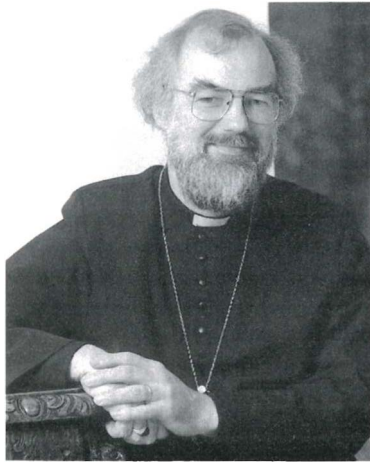


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# The theologian

*by Rowan Williams*



The suggestion that Michael Symmons Roberts, James MacMillan and I might collaborate in some way on a project connected with Theology and the Arts was both exhilarating and rather bewildering at first. The fact that Michael and James had already collaborated, to outstanding effect, could mean that I was bound to be something of a gooseberry: offering edifying theological thoughts around the edges of a serious artistic enterprise. It is still not easy to

summarise exactly what the co-operation meant; but I hope to indicate why I think the process was a bit different from my fea

The theme emerged fairly early. Michael's fascination with the story of a "virginal conception" in the course of the bombing of Hamburg by the allied forces opened up a vigorous discussion about the biblical story of Christ's conception, about current eth<sup>ic</sup> issues around genetics, and about the present cultural confusion over the unborn.

We discovered that we shared two unfashionable commitments (at least): we all believed that the virginal conception of Jesus was not a piece of slightly embarrassing theological fantasy but rather a sharply challenging and uncomfortable statement about the nature of God's creativity in the gift of Jesus to the world; and we were all sceptical about the moral high ground that had been conceded to those who wrote off the moral claims of unborn children in our society. The world of genetic engineering and experiment was for all of us a mysterious and troubling one; we were not, I think, wanting to be Luddites, but were alert to the signs of hectic Messianic enthusiasm around these matters. We felt that there was something in the middle of all these common concerns to be said about humanity, its frailty and necessary limitedness. The story of a woman conceiving as the result of a bomb blast was, at the very least, a potent parable of the dangerous marriage of creativity (artistic or scientific) with violence or violation in our culture.

The work as it emerged pivots around themes of repetition and unfreedom, and that love for humanity that effectively brings death because it cannot (to paraphrase Augustine) love human beings humanly. (This was the point of the ambiguous and puzzling figure of Bruno, the pseudo-angel of this parodic annunciation, who learns too late his own vulnerability and need.)

One very perceptive commentator (Michael O'Connor of the Royal School of Church Music) called the work "a play of absences", a meditation on this network of relations in which no-one actually holds the role they should – a daughter who is only the repetition of a mother, a mother whose parenting is nothing to do with love or commitment, a dark angel representing an absent God or absent father ...

This prompts some thoughts on the entire process of the work done together in the "pod" group of artists and theologian. Assume, for the sake

of argument, that art today has problems in the direct representation of God. It's not a remote assumption at all, as a moment's reflection will confirm. Representing God visually, verbally, aurally, is today bound to identify the artist, in the eyes of many, as someone who has chosen to occupy a specific "tribal" language and imagery, which he or she may handle with skill and even with emotionally satisfying effect, but which steps back deliberately from the task of touching and reworking the stuff of common human reacting and perceiving. Think of the awkward mixture of respect and mild derision that the composer John Tavener invites in the arts media. How then to express the theological anxiety that contemporary reality induces for the believing artist, how to do the "touching and reworking" job of art in such a way as to define a significant spiritual question?

Well, you can follow the example of the most serious religious poets of the century, TS Eliot, RS Thomas, Geoffrey Hill; you can gesture towards the gaps, as Eliot and Thomas do, or play with parodies, near-misses, of religious utterance, as Hill often does. What we settled for was something like the latter strategy, I think. What does this remind you of? A virgin, an angel, a child; all representing something that – quite apart from its setting in the war context – might serve as a powerful composite image of some of the hopes of genetic technology: control of the chance and contingency of human birth, of the inheritance of human imperfection. But colour it sombre: this is a profoundly tragic, diminishing story. What if we were in control? What could we do but reproduce the same, the sameness of our individual desires and dreams, enslaving the future to our present? So what is it that the story here being echoed is saying, the other story of virgin, angel, child? We only begin to understand that, it seems, when we have put the parody together. This is what we can do, what we can make: ourselves all over again. Who but a "dark" angel could

announce a birth that was pure repetition of what's there in us; an angel speaking for the love that freezes us as we are rather than opening us to what could be in the anarchy of grace?

The parody makes it strange, makes it new. Perhaps this is what a convincing religious art has to be today, a parody of religious themes that forces attention onto the forgotten, patronised stories behind the parody. Flannery O'Connor, the American Catholic novelist, deliberately set out in her chilling novellas and short stories to show a world without grace – not a secular world, not at all, in fact a world soaked in religious allusion, barely noticed; but a world in which obsession, hurt, disappointed love and fantastically misdirected prayer pulled constantly against the freedom of divine love. There is no "god-shaped hole" in Flannery O'Connor in the sense that there are simple questions waiting for a Christian answer. There is only the endless human construction of God in ways that frequently end up replacing God with our own deluded self-beliefs. Pursue this to its end, O'Connor seems to say, and the idea of the real and uncontrollable opposite – causeless love, "irrational" gift, the wounds and relinquishments that alone make possible the reception of such newness – takes authoritative and surprising shape.

Something like this was at work in *Parthenogenesis*; and the experience of working together on it could be described as both theologian and artist holding each other back, to make sure that it is indeed the "negative" print that appears. By denying the facile appeal to a straight language of faith, we deny that we have a language that's actually adequate to what we want to talk about. But, verbally and musically, we can construct a "myth" of human self-creation, its violence and sterility, and leave the greatest question present in those negations: what would it be for life to be brought from nothing by love? And the artist at least spends a lifetime right on the edge of understanding what an answer to that might feel like.