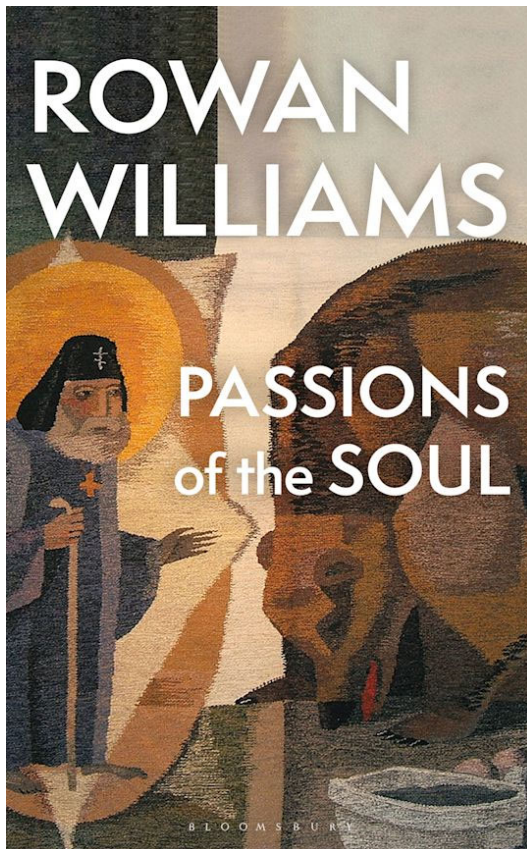


Rowan Williams, *Passions of the Soul*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2024. Pp xxxiv, 121.



Reviewed by Father Stephen Sharman

When this reviewer first met the writings of Archbishop Rowan Williams, he started with his poetry on the theory that if he could say something worthwhile in poetry, his prose would be worth reading. We begin today with a verse from his poem “Advent Calendar:”

*He will come like dark.
One evening when the bursting red
December sun draws up the sheet
and penny-masks its eye to yield
the star-snowed fields of sky.¹*

The light of God’s love for us bursts into our lives like a ray of the red light of the setting sun breaking through the dark clouds of a late autumn day. It assures us that we are not without friends and not without a home. Our friend is God and our home is Heaven.

The Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Lord Williams of Oystermouth, is a bishop, a scholar, a poet, an educator and a writer. He has had a distinguished career in all these fields of activity. He was born on the 19th of June 1950 in Wales of a Welsh speaking family. He received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from Oxford University in 1975. His dissertation was “The Theology

¹ Rowan Williams, “Advent Calendar” in Rowan Williams, *The Poems of Rowan Williams* (Oxford Perpetua Press 2002), p15.

of Vladimir Nikolaievich Lossky: An Exposition and Critique.” His interest in Eastern Orthodox Christianity continued with him for his life as a scholar and writer. He was ordained deacon on 2 October 1977 and priest on 2 July 1978. He taught in both the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford. He was appointed Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in Oxford in 1986. In 1991, he was elected Bishop on Monmouth in the Church in Wales and Archbishop of Wales in 1999. He was a appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 2002 and held the position until 2012. Following his time in Canterbury, he served as Master of Magdalene College in Cambridge until 2020. He was appointed Chancellor of the University of South Wales in 2014 and still holds this position. He now lives in Cardiff where he continues to write, preach and lecture.

He is the author of many books, essays and lectures. In addition to his volume of poetry and this book reviewed here, he wrote *Arius: Heresy & Tradition Revised Edition* (1987, 2001), *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (2003), *A Ray of Darkness: Sermons and Reflections* (1995), *The Way of St Benedict* (2020), *Christ the Heart of Creation* (2018), *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (2003), *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (2003) and many others. His theology is the subject of a book length study, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* by Benjamin Myers (2012). There are, no doubt, other studies of his theology and there will be more. His theology is well worth careful reading, study and reflection. Scholar archbishops of Canterbury are not uncommon. One remembers the much-loved Archbishop Arthur Michael Ramsey. Williams is in good company. This reviewer began his reading of Rowan Williams’ prose with *Lost Icons* which he purchased in London and read on an Air Canada flight between London and Toronto.

And now to this volume. Williams begins by admitting that the book began ‘as a series of retreat addresses given to the Anglican Benedictine at Holy Cross Convent in Leicestershire’ (p vi). These addresses have been transcribed and edited and now published. To them Williams has added an ‘Introduction: A Tradition for Learning Freedom’ (pp xi-xxxiv), and two additional pieces ‘To Stand Where Christ Stands’ and ‘Early Christian Writing’ (pp 79-114). The book concludes with notes and an index of names (pp 116-121).

The book explores the place and roles of passions, that is, the instincts and urges which possess human souls. These passions and their remedies are pride, listlessness, the truth of dependence, anger, gluttony, the grace of poverty, avarice, lust, the risks of mercy, envy, despair and the light of hope. Williams compares these passions with the list of seven deadly sins which are much studied in the western monastic tradition. These passions are balanced by the eight Beatitudes of Jesus' teaching about the health of souls. One catalogue balances the other catalogue. One contains the problems and the other contains the solutions. This is a venerable approach. If a person perceives a problem in his spiritual life, sin, temptation or vice, then he seeks an opposite, virtue, strength or benefit, to cure it. For example, one suffering from gluttony might try fasting as a remedy. If one envies a person, one might try praying for him.

Cassian makes nine appearances in this book. He is a master of the spiritual life. He was nurtured in the monasteries of Egypt and lived and taught in Southern France. His books are classics in the genre of Christian spiritual writing and Williams' use of him illustrates his own deep roots in the monastic tradition. Other writers who appear in this book are St Augustine, Evagrius of Pontus, St Gregory of Nyssa and Origen. All are venerable members of the monastic tradition and Williams shows himself to be deeply formed by this tradition. Among the modern authors whom he quotes, his reference to the work of C S Lewis is particularly apt (p 61).

Chapter six, "To Stand Where Christ Stands" (pp 79-101), examines Christian spirituality. He discusses both what Christian spirituality is not and then what it is. For these reasons, the chapter is a very useful one. The last chapter, seven, "Early Christian Writing" (pp 102-114) discusses writers of Christian prayer in the first three centuries of the Church.

To sum up, this a n interesting and useful work, the product of a lifetime of study, reflection and prayer. He writes with confidence and authority. This reviewer strongly recommends Archbishop Williams' short book to all who are committed to leading a Christian life of prayer and spiritual discipline. The notes suggest sources for further reading and prayer.

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*.