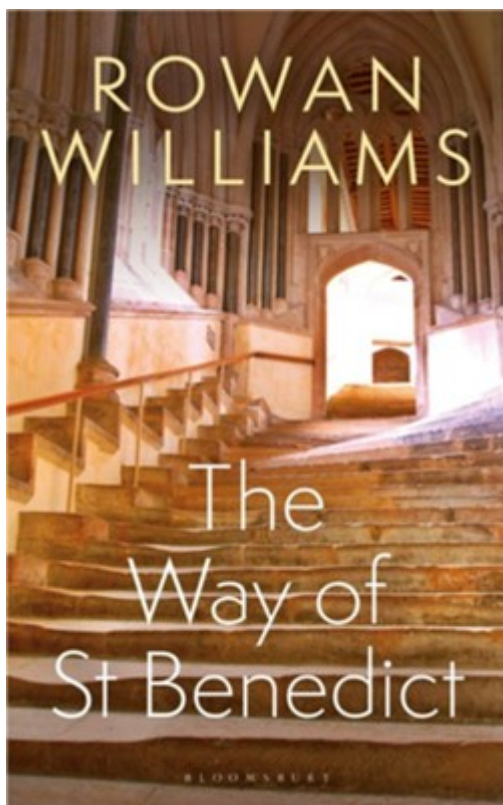


Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020. Pp 145. ISBN TPB 978-1-4729-7307-8



*Reviewed by
the Rev S C Sharman, PhD*

This reviewer admits that he has never met Archbishop Rowan Williams, sometime Archbishop of Canterbury and now Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. He knows him only through his books and through his reputation with scholars and churchmen. He was introduced to Dr Williams' work one summer in London when he was advised to read *Lost Icons*. He purchased a copy of the book in a bookshop in London and read it on the aeroplane on the way home to Canada. He found a copy of the Archbishop's book of poetry, *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, in a book shop in Lampeter, Wales, and read it following the theory that if a scholar can say it in poetry he can also say it in prose. Archbishop Williams can do both. This reviewer has since read other books by Williams. He has not always understood what he was reading, but he is increasingly impressed by the depth and breadth of the Archbishop's scholarship.

This book, *The Way of St Benedict*, is a study of St Benedict, his rule and his influence on succeeding generations of monasticism in Western Europe. Williams states the theme of his book in the first sentence of his introduction: "for fifteen hundred years, the Rule of St Benedict has been one of the most influential texts in the culture of Western Europe" (p3), and he proceeds to discuss this in the seven chapters that follow. This book contains a collection of

essays which were first published in other places and which have now been bought together, revised and published as a book about St Benedict.

Before we continue with this review, it might be useful to write a few more words about St Benedict of Nursia. He was born circa 480 AD and died circa 547 AD. That places him in the dying years of the Roman Empire in the West. He left the City of Rome to seek a life of prayer in solitude in the wilderness places of Italy. His way of life, his teaching about this way of life and his miracles attracted disciples and he became the founder of monasteries. His last foundation and the most famous was at Monte Casino, the scene of important battles during World War II. The major source of our knowledge about this saint is Book II of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. He prepared a *Rule* for his monks, which became the dominant *Rule* in the Western monasticism. Gregory the Great describes the *Rule* as "remarkable for its discretion and its clarity of language" (*Dialogues*, Book II chapter 36). Charlemagne made Benedict's *Rule* the required *Rule* for all monasteries in his empire.

In his introduction, Williams speaks of the importance of the *Rule* for community and communal stability. He refers to "a new conviction that the *Rule* embodies a practical social vision of intelligence, cooperation, compassionate solidarity and responsible labour" (p8). He also refers to Rod Dreher's book, *The Benedict Option*, which was reviewed in a previous issue of this journal (CJOC, Vol. XIII, No. 2, summer 2018). Consequently, the *Rule* can be understood as a document with universal significance.

In the first chapter, "Shaping Holy Lives" (pp11-26), Williams discusses the monastic community. The reader is advised to read this chapter and the following ones with a copy of the *Rule* at hand so that he/she can look up the Archbishop's references to the *Rule*. Here the Archbishop talks about the lives of the monks and the role of the abbots, noting, among other things that "the monk must be transparent; the monk must be a peacemaker; the monk must be accountable" (p13). The abbot is the leader of a community "genuinely working with a shared focus and common language, in which both discussion and decision are possible" (p24). Williams quotes from the Welsh poet Waldo Williams, "*Cael neuadd fawr Rhwng cyfyng furirau*, inhabiting a great hall between narrow walls" (p22), and explains that this is "the definition of life itself." It is likely also a good description of monastic life. Waldo Goronwy

Williams was born 30 September 1904 and died 20 May 1971. He was a Welshman, a teacher, a poet, a Christian pacifist, an anti-war campaigner, a conscientious objector during World War II, Welsh nationalist and a supporter of the Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales, a Welsh nationalist party, which advocates for Welsh independence from the United Kingdom). His poetry appears in anthologies of Welsh verse and is probably known by most Welsh school students. The monastery is, therefore, a community of people seeking to grow closer to Christ and one another in lives of prayer, labour and ascetical practices.

