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## **Priest in the inner city: Subjecting the ecclesiology of John Milbank and Rowan Williams to empirical scrutiny**

**Abstract:** The article considers the strengths and weaknesses of John Milbank's ecclesiology through an examination of encounters the author has had as a Church of England priest working in the inner city. The analysis is further sharpened by setting Milbank's ecclesiology alongside Rowan Williams' ideas about the Church and priestly ministry. The article argues that while there is more to Milbank's ecclesiology than some critics have allowed, Milbank's account can be usefully supplemented by close attention to the lived experience of the Church day by day. However, in his later writing on the Church, Milbank explicitly acknowledges the tensions in his earlier ecclesiology and speaks in favour of precisely this kind of work. Nevertheless, for a more rounded characterisation of the Church as a distinctive human community we need to look at the Church taken to its limits, sticking with situations of 'dis-ease and conflict, and not looking for 'quick and false solutions'. These points can all be found reflected positively in Williams' ecclesiology.

**Keywords:** Ecclesiology; John Milbank; Rowan William; priest; inner city

### **Introduction**

A recent book, *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, explores the implications of bringing qualitative research, in particular ethnography, to bear in the

study of the Church.<sup>1</sup> The underlying rationale for this project, which represents a new and dynamic current in ecclesiology, is a concern that there is often a gap between systematic theologians' articulations about the Church and the reality of the 'actually existing' local or institutional Church: that is, the former are sometimes accused of 'idealising' the Church. *Perspective on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* does not, however, pursue its agenda uncritically such that the implications of bringing ethnography to bear are given a thorough airing. John Webster, for instance, writing in the volume, suggests that '[b]ehind the worries about idealism...lies a conviction...only half-articulated that the real is the social-historical'.<sup>2</sup> Webster goes on to argue that investigations into the Church are of two sorts. One, he says pursues the *origins* of the Church 'in the sense of the theological- metaphysical depth from which the Church arises as an apostolic society'. The other is concerned with the *phenomena* of the Church by which he means investigations of a social-historical or a social-cultural nature (i.e. of the local or institutional church). Webster says that there is a proper hierarchical arrangement between these two kinds of investigations: that is, investigations of origins precedes and governs investigations of phenomena. "Respecting the hierarchy is important," Webster says, 'because answers to the second set of inquiries can be taken to be answers to the first set of inquiries', which he thinks is mistaken.

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<sup>1</sup> Pete Ward (ed), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: MI and Cambridge, Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 2012), pp. 1-12.

<sup>2</sup> John Webster, 'In the society of God: Some Principles of Ecclesiology' in Pete Ward (ed), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: MI and Cambridge, Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 2012), p. 202.

Webster's insights are helpful – not least in getting us to think deeply about where concerns about idealism come from and also helping us clarify the diverse kinds of investigations ecclesialogists may see themselves as engaged in. However, is it right to say that in studying the Church one is engaged *either* in a metaphysical/theological study *or* a social/cultural one? Pete Ward, the editor of the said volume, seems to suggest not. He says that to understand the Church it is necessary to view it as being 'simultaneously theological and social/cultural' arguing that such a perspective is itself Christological. Ward writes:

We want to speak simultaneously about the theological and the social/cultural reality of the church because of Christ who is at once the one in whom 'all things' hold together and 'head of the church'. We see understanding as an ecclesial act that is both theological and social/cultural, and this is because of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Radical orthodox theologian John Milbank, who amongst other things, speaks of the Church as an 'exemplary form of human community' has been tarred with the

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<sup>3</sup> Pete Ward, 'Introduction' in Pete Ward (ed), *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography* (Grand Rapids: MI and Cambridge, Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing Co, 2012), pp. 2-3.

idealism brush in his depiction of the Church<sup>4</sup>. He has also been accused of talking about the Church in a way which is dualistic. Stephen Shakespeare writes:

[Milbank's view of the Church] assumes that as true politics must reside within the Church, outside the Church can only be darkness.<sup>5</sup> The potential for meaningful alliances with bodies outside the Church seems to be limited if not positively discouraged. The ability to learn from non-Christian traditions seems to be ruled out from the beginning. This theology seems to deny that creation can participate in or reflect the will of God apart from the Church. This is not only theologically questionable, it puts barriers in the way of practically working with others for the common good. And, by idealising the Church and demonizing other discourses, it insulates the Church from all external criticism and accountability.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 92.

<sup>5</sup> Why does Milbank view the Church as 'true politics'? I guess it has to do with a radical orthodox sense that the state or the secular has usurped or colonised what is rightly God's. William Cavanaugh writes: 'It is the Church, uniting earth and heaven, which is the true 'politics'. The earthly city is not a true *res publica* because there can be no justice and no common weal where God is not truly worshipped.' See William Cavanaugh, 'The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,' in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds) *Radical Orthodoxy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 185.

<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, p. 93

While these are serious charges – and if true point to an ecclesiology I would wish to distance myself from – there is a sense in which it is somewhat fashionable to knock Milbank so we do well to look carefully as to whether such criticisms are justified, including taking into account Milbank’s writing since his *magnus opus*, *Theology and Social Theory*, was published 1990.<sup>7</sup> What this paper seeks to do, therefore, is to scrutinise the strengths and possible weaknesses of Milbank’s ecclesiology through an examination of encounters I have had as a Church of England priest working in the inner city. The encounters are presented as a series of ‘thick description’ (ethnographic) vignettes, deploying a methodology I justify based on a reading of Rowan Williams on the relationship between priestly ministry and the Church<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990). For more recent writing, see John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) and John Milbank, *The Future of Love: Essays in Political Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2009)

<sup>8</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘The Christian Priest Today’, Lecture on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ripon College, Cuddesdon, May 28, 2004.

