens, aspire to be? The church in Washington, D.C. that day, despite its hog-tied protestations, was not being non-partisan or neutral; it was not being amoral. In the face of such incipient and recrudescing horrors, it was being *immoral*. Despite its statement, it was not speaking, but was rather keeping silent. As Desmond Tutu reminds us, “If you are neutral in a situation of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”<sup>32</sup>

The gospel insists on being lived out in the incarnational hurly-burly; it declares that some forms of speech are silence—in fact may be worse than silence. The holy spirit of Elie Wiesel cries out from such cathedral steps: “I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.”<sup>33</sup> When the church makes statements such as the one at the National Cathedral, not only has Constantine won (and Augustine, who summoned the military down upon the Donatists), so has state evil in any form. And state evil, let us remember, has ensouled persons, many of faith, pulling levers, pressing buttons, and casting anti-gospel votes.

And yet . . . And yet . . . the poet cries out, lifting each human freight from its cross:

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Rose Marie Berger, “Making the Crooked Way Straight,” *Sojourners* (August 2016): 24.

<sup>31</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Random House, 1996), Canto III: 32–33.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, delivered in Oslo on December 10, 1986; [www.eliewiesel.org/nobelprizespeech.aspx](http://www.eliewiesel.org/nobelprizespeech.aspx).

flame leaks and spits out of the singularity,  
sparks a cracked bell. Iron, rope, smoke

Pant in the tight dark, a light-footed,  
high-strung passing. Afterwards we breathe,  
dry off the sweat and crying, ask what history  
is after, bullying us into waking, into this oppositeness.

Oppositeness. Isn't that what resurrection is? Isn't that what gospel is? Could it be, finally, that this opposition, referring back to the poems discussed earlier, is what incarnation is? But opposition means that there is a vast territory of mystery between the two poles, not wishful attempts at creedal exactitude. But Mystery does not mean impossibility or obfuscation: riding through her territory, she bears saddlebags laden with explication, and explication brings possibility.

What religious structures often bespeak, and sometimes befoul, is familiar: they structure family, even fictive families like congregations; all too often they function, still, as *paterfamilias*. But incarnation, at least Jesus' radical incarnating in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, is maternal: Mary's *kenosis*, both foreshadowing and consequent of God, consanguine. Though often too familiar in hymnody and liturgics, it is incarnation, as Jesus insists (Luke 12:49–56), that is unfamiliar—asking us, nevertheless, to join in its continual rebirth. To do so may mean that we are—yes, continually—giving it rebirth in our parenting. We act for God *in loco parentis*.

### *Benediction*

What, then, do these poems of Rowan Williams offer? They reveal to us a Lord who is both unfamiliar enough to challenge our preconceptions and our complacencies *and* a Lord who carries us, always, if we allow him, across thresholds. Such a liminal Lord can lead us both to self-emptying and an incarnated life. Just as incarnation requires self-emptying, self-emptying brings incarnation, especially in the sense of rebirth. And rebirth, resurrection, brings renewed sight. Restored vision, at least in this sublunary world of ours, requires sacred opposition. We live amid principalities and powers that resist the gospel; we participate, willingly or willy-nilly or oppositionally, in derelictions and malversations. And yet the homecoming of the unfamiliar Lord can, with gospel effort, make the good news ever more familiar and enriching, lifting from us veil after veil.

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