The second chapter, "The Staying Power of Benedict" (pp27-42), is an exploration of stability in St Benedict's Rule and in Benedictine monasticism. St Benedict insists that his monks must remain in one place in one monastery. For them there are no visits to other monasteries in other places as was common in Irish monasticism. Williams' comment is pithy: "That is to say, it's all about staying in the same place, with the same people" (p27). The Archbishop considers several qualities to be important in monastic life chiefly that of peace. The thoughts contained in this chapter could be easily applied to a parish Church where the same people worship together Sunday by Sunday often for several generations. Williams stresses the "level of close attention that is to be given to the specific needs of each member of the community" (p33). In a monastery this duty belongs to the abbot; in a parish it belongs to the parish priest and the leadership of the parish.

The third chapter, "Monks and Mission: A Perspective from England" (pp 43-53), discusses the place of Benedictine monasticism in the conversion of England to the Christian Faith. He emphasises the "apostolic life," which St Augustine of Canterbury established in Canterbury and which he, his clergy and monks lived there. He submits that "what makes a community effective in terms of mission and witness is the apostolic life" (pp44-45). Later in the chapter he suggests that examples of the "apostolic life" might be effective "for the evangelization or re-evangelization of our historically Christian countries" (p49). This reviewer, a specialist in Early Anglo-Saxon England, remembers that St Wilfred of York boasted that he had introduced Benedictine monasticism into England (see *The Life of Bishop Wilfred by Eddius Stephanus*, Chapters xiv and xlvii).

Chapter four, "From Solitude to Communion: Monastic Virtues and Ecumenical Hope" (pp 54-65), discusses the implications of community life and the vocation to solitude in Benedictine monasticism for the modern ecumenical movement. The author begins with the monastic reform movements of the eleventh century. He asserts that "monastic practice is, therefore, of its root, a living-out of the fundamental Christian doctrine of human nature as restored in Christ" (p55). Williams argues that this has implications for ecumenical relations and urges that ecumenical relations be re-considered through the lens of Benedict's Rule. Then we shall find a "rediscovery of one another in our confessional diversity and a search for how we may become able to serve one another more freely in Christ's Body" (p65). Ecumenical relations become more than church politics on a wide stage but a quest for Christian love.

Chapter five, "Benedict and the Future of Europe" (pp66-83), is more challenging and potentially controversial. Here he argues that the Rule of St Benedict gives us a way to address the problems of modern Europe. Archbishops of Canterbury learn to be very careful when they address political questions, and the period of Brexit (the United Kingdom leaving the European Union) has been a difficult time for the UK. At the beginning of the chapter, he asks "but is there a sense in which we can speak of Benedict and his Rule as offering an orientation for Europe's future?" (p66), and then spends the rest of the chapter answering his question. He is particularly concerned with the project of creating human communities and suggests that the Rule speaks eloquently to this project. In his view, the future of Europe depends upon people living together in communities which recognize the humanity of their members.

Chapter six, "Reforming Monasticism: An Early Medieval Debate" (pp87-105), is a careful examination of the eleventh century reform of the monastic institution and their interpretations of the Rule of St Benedict. This reform arose from the "persistent demand for a return to undiluted 'primitive' practice, a reform in the monastic institution that sweeps away the compromises of history and cultural assimilation to reveal the stark and distinctive identity of 'true' monastic life" (p87). This movement of reform in its later stages is associated with St Bernard of Clairvaux and Cistercian monasticism. In Williams' chapter we meet Odo of Cluny, Odilo of Cluny,

Hugh of Cluny, Dunstan of England, Peter Damian, Romuald, John Gualbert, Stephen of Muret, Bruno and others. Peter Damian is remembered for his insistence “that monastic asceticism is identical with Christian life as it should be lived” (p94), and Romuald for his conviction that monastic life is a prelude to solitary life (p95). All this is an indication that the Rule was understood as a ‘living’ document.

Chapter seven, “A Benedictine on ‘Mysticism:’ Abbot Cuthbert Butler” (pp106-132), is a very challenging chapter for the non-specialist but is worth careful reading and re-reading. Here the archbishop examines Abbot Cuthbert’s writings about mystical theology and especially his book, *Western Mysticism*. This chapter validates the archbishop’s profound grasp of his subject and his knowledge of the necessary secondary literature. It is, nevertheless, a pleasure to read.

The whole book is a pleasure to read. This reviewer was intrigued by the Archbishop’s skill in seeing modern situations through the lens of the Rule of St Benedict. This demonstrates the continuing value of the work of the Fathers of the Church even in our days.

The book would have benefited from an index.

About the reviewer: Father Stephen Sharman is a priest at St. Nicholas parish in Narol, Manitoba. He received his PhD from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David in 2013. The title of his dissertation was *Visions of Light in the Writings of the Venerable Bede*.