<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2097/>

(Last accessed December 8, 2015). Note, that for the purposes of this article, and in order to make my task manageable, I am focusing my attention on a single Williams’ text conscious that it sits within a much larger oeuvre. For an excellent introduction

The paper proceeds as follows. It first examines Milbank's earlier and later ideas about the Church exploring the extent to which they are vulnerable to the charges levelled against them. I then introduce Rowan Williams ideas about the Church and priestly ministry. Williams not only provides justification for my methodology – and indeed a lens through which to scrutinise my own experience of priesthood – but also offers insights about the Church in his own right. Williams' insights are helpful therefore in further clarifying Milbank's perspective on the Church. Having compared and contrasted Milbank and Williams' thinking about the Church, I then present my vignettes before finally returning to the theoretical questions raised by the paper. The argument of the paper is that while it is perhaps understandable why Milbank has attracted the criticism he has, on careful examination it is evident that there is more to his ecclesiology than his critics would allow. Nevertheless, Milbank's ecclesiology can be usefully supplemented and embellished with what we might call the fragile, compromised, suffering Church – which is essential to its very essence as a community born out of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Milbank on the Church**

Milbank has been accused of adopting a view of the Church which is both idealistic and dualistic. The former suggests that his characterisation of the Church is out of step with reality and the latter is meant to imply that for Milbank 'outside' the Church

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to the wider Williams' canon, see Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012).

is only darkness, and that the scope for meaningful alliances with outside bodies is limited and/or to be discouraged. So, let us examine Milbank's writing on the Church, starting with *Theology and Social Theory*.

For Milbank, the Church is to be understood as: 'an exemplary form of human community'<sup>9</sup>; an 'always "other governed" rather than autonomous human community'<sup>10</sup>; 'the lived project of universal reconciliation'; 'a peaceful, reconciled social order, beyond even the violence of legality'<sup>11</sup>; a place where one practices non-violence ('where it becomes more than just an idea')<sup>12</sup>; as a body which seeks to be an 'asylum, a house of refuge' from the enactment of punishment<sup>13</sup> (even while recognising its "tragic necessity")<sup>14</sup>; 'a social space where a different, forgiving and restitutionary practice is pursued', where we acknowledge that an individual's sin is 'never his alone'; and 'a space...where truly just economic exchanges occur' such that the space where arbitrary, unjust exchange 'might recede'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Milbank, *Theology*, p. 390.

<sup>10</sup> Milbank, *Theology*, p. xxxi.

<sup>11</sup> Why does Milbank speak of the 'violence of legality'? Milbank thinks that the law and order maintained by the liberal state holds up a false peace, resting on false view that human nature is fundamentally violent at root. Ibid, pp. 392-395.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 401.

<sup>13</sup> Milbank's speaking of the 'enactment of punishment' comes from a similar place as articulated in note five.

<sup>14</sup> Milbank, *Theology*, p. 428

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 428.



At the same time, Milbank wishes to emphasize that his ecclesiology is ‘not simply...the imagination of an ecclesial ideal’ but rather one which is concerned with ‘the actual genesis of real historical churches’.<sup>16</sup> In this respect, he does not spare the Church from criticism, is quick to point out the way in which it has been complicit in the emergence of a secular liberal worldview and that even now continues to pander to it.<sup>17</sup> And yet, for Milbank, the Church, while not a utopia, is not reducible to its institutional failures.<sup>18</sup> In addition, Milbank wants us to view the Church as a ‘nomad city’ ‘without a site or walls or gates’<sup>19</sup>, ‘where the lines between Church and world, spiritual and secular are blurred’.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 383.

<sup>17</sup> How would Milbank see the Church as pandering to a secular liberal view? *Theology and Social Theory* charts, amongst other things, how various theologians were complicit in the emergence of the very idea of the secular in the post-Enlightenment period. Today, radical orthodox theologians would argue that a secular consciousness – simply accepting that such a thing as the secular exists – has been imbibed by the Church, which in turn allows itself to be boxed in by constraints originating from a secular worldview (e.g. seeing religion as a private matter) or by adopting secular approaches to leadership or management. See Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 7-8 for background.

<sup>18</sup> Milbank, *Theology*, p. xxxi.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 394.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 413.

On the subject of ‘the world’, ‘worldly powers’, and how to engage with them, Milbank does not appear to be proposing a ‘don’t have anything to do with them’ approach. Certainly, he does not look favourably on a Church which mimics the world of secular liberalism, panders to it, or allows itself to be coopted by it. On the other hand, one can discern in his writing a certain resignation to the “necessity” of the liberal state, and a ‘contractual’, or legally bound, peace.<sup>21</sup> He concedes that in some circumstances coercion may be needed to prevent people who are ‘temporarily blind’ from “permanent self-damage’. ‘Such action may not be “peaceable”,’ Milbank says, ‘yet [it] can still be “redeemed”...and so contribute to the final goal of peace’.<sup>22</sup> There is a similar element of accommodation elsewhere in Milbank’s writing where he seems to say that the Church ‘must’ try to ‘extend the sphere of socially aesthetic harmony within the state’<sup>23</sup> and to coax the world and worldly powers to ‘work towards the ultimate purpose, the true heavenly peace’.<sup>24</sup> But, he says, one should not expect too much from the state given that it is committed to the formal goals of *dominium* ‘by its very nature’.<sup>25</sup> So, how does Milbank fare in *Theology and Social Theory* in relation to the criticisms levelled at him?

