Similarly the section on Celibacy, whilst it clearly show the author's own take on this aspect of church teaching, raises questions which will continue to find both support and opposition in the wider Roman Catholic Church communities and structures.

> It is sex that puts people off religion. It is the most personal part of life, a powerful impulse that is only managed by great effort. It is not an area where young people find it easier to brook interference from others.

The difficulties facing the Church are summed up in this section, but Fr Slavin is clear that celibacy for its own sake is sterile: it may be a choice based on practical considerations, but its 'merits' may be lost unless love is evident in deeds as well as words: men and women are all called to the same spirit of compassion.

If the first part of this book is the portrayal of a varied priestly life lived in the service of others, the second part examines with honesty and candour the stresses and compromises that such a life has meant for the author. Whilst the reader may not agree with all of the author's views, I shall still file it under 'a good read!'

Allan Hargreaves, whose work is centred around charity law and finance, has worked closely with UK religious orders and charities in an advisory as well as a professional capacity. He works closely with the Peru Mission (http://www.theperumission.org.uk/) which champions the lives of those living in urban poverty as well as rural jungle dwellers, indigenous people who live in communities along the Amazon's tributaries.

The Way of St. Benedict
Rowan Williams
London: Bloomsbury, 2020
ISBN: 978-1-4729-7307-8 (pbk), 147 pages
ISBN: 978-1-4729-7309-2 (e-pub)
£12.99

Thinkers capable of speaking fluently the languages of both Catholicism and modernity/post-modernity, not as antipodal forces but as intelligible discourses, are rare. Rowan Williams is such a thinker. In this collection of five short essays, Williams reflects on the relevance for our times of the

sixth-century Rule of St Benedict, which was the foundational document of Latin monastic life. The Rule, written by an experienced monastic superior amid the uncertainties of life due to the collapsed Western Roman Empire, is remembered for its practicality, moderation and humanity. These are qualities that have guaranteed its endurance over the centuries and guide its instructions for engendering stable, welcoming, busy and prayerful communal life: a pattern which Williams sees as a viable prototype to inspire ways of living in contemporary communities. The Rule provides an opportunity to reimagine selfhood within the *longue durée* of the classical tradition of self-knowledge in order to put into practice a way to live honestly with ourselves and within community.

It is faith and reason at the heart of *The Way of St. Benedict* that I want to explore in this review essay. The proposition that Williams presents in *The Way of St. Benedict* is that the requirement of moving towards the future of our common home is to heal, to bring back together, through mediation that preserves, values, and celebrates differences. This proposition acknowledges both faith and reason that many now consider are at odds and have become politicised in Anglo-American politics.

Williams acknowledges that the hard work of living honestly within the communal structure of the Rule is an ambitious project that does require honestly facing dissonances between catholicity and the plight of the modern individual adrift in subjectivity and uprooted from any public or private identity. Another way of phrasing this 'catholic' ('all-encompassing' or 'universal') position would be to say, '*Not Only..., But Also...*': *both* the one side *and* its opposite not only can, but *must* be held together in tension, even if they seem to be contradictory, in order to understand the whole truth, the whole of the complex reality. Williams explains to readers that his project is not intended to be a systematic introduction to 'Benedictine spirituality,' but is intended to prompt reimagining possibilities through the Rule as his 'lens' on the contemporary secular world (p. 9).

His engagement with the Rule as a way of living in the world speaks back to Rod Dreher's idea in 2017 of a 'Benedict option' that ostensibly drew from the closing paragraph of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue.* MacIntyre, writing in 1981, had briefly pointed to the efforts of Christians during the decline of the Roman Empire to salvage their moral tradition by constructing 'local forms of community'.[1] To restore a sense and meaning to moral action, MacIntyre argues, the self must revive its links with the environing world. Instead of separating itself

from the outside world to find some inner 'values' of its own creation, the self 'has to find its moral identity in and through its membership in communities such as those of the family, the neighbourhood, the city and tribe.' However, this does not mean remaining tied in a narrow way to local exclusivities because 'it is in moving forward from such particularity that the search for the good, the universal, consists'.[2] Dreher, by contrast, employs MacIntyre to understand contemporary frustrations of white American conservative Christians who feel besieged in such a way that politics is no longer available to them and so their option is to withdraw from mainstream society as a mode of cultural survivalism.[3]

Williams evokes the virtue of stability in the Rule where self-rootedness within a community structure is not incompatible with a liberal democratic adherence to autonomy, but facilitates autonomy within authority that over time becomes the leaven for living authentically. Williams writes:

> The Rule's sketch of holiness ... puts a few questions to us, as Church and culture. It suggests that one of our main problems is that we don't know where to find the stable relations that would allow us room to grow without fear. The Church, which ought to embody not only covenant with God but also covenant with each other, does not always give unlimited time to grow (p. 25).

