



# Overcoming political tribalism

Rowan Williams

The third PM Glynn Lecture on  
Religion, Law and Public Life 2019

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# Preface

Paddy Glynn was the last of the founding fathers to sit in the Commonwealth Parliament. He was elected to the House of Representatives in 1901 under state electoral laws (as were all the members of the inaugural Parliament), and from 1903 served in the House as Member for Angas. He was elected unopposed in four elections and prevailed over opponents in two more. In the 1919 election, however, the Honourable Patrick McMahon Glynn KC MP, Minister for Home and Territories in Billy Hughes's Nationalist government, was defeated 9,217 votes to 9,468 by his Labor opponent, Joel Moses Gabb.

Therefore, 2019 marks an important centenary for Glynn, but also for the country. As his biographer, the Reverend Professor Gerald Glynn O'Collins SJ AC, has observed, when Glynn lost his seat, some of the giants of the Federation period — among them, Kingston, Deakin, Reid, Downer, and Forrest — were dead, and Barton would join them a month later. None of the founding fathers sat in Parliament in Canberra, although Glynn attended its inauguration as the national capital in 1927 as one of three surviving members of the first Parliament. "Glynn's day was done", as Father O'Collins said, but an ending is always a beginning. A Commonwealth had been well and truly established. It was now up to the country to keep it.

The task of keeping a Commonwealth — of ensuring that our life in common continues to flourish — is not a task that has an end, and the PM Glynn Lecture on Religion, Law and Public Life honours Glynn's unwavering commitment to it. For the 2019 Glynn centenary year, the third PM Glynn Lecture was delivered by one of the most distinguished religious leaders and public figures of our time, Rowan Williams. The topic for his lecture, overcoming political tribalism, goes directly to major questions at the intersection of religion, law, and public life today: what do we share? What do we owe each other? How do we disagree? How do we live together? Our moment is one where the vagaries of politics and culture in democratic societies force us to confront these and similar foundational questions, which until quite recently were thought to be long settled. Lord Williams's lecture provides some indispensable reflections for answering them in our new situation.

Exploring what these answers might be is a task that the Institute will continue, in particular with a book of essays responding to this lecture, which will be published by the Kapunda Press in 2020. We are immensely honoured to have Lord Williams join us in contributing to this conversation, which has really only just begun.

**Dr Michael Casey**

Director

PM Glynn Institute



## Dr Rowan Williams

Rowan Douglas Williams is the 35th Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, and an honorary Professor of Contemporary Christian Thought in the University of Cambridge. From 2002 to 2012, he served as the 104th Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, Primate of All England and Metropolitan.

Born in 1950, he was educated at Dynevor Secondary Grammar School in Swansea, and