In terms of the idea that his view of the Church is idealistic, one can see why such a charge might be levelled: there is a certain trumpeting of the achievements of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 424.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 428.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp. 411-412.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 428-429.

the Church as human community while of course the local or institutional Church is not always exemplary. However, Milbank says explicitly that he is not interested in an ‘ecclesial ideal’ but rather ‘real historical churches’. He is highly critical of the Church in a number of significant ways and there is acknowledgement in the way he writes that the Church sometimes falls short. For example, he speaks of the Church *seeking to be* an ‘asylum’ or a ‘house of refuge’ with the clear implication that it does not always measure up.

In terms of the charge that his ecclesiology is dualistic, Milbank clearly sees the Church as standing for something different and distinctive in respect of the world although should this surprise us? However, as we have seen, he does not have ‘don’t have anything to do with outside bodies’ approach, including in relation to the state. In respect of the state, he urges caution in the Church’s dealing with it but again this does not seem unreasonable.

Is there still an element of dualism in *Theology and Social Theory*? Dualism implies to me an uncritical sense of ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ in respect of the Church, a sense perhaps that the Church has clear and distinct boundaries in respect of the world. For Milbank to hold such a position would be strange given that at the heart of the radical orthodox project is a challenging of classic binaries (e.g. secular/sacred). Moreover, while Milbank does at times lapse into language of Church/state, Church/world etc – as we all probably do – he also speaks of the Church as a ‘nomad city’ “without a site or walls or gates”, “where the lines between Church and world, spiritual and secular are blurred”. This seems acutely expansive not dualistic.

Furthermore, if we turn to Milbank's more recent writing on the Church, where he seeks to respond to some of the criticisms he received in the wake of *Theology and Social Theory*, we again find that it is an over-simplification to say that Milbank's ecclesiology is either idealistic or dualistic. In a chapter on ecclesiology in *Being Reconciled*, Milbank talks about the incarnation and the descent of the Spirit inaugurating a "counter-polity" which refuses "all the usual conditions of human rule", including the "exclusivist logic of inside/outside".<sup>26</sup> Milbank also says there is no hierarchy in the Church between the "internal and mystical", on the one hand, and the "public and political" on the other. Rather, he emphasises, there is "one hierarchy of the Eucharist and the ecclesial *corpus mysticum*", which is both mystical and political.<sup>27</sup> It is hard to see this way of speaking as dualistic.

Clearly refuting idealism, Milbank goes on: "In heaven [the Church] is perfect, but on earth its sway is not utopian" and further "for now we glimpse dimly its perfection within a process of reconciliation that is but fragmentarily realised".<sup>28</sup> Continuing, Milbank notes that while the descent of the Son and Spirit "inaugurates an altogether different possibility" – "a narrow chink of light" – allowing "a certain counter-movement of progress...towards the source of this light", redemption remains "a vague rumour".<sup>29</sup> Thus, the Church is the "brotherhood and sisterhood of the Grail, of those ceaselessly questing for the Eucharist, which Milbank identifies as "the

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<sup>26</sup> Milbank, *Being Reconciled*, p. 105.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

source of the Church”, and so “questing for the Church itself”. However, great care is needed: when the Church is “objectified as mere human sovereignty”, Milbank emphasises, then “its nature is lost”.<sup>30</sup> Finally, how is the Church constituted? For Milbank, it is established “both as the truth of the Logos...revealed by the good of the Holy Spirit, and as the gift of the Spirit, which is peace” intermingling with the Spirit’s “specific gifts”, which are *human talents*.<sup>31</sup> To incorporate the human into the mix is surely not to be idealistic!

Milbank also writes about the Church in his 2009 book *The Future of Love*. Here again, he clarifies his position with a non-idealistic and non-dualistic ecclesiology. Responding to his critics directly, Milbank opens the chapter entitled ‘Enclaves, or where is the Church?’ with the sentence: “It was not the purpose of *Theology and Social Theory* to imagine the Church as Utopia. Nor to discover in its ramified and fissiparous history some single ideal exemplar”.<sup>32</sup> As Milbank explains, this would be to envisage the Church in spatial terms – “as another place, which we might arrive at” but this is not what the Church is. The Church is not – for Milbank – “a peace we must slowly construct...imbibing hard-learned lessons”.<sup>33</sup> Rather, it is peace “already given, superabundantly, in the breaking of bread by the risen Lord. But, on the other hand, the Church is not a peace “already realised” where our labour is excused but

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 106. Italics mine.

<sup>32</sup> Milbank, *The Future*, p. 133.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

rather is a gift where – like any gift – we only get “traces of the giver”.<sup>34</sup> It is here that Milbank concludes, famously: “Fortunately the Church is first and foremost neither a program, nor a “real” society, but instead an enacted, serious fiction”<sup>35</sup>.

If this is to do enough to clarify the distinctive and subtle nature of Milbank’s ecclesiology – particularly in more recent renditions – what, on the other hand, is missing from his account? Here, and continuing with his chapter, ‘Enclaves, or Where is the Church?’, what we find, helpfully, is that Milbank is very candid about how his account of the Church can be supplemented and embellished, in fact precisely in the ways this article is pushing. Moreover, Milbank makes connections – as I do – with Rowan William’s ecclesiology, acknowledging that the task ahead may not just be one for academics, which I understand to mean that reflections on the nature of the Church need also come from those with a pastoral profile, including scholar-priests. Milbank writes: “If one neglects the ‘micro-temporality’ of the Church, its proper precariousness then a new kind of narrative essentialism might intrude, ignoring the fact that the Church is present *in an obscure but precise act of charity* as in the deliberations of epochal councils”.<sup>36</sup> Further, Milbank says specifically that *Theology and Social Theory* “requires (infinite) supplementation by *judicious narratives of ecclesial happenings*, which alone would indicate the shape of the Church that we desire”.<sup>37</sup> At same time, Milbank acknowledges that there may exist “a certain

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 134. Italics mine.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 135. Italics mine.

tension” between his way of speaking – witness the accusations of idealism and dualism – and the “narratives of ecclesial happenings”, which he says also need brought to the table.<sup>38</sup> This is precisely the work this article seeks to do reflecting on encounters I had as a priest in the inner city.

This seems an appropriate point to consider what Williams brings to the mix, remembering that Williams offers both a justification for using priestly encounters as a window onto the Church, a lens through which to interpret my own experiences of priesthood, and a distinctive ecclesiology in his own right.

### **Williams on the Church and priestly ministry**

Williams warns against one view of the Church which he describes as ‘popular, seductive but damaging’, namely that the Church is ‘essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith who get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people “outside”’.<sup>39</sup> Williams says that while this way of seeing things appears harmless at first ‘it is a long way from what the New Testament encourages us to think about the Church’. Instead, Williams suggests that the Church is ‘first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be’. He adds that what we have to do about the Church is ‘not first organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape’. Continuing, he writes:

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, ‘The Christian Priest’.

[The Church] is a place where we can see properly – God, God’s creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe.

Williams concludes: ‘Forget this, and you’re stuck with a faith that depends heavily on what individuals decide and what goes on inside your head’.

Williams sees clear and distinct connection between priestly ministry and the Church with the former offering a window onto the latter. ‘[M]inisterial priesthood’ is a ‘making visible of what the Church is’, Williams says; it is about the ‘inextricable involvement of apostolic ministry with the very identity of the Church’, and ‘being in the Church’ is ‘being in the climate...of priesthood’.

Developing his ideas further, Williams says that when Christ calls he calls into a community with ‘diverse roles and tasks’, one of which is that of apostle. He says that the task of apostle is that of witness: ‘to point in word and action to the basic facts of the action of Christ’, adding that the apostle has the responsibility of ‘connecting this or that community with the fact of Jesus, and so in turn connecting communities with one and another’. Williams then asks what does this mean for the priest today?



For Williams the priest has ‘one fundamental task’ which breaks down into ‘a number of different responsibilities’ – three in fact. The fundamental task, Williams says, is that of ‘announcing in word and action in the middle of the community what the community is and where it is’. He continues:

...it is telling the Church that it is the created universe insofar as that universe has been taken up into the activity of the eternal Word and transfigured by this fact, and that it is in consequence the place where Christ’s self offering continues to be most freely real and effective. The priest is therefore in the business of – as we could put it – immersing in Christ’s action the gifts and prayers and love of human beings.

These things, Williams says, are ‘too weak and compromised to make peace’ so they are ‘borne along by the one that truly and eternally makes peace, the self-giving of the Word’. Central here is the Eucharist, Williams notes, ‘where our action towards God is taken up in God’s action towards God’ and ‘where the making our own of Christ’s prayer at his table opens us up to receive Christ’s life’.

For this to happen, the priest needs to have skill, willingness and space for three things to happen. First, recalling Habakkuk and Ezekiel, Williams says the priest needs to be a *lookout*. This involves telling the Church ‘what and where it is’. To do this, Williams emphasises, the priest must be ‘free to see what and where [the Church] is, particularly highlighting things that others don’t see or are not prepared to see. This requires a fair amount of literacy about the world, Williams says, and it is important that the priest does not overload him or herself with duties. ‘The effective

and faithful priest,' Williams concludes, 'is a witness to how Christ's offering takes up what is ours to make it a gift to God...'

Secondly, the priest needs to be an *interpreter*. This is about helping people 'make sense to and of each other' and to 'see Christ in one another'. This is particularly important, Williams says, when first impressions are one of 'alienness and threat'. This process of interpreting is not about sentimentality or a generalised acceptability ('I am right and you are right and all is right as right can be') but rather it is about asking: 'Where in this life and witness is the healing and absolving of Jesus, where is the summons of Jesus to penitence, where is the bearing of the cross, where is the resurrection?'. In situations of conflict, being an interpreter involves showing people 'the suffering Christ' in one another, visible on all sides. Interestingly, being an interpreter is *not* so much about 'interpreting the Church's teaching to the world "outside" or interpreting culture to and for the Church', William emphasises.

Thirdly, Williams says the priest needs to be a *weaver* of communal life. This is done partly through leadership of public worship and sacramental life. However, being a weaver is also about 'making connections at many levels', including: 'bringing the alienated to meet each other'; 'peacemaking in the individual and collective context'; 'addressing racial and social conflict'; 'brokering plans and aspirations in the local community'; and 'trying to make faith humanly compelling'.

Williams notes that being a lookout, an interpreter and a weaver is – not surprisingly – extremely challenging and, at times, frustrating and draining. While he highlights some particular challenges of our day, he is quick to add that we should not

think that being a priest is more difficult today just that it is difficult in different ways.<sup>40</sup>

Williams goes on to ask what resources are needed for the calling he has identified. His answer is that what is needed is a trustworthy person. What renders a person trustworthy, he says, is faithfulness. Faithfulness, for Williams, is about a willingness to be ‘consistent and patient’; to stick with situations of ‘dis-ease and conflict’; and not to look for ‘quick and false solutions’. Faithfulness relates also to personal discipline (‘a rhythm of prayer and study’). It involves a certain familiarity with ‘just how difficult and tragic’ life can be, and importantly it involves truly paying attention to people. ‘We can’t uncover the face of Christ in people,’ Williams says, ‘unless we have the habit of real attention to human faces in all their diversity’. To achieve this, it is important to spend time in silence, in adoration, and with scripture in order to become familiar with Christ’s face. A certain detachment is also important, Williams says, ‘not from human suffering or human delight but from dependence on human achievement’. Good theology, he says, offers training in such detachment. Williams

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<sup>40</sup> Williams’ social commentary is interesting here. ‘The role of lookout is complex when our culture is simply so diverse, and when we are constantly struggling with a climate of pervasive mild cynicism, where the corruption of a lot of our communication leaves you feeling very much at sea in trying to find words of transparent truthfulness...The weaver may feel his or her integrity disappearing in the effort to create a living web of generous relationships, because we are all these days so much more self-aware, in sometimes less than helpful ways, aware of how we are seen and “read” by others, and of the muddle of our motivation.’

concludes: 'Theology is supposed to let us know the depth and dimension of what has been done, the scale of the landscape we inhabit, so that we are less likely to see the Church as just a human institution dependent upon skill, agreement and goodwill'.

### **Milbank and Williams compared**

It is useful to ask to what extent Williams cuts a different or a similar tone to Milbank. In his writing about the Church, Williams certainly strikes at notions of 'inside' and 'outside' in relation to the Church. Key to Williams' view of the Church is this idea of it being a 'dimension in the universe', a 'space (already) cleared by God through Jesus'. It is a 'climate' or a 'landscape' we need to inhabit (less organise). This is a most expansive ecclesiology: for Williams the Church can be found any where and is certainly not just to be associated with those people who gather in a particular building.

Milbank comes closest to this understanding of the Church when he talks about it as 'other governed' rather than an 'autonomous human community' or as a space where different kinds of things can be pursued or come into view (e.g. non-violence or just exchange). He also seems closest to Williams' perspective when he talks about the Church as a 'nomad city' 'without a site or walls or gates', 'where the lines between Church and world, spiritual and secular are blurred'. Thus, there seems to be some overlap between Milbank and Williams.

However, are there also significant differences between the two men either of tone or substance? In some ways, it is hard to know this simply from studying a

limited number of their written texts: such nuances probably need to be teased out in conversation. However, there is perhaps a greater tendency on the part of Milbank to boast in the Church compared with Williams. For Milbank, the Church – certainly in his early work – is an exemplary community, a reconciled social order, non-violent, a refuge from the enactment of punishment, a place of just economic exchanges – although he may mean this in the sense of ‘this is the Church but we do not often see it’. Williams, on the other hand, seems to leave matters more open. The Church is a ‘place’ – undefined – we are invited to enter. It is where we connect communities with Jesus and one another – again the precise form it may take is left unspecified. It is where we bring the alienated to meet each other. It is where we address racial and social conflict. It is where we broker plans and aspirations in the local community. However, Williams does not assert the content of what may be realised here: the Church may be a place where we bring the alienated to meet each other but Williams does not proclaim in advance that it will be a place of reconciliation or non-violence. This sense of latency, of something begun in Christ, but which may or may not be realised, comes across strongly in Williams and at times seems to set him apart from Milbank. Let us now turn to my encounters in the parish to see what vision of the Church comes through here.

Williams, it will be recalled, spoke of the priest as lookout, interpreter and weaver ‘making visible’ the Church as a place where we can ‘see properly – God, God’s creation, ourselves’. In the vignettes which follow, I introduce *five* categories which make sense of my own experience of priesthood. These are: being sent out; coming alongside difficult lives; finding our limits; seeing the bigger picture; and being left with some difficult questions. These categories are by no means exclusive

in relation to Williams' ideas of lookout, interpreter and weaver. Indeed, there is considerable overlap. However, I am interested in areas where my emphasis might differ from Williams too. Once we have digested the vignettes, I will return to what they say about the nature of the Church, in turn further adjudicating between Milbank and Williams.

The vignettes embody a particular style of ethnographic writing where the emphasis is on 'telling it how it is' such that the reader might have a sense of 'being present'. Each vignette is followed by a short reflection which aims to move us from the particular to the general. All names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

### **Priest in the inner city: five vignettes**

#### **A. Being sent out**

*It's gone eleven in the King's Arms. My attempt to leave so I don't fall off my bike riding home has been thwarted as another generous person buys me a drink. The door has been shut, the curtains drawn, and the ash trays put out. It's only regulars now. Conversation and smoke flows freely up and down the bar, even though the smoking ban has been in place for years. Someone ribs the bar maid. 'Fuck off' she mouths in a friendly way, gesticulating with a finger. People have long since stopped minding their language just because the vicar's there. A woman comes in selling stolen goods, desperate to get her next fix. A couple examines the merchandise and buy some cheese at a knock down price. No one bats an eyelid. My companions rail me again with yet another*

*heartfelt interpretation of Revelation. They read it on the internet. It makes no sense to me but it does to them. I weave my way home on my bicycle, tired but strangely inspired.*

I have been visiting the local pubs with my collar on for over three years now. It is a good way to connect with the people of the parish and to meet them on their own terms. The people are welcoming and generous, often buying me drinks when I should be going home. The drinking is heavy. The conversation is scurrilous and lewd but often very funny. People know how to enjoy themselves. It is not uncommon for the conversation to drift to matters of religion: there is something about my being there which seems to invite this. For me, the pub has something of the confessional about it as people bear their souls – particularly when they have had a few drinks – and look for reassurance that they are ‘okay’. The pubs are mainly frequented by regulars and therefore can be somewhat exclusive but they also offer community to people who otherwise would have none: there is a sense in which people look out for each other. Sat at the bar on a Thursday night I am often at my happiest, knowing that there is no where else I would rather be.

## **B. Coming alongside difficult lives**

*Standing, slightly swaying at the bar, Kit could just not get over it. It's Saturday afternoon and the vicar has just walked in and ordered a pint. 'Are you for real?' he says incredulous, offering me his hand in a slap of a handshake. 'You are not a strip o'gram?' someone else asks.*

*I chat with Andy, an ex-soldier and policeman, who now deals in cars. Andy drinks cider with ginger in it. 'What happened the other night?' I ask. Someone I know had been in a fight but Andy was none the wiser.*

*Kit sidles up to me. 'My daughter has epilepsy. She's seven years old,' he says, the pain evident on his face. 'I pray to God every night but can you pray for her?' 'Will you pray for her?' he repeats.*

*Kit still hasn't got over me being there. He gets out his mobile and asks Andy to take our photograph. We stand close, his arm round my shoulder and mine round his. I smile a big smile. Click. Kit and the vicar in the pub!*

*'I am a bad man,' Kit volunteers suddenly, burdened by worry and guilt. I try to ease his burden. 'But what can I do?' Kit asks. 'Ask God to help you,' I offer weakly to the man who prays for his daughter every night.*

*'You will pray for Lucy, won't you?' Kit asks as I leave.*

While we laugh a lot in the parish, I also come face to face with huge amounts of suffering. We are not talking bad days or minor upsets but years of trauma, ill-health, abuse or anxiety, usually against a backdrop of poverty. A big part of my job is to listen to people, and in so doing honour them in a context where they are frequently fobbed off or given short shrift (e.g. via the benefits' system). I also try and offer practical help because sometimes a listening ear is not enough. Often a deep anger lurks just beneath the surface and it is not uncommon for this to be directed at me. I



try to remain calm, and to be patient and constant but it is not easy and sometimes the scale of the suffering gets to me.

### **C. Finding our limits**

*Jim turned up out of the blue some two years ago – a recovering alcoholic in his 60s who had been re-housed in one of the area’s sheltered accommodation. To begin with things went smoothly. Jim was not drinking for the first time in years. He started coming regularly to church. He joined our bible study, and we even took him on our parish weekend away.*

*There was always something slightly unnerving about Jim’s behaviour. He didn’t like to be interrupted, took a particular interest in children, and was constantly sensitive to the possibility of being slighted. At our weekly bible study, Jim had a stock of phrases about Christianity which he trotted out whenever he got the chance. I learnt them by heart: ‘God knows the secrets of our heart...Nobody can fool God...Nobody is perfect...We are all sinners’. Try as you may to move him on or plant new seeds, the response was always the same.*

*Some months later, the local newspaper began a campaign to raise money for a little boy to go to America to have an operation he could not get on the NHS. Jim adopted the campaign as his own, writing letters and making copies of articles on the case to circulate (or more correctly getting us to do these things!). However, the campaign soon became an obsession. Anyone who*

*didn't embrace it with the same enthusiasm became the target of Jim's wrath. 'Call yourself a Christian!' he sneered.*

*As the weeks went by, Jim's behaviour became increasingly erratic and challenging. He was banned from the communal areas of his accommodation, we heard. One day, he was seen being escorted to a police vehicle from the local community association. It soon became clear that Jim had started drinking again.*

*Things finally came to a head at our weekly coffee morning. Seated on his own, Jim called me over. He wanted me to visit one of our parishioners because he said 'he was worried about her'. The situation was complex – it was not the way Jim said it was. I listened, assured him that the person in question was okay, and sought to curtail the conversation before it got out of hand. A few minutes later Jim beckoned me back. 'I've got to go now,' I said, 'I have a meeting at the bank.' Jim exploded in a ton of obscenities and abuse. 'You call yourself a fucking Christian, you piss-artist. You're going to the bank to get money for your fucking booze!' As the situation escalated, we asked him to leave. It escalated more. We called the police. Jim is now banned from our coffee morning.*

*Some weeks later I visited Jim in prison after I had tracked him down there. I could tell he was pleased to see me. He talked a continuous, hard to decipher, stream of words, railing against the world. Then the prison officers came. There was a problem with my visit. They put Jim in a cell while they went to*

*sort it out. Jim lost it. The visit was called off. The last I heard was Jim shouting and banging on the cell door.*

While we may have all sorts of heroic images of the Church as an accepting or forgiving place, my experience is that we are frequently taken to our limits both institutionally and personally. Often I do not know what to do. I am unable to bring about reconciliation between feuding parties or groups, or with people who have taken against me. I frequently feel compromised by failing to speak out in the face of abusive or prejudiced talk, and sometimes we have no choice but to call the police or restrict people's attendance of our activities – although always as a last resort.

#### **D. Seeing the bigger picture**

*It's Saturday evening on a church weekend away. 'Come quickly, Martin. Steve is having an epileptic fit.' I run over to the lounge to find Steve, combat trousers, grey shaved hair and stubble, in his fifties, laid out on the sofa. Sofia, from Ukraine, is concerned. He normally has one fit, she says, but this time he has had two. We call an ambulance.*

*With others watching Steve, I return to the barbeque to check on the burgers and sausages. People gather. Food is served.*

*There is tension in the air. Before his fit, Steve had become aggressive: threatening to throw Emma out of the window. Emma, 10, is frightened. Kylie is fuming, threatening to call the police. Molly is stressed. 'I am sorry', she*

*says, 'but Steve's a prick.' Josh loiters awkwardly, controlled by his mother's moods. They sit apart from the main group, looking sullen, before sloping off.*

*The ambulance arrives. Steve is taken away. Sofia goes with him. We give her a phone and some money. 'Call us when you know what's happening. Someone can come and collect you,' we say.*

*Kylie has lost it, gone into a dark place where no one can reach her. She sits bent over in the meeting room. Someone has put a blanket over her. Josh is throwing up.*

*I return to the barbeque. Ice creams are being served and we sing camp fire songs.*

*Sofia calls. It's around 10 o'clock. 'We can collect them from the hospital.'*

*Steve limps out of A&E to the waiting car. We set off back, retracing our steps past the night clubs and curry houses.*

*A text comes through on my phone. 'Kylie is really upset. She doesn't want Steve anywhere near her or Emma.' What are our options?*

*We put Steve and Sofia in the lounge to sleep, hoping we can keep the warring parties apart, hoping that by the morning calmer heads will prevail.*

*I hang around until midnight waiting for everyone to go to bed.*

*I wake at six with a start: the memories of the day before flooding back and needing to write a sermon.*

*Steve and Sofia are keeping a low profile in the lounge. I go to see them. 'What do you want to do, this morning?' I ask, unsure myself of the answer. 'Sofia wants to go to the church service but she doesn't want to go without me,' Steve says. 'I think you should both come,' I say, now certain of it. 'If there is any trouble, we will just manage it,' I add, secretly dreading what might happen.*

*I accompany Steve and Sofia to the meeting room. Steve walks awkwardly with Sofia supporting him. He looks old and pitiful. They sit at the back. Kylie is sleeping and misses the service.*

*'You are the rock on which the church in this place is to be built,' I tell people, reminding them that this was where we had begun on Friday night. I quote St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. 'If one part of the body suffers, all the other parts suffer with it; if one part is praised, all the other parts share in its happiness.'*

Although things are sometimes very difficult, I try and keep sight of the bigger picture, of the possibilities, of the potential, of a sense of how things might be. For me, Kylie is not just a prolific shoplifter, or whatever her media label would be, but a complicated, wounded individual, who has been touched by Jesus Christ and who

sings like an angel. On the streets, I see the beauty of the recently arrived Somali community – a beauty that those who fear them cannot see. I see acts of kindness in the pub infamous for its squalor and its drug dealing where no wants to go. I encounter faith among people who never go to Church, and amid the feuding and division, I hold a vision of unity in my heart.

#### **E. Being left with some difficult questions**

*I don't remember exactly when I met Dan but he started coming to our Sunday Drop In – a kind of breakfast club with prayers for people who were unlikely to come to our main church service.*

*Dan had grown up in children's homes. He took medication for schizophrenia. He once told me how he had killed a man but had got off 'on a technicality'. He was an ex- or more likely a current heroin addict, and he looked like a man who had taken a lot of drugs.*

*Dan lived with Lily in one of the high rise flats. Lily was in a wheel chair, having had one of her legs amputated. Though in her 30s, she had serious health problems. They were both on methadone. Their relationship was volatile but they stayed together. Lily clearly meant the world to Dan.*

*Dan in particular found Drop In a support. Often, he would come without Lily, tucking into the bacon sandwiches, playing pool, and unburdening himself*

*about what was getting him down, his worries about Lily's health, and the stress of being her main carer. Dan always asked us to pray for Lily.*

*One day, the church office and the primary school across the road were broken into. Not much was stolen but there was quite a lot of damage. CCTV evidence identified Dan as the culprit. Dan said he could remember nothing about it. It appeared he hadn't been taking his medication and was looking for money for drugs. The police were keen to prosecute, with the beat officer saying he wanted to get Dan off his patch. We spoke to Dan about the upset that the break-in had caused but decided not to press charges. However, the school took him to court.*

*On the day of the hearing, I accompanied Dan to the local magistrate's court. The barrister defending Dan did a good job. My presence in court – as Dan's vicar – was acknowledged as was my offer to remind Dan to take his medication. Dan avoided a custodial sentence, receiving instead a fine which would be taken out of his benefits. As we left court, Dan and I joked at how lucky he'd been. I could scarcely conceal my delight with the outcome.*

*Some months later, Dan announced that he and Lily were moving to a new place a few miles away – a bungalow which would be easier for Lily with her disability. I was sad to hear they were leaving but offered to help with their move, picking up a hire van on the day. Apart from their bed and a TV, their possessions fitted into a few carrier bags.*

*After they moved, I phoned Dan a few times but we fell out of touch. Then came news that Lily had died. I tried to call but the number no longer worked so I went round to see if I could find him. Dan answered the door, gave me a hug and told me what had happened. It sounded terrible. Dan kept bursting into tears. He told me Lily had been buried under an apple tree in Gloucestershire where her family had come from. Before I left, I prayed with Dan. I felt very inadequate.*

*The other day, I bumped into Dan as I was passing near his house. Life sounded as rubbish as ever. I encouraged him to come along to Drop In but I haven't seen him.*

While there are times of laughter, happiness and meaning when the harshness of life fades into the background, it seems wrong to end on this note – an overly rosy Christian optimism that is not born out by the facts. The reality is that for many people the suffering and the hardship never stop. There are no obvious signs of healing, the lifting of burdens, or the onset of ‘full life’. Death, perversely, offers a kind of release. However, it leaves us with huge questions. What is the meaning of Jim’s life or Kylie’s or Lily’s or Dan’s in the face of so much hardship, and how do we speak of the love of God in relation to them? Kyrie eleison, I cry.

### **From priestly ministry to the Church: what kind of Church?**

Milbank speaks of the Church as an exemplary but other governed human community, a reconciled, non-violent, social order, a refuge from the enactment of



punishment, and a space where we acknowledge an individual's sin is never his alone. In his more recent work, Milbank emphasises the Church on earth is not utopian. Rather, we glimpse its perfection dimly. It is only fragmentarily realised.

Williams speaks of the Church as a climate or a landscape to inhabit. It is where we can see properly and where we connect communities with Jesus and one another. It is where we bring the alienated to meet each other. It is where we address racial and social conflict. It is where we broker plans and aspirations of the local community. So, how do these ideas stand in relation to my experiences in the parish?

#### *A climate to inhabit*

Here, I think of the pub and the drop in not to idealise them but to emphasise the importance of the Church being there, and of honouring and affirming the people by being present and listening to them. I note the sincerity of the prayers and the acts of confession I hear there.

#### *Finding our limits*

Often, and in contrast to some of Milbank's assertions, the Church does not stand apart from the violence of the world or the enactment of punishment. In fact, in extremis, we rely on the police, who yet are also part of the body of Christ. We struggle to bring the alienated to meet each other, or address racial conflict, as often people do not want to know. 'We need to try and get on,' I once said in the pub

having listened to yet another diatribe against the Somalis. ‘You may need to get on. We fucking don’t,’ came the reply.

*Being exemplary?*

And yet, at the same time, the Church does on occasions inhabit the space identified by Williams or stand for something distinctive as identified by Milbank. When we refused to prosecute Dan, who had stolen from us, and instead went to support him in court, we stood apart from the violence of punishment. While Dan – and Jim and Kylie – challenge us, we know that their sin is not theirs’ alone, and we welcome them. And, as lookout and interpreter, we try and maintain the bigger picture. You are the rock on which the Church is built, I said even as the community threatened to tear itself apart.

And lastly, if we are left with difficult questions, we do not seek easy answers or run away. We stick with situations of dis-ease.

**Conclusions**

At the beginning of the paper, I suggested that Milbank’s ecclesiology can be usefully supplemented and embellished by what we might call the fragile, compromised, suffering Church, which I believe is what comes across clearly in my vignettes. However, with reference to Milbank’s later writing on the Church it seems that this is work he would welcome – what he refers to as the Church’s ‘micro-temporality’ or its ‘proper precariousness’, a Church glimpsed in obscure acts of charity (and much

more). To speak in this way is not to knock the Church in the sense of gloating over its frailties or failings or to suggest somewhat gleefully that it is a poor shadow of the body ushered in by Christ – as some might do – but rather it is to identify something fundamentally Christ-like about the Church which is part of its very essence. The Church taken to its limits, sticking with situations of ‘dis-ease and conflict’, not looking for ‘quick and false solutions’, is how the Church finds itself, and catches glimpses of exemplariness or inhabits that space in the universe already cleared by God. However, notions of exemplariness need to be spoken of carefully if they are to be spoken about at all, and Williams’ ecclesiology – pointing in the direction of the Church without defining its ‘achievements’ ahead of time – is sometimes better for this than Milbank’s.<sup>41</sup> It is helpful – with Webster – to think of ecclesiology in terms of the study of both origins and phenomena in respect of the Church. However, as I hope this paper has shown, our study of the social/cultural Church is also a study of the Church metaphysical, theological, and Christological.

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<sup>41</sup> How we explain the sometimes different emphases of Williams’ and Milbank’s ecclesiology is worth reflecting on. While the two men have a long, entwined history, they arguably have different stakes in the Church (Williams as a church leader who has been ‘in ministry’ for a significant part of his career and Milbank as a lay theologian). However, whether these things are really determinative in terms of their particular emphases is an open question. I am nevertheless grateful for an anonymous reviewer for making these suggestions.