The implication is that we need to find surrogate communities that structure authenticity. Benedictine stability is the necessary ground for this. Williams highlights that authenticity requires hard work by drawing attention to Merton, a Trappist in the Benedictine tradition, as follows: 'Read Thomas Merton's journals, and you can see how hard it is – how hard it was for him – to discern what was a matter of an authentic vocation to solitude and what was conditioned by reaction to just a regimented common life' (p. 64). Williams places his emphasis on the value of stability as the pivot of the Rule that allows for self-conversion over time (p. 26).

In our new century we confront the challenge of articulating living traditions amidst global complexity. Williams writes:

> The Benedictine monk is someone struggling to live without deceit, their inner life manifest to those to whom they have promised fidelity; he is a person who makes peace by addressing the roots of conflict in himself and the community

> ... And the Benedictine community makes its proposal to the society around it on confidence that, while this society may not have chosen to identify with any religious institution, it nonetheless faces all the challenges that Benedict's monks face (p. 35).

The Rule of St. Benedict retains the ancient belief that a disciplining of the inner impulses is possible when the world seems to be getting angrier. Williams accepts that the way in which individuals are embedded in their social particularity is substantially different in contemporary society than it was in the age of St. Benedict. But it is not wholly different, either; this is why it is still instructive for a modern person to read and re-read the Rule, and why its ethical paradigms can still serve as models for contemporary living. The Rule is a means for Williams to imagine what is at stake by living honestly. For Williams, Benedictine authenticity requires teasing apart the illusions of self-fantasy that are ultimately self-serving and no one is exempt from self-delusion (p. 31). The proposal that the Benedictine tradition makes and ultimately the offer that the Christian tradition itself makes is that life exists differently in the world from patterns we seem to be oblivious to in contemporary society. This difference requires a quality of forbearance that has implications for the exercise and conduct of public debate or settling disputes within a basic recognition that we have no choice but to take time with one another if we are to work towards a sustainable future for our common global home.

Williams implicitly evokes Catholic *both/and* perspectives as a means of thinking through the implications of *either/or* dichotomies that are the warp and weft of contemporary living. Williams writes:

> The challenge that the politics of the Rule poses is how the public sphere might be able to give space to those practices and institutions that witness to the possibilities of the transcendent; how the 'rumour' is kept alive that there are levels of self-understanding and self-giving in service or adoration that keep the world of labour and production in perspective (p. 82).

Benedictine interiority is expressed by the monastic paradox of *contemptus mundi* ('contempt for the world') that sought wisdom not as 'options,' but as listening and serving the existing culture and so offers a distinctly counter-cultural position of being both hopeful in the material

world and not falling prey to the limits of existence.

The second part of the book consists of two erudite essays, one on the patchy history of monastic reform in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the other an account of Abbot Cuthbert Butler's classic, *Western Mysticism*, and its complex reception. These writings are different from the earlier essays in the book and from each other. Both require considerable background knowledge, and the second is notably remote from St Benedict's Rule. Christian mysticism aspires to apprehend spiritual truths inaccessible through intellectual means and comprises an integral part of monasticism.

Against the temptation of tribalism and its self-reinforcing cognitive dissonance, aspects of the *longue durée* of Catholic tradition, that integrates both the mystical and the intellectual, is useful for imagining a post-triumphalist and cosmopolitan Catholic culture, but this culture work is mired by incongruities between Catholic *both/and* within secular *either/or* discourse. To bring back together, through mediation that preserves, values, and celebrates differences is the requirement of moving towards the future of our common home. To live authentically in the model of the Rule, for Williams, means that the only authentic choice we have is to go on asking difficult and uncomfortable questions about how public policy either provides or fails to provide stability and how policy either reveals or obscures ways in which our social environments could be regarded as being trustworthy. The very worst thing that can happen to a society is if it comes to a point where a critical mass of the population loses confidence in the ongoing challenging process of reasoning together and draw the conclusion that they no longer have a stake in either society or culture.

Notes

1. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 263.
2. *After Virtue*, p. 205
3. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. New York: Sentinel, 2017.

James G. R. Cronin is an academic at University College Cork, Ireland. He is a regular contributor to the *Merton Journal* and is an international advisor on the board of the International Thomas Merton Society, Bellarmine, University, Louisville, Kentucky.