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Rowan Williams’ *Faith in the Public Square* is a provocative contribution to contemporary socio-political discourse. I recommend Williams’ lectures to any reader interested in religion’s voice in secular societies. The book collects twenty-six lectures given between 2002 and 2012 at venues as varied as the European Policy Centre in Brussels and the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences at the Vatican. In seven parts, Williams addresses secularism, liberalism, the environment, the economy, justice, diversity, and religion. The author writes with his characteristic charity, theological acumen, and philosophical insight.

Some of the initial essays in the volume—especially “Has Secularism Failed” and “Europe, Faith and Culture”—show Williams’ skill in speaking to both specialists and to educated religious and non-religious lay readers. Specialists interested in social theory, political history, and the theologico-political problem will appreciate Williams’ Augustinian and Sturzo-ian commitment to rational, historical process rather than facile notions of historical progress. This commitment frees Williams from both unwarranted optimism and pessimism, enabling a hopeful engagement with the secular other.

Educated lay readers invested in debates regarding the place of faith in supposedly secular spaces will appreciate Williams’ creative deploying of the Christian tradition and the necessary commitments of religious persons. Williams mines the genealogies of Western visions of God, person, world, and liberty in order to expose the irreducibly religious—and usually Christian—patterns of speech that ground contemporary debates.

As one can expect with Williams, the weaknesses here are few. Given their basis in public lectures, the essays sometimes lack the precision one expects from Williams. Some of the more provocative aspects of Williams’ thought—the relationship between same-sex couples and marriage law, the relationship between relativism and a stable human nature—are often enough present in the essays as evocative gestures. But in the charged atmosphere surrounding such issues, the reader craves detail, distinction, and explication.

Nevertheless, the book’s strengths are many. I highlight two present across the spectrum of essays. First, a useful thread runs throughout. Repeatedly, Williams gives a coherent rationale for the “procedural secularism” by which a state may decline to privilege a given religion (2). In so doing, he creates space for dialogue between the religious and the secular. But he simultaneously undermines various arguments for “programmatic secularism” by which a state may ban private convictions from public space (3). In so doing, he demands that we recognize that the religious and the secular are not partitioned from one another but are always dialoguing within a complex mutuality. In this way, Williams avoids both “renewed bids for theocracy” and the “complete privatizing of faith” (135).
distinguishing secularisms, Williams is trying to restore our faith in the public square as a place where humans—outfitted with all their commitments—may engage in “argumentative democracy” (135).

Second, Williams’ retrieval of peculiarly Christian language is a salutary contribution to the “argumentative democracy” he hopes will characterize the twenty-first century public square. Williams faithfully and creatively excavates the Christian tradition for more adequate descriptions of various crises in contemporary life. He is particularly sensitive to the way we speak of God’s relation to human and non-human creation and of the consequences of these descriptions for our socio-political existence as embodied humans. Much rides on whether or not we recognize other persons and non-human creation as gifts from God that lead us toward unity with God. I note as well that Williams’ use of the tradition is appropriately nuanced. The matter is not one of identifying Christianity as the source of everything bad about modern life or conversely as the source of the few remaining goods to which we must desperately cling. Rather, Christianity provides us with a true description of what it means to be human. The Christian tradition’s meditation on the person can thus re-ground many unwieldy debates about the good of political life, the origin and durability of rights, the duty of humans to the environment, the purpose of economic growth, etc.

Williams has thus attempted to contribute to a real discussion of the absolutely necessary place of religious faith in the public square. Further, he seeks to restore our faith in the very idea of a public square. On both counts, he has succeeded with rigor and elegance. His style is pleasing and direct, blending sophisticated teaching, persuasive argumentation, and plenty of delight. Readers will be pleased with the breadth of topics and Williams’ admirable grasp of a startling array of literature, theological, literary, political, and philosophical.

Across the broad array of topics, the essays speak from both a Christian and a religious perspective. That is, though Williams writes from a self-consciously Christian perspective, he is aware that many of his arguments hold for the religious person more generally. Thus, the title does not refer solely to the Christian faith but rather to the robust, welcome, and necessary presence of religious persons and communities in public discourse.

The book is well worth the money and will be useful for many different types of readers interested in the complex shape the theologico-political problem has taken in the twenty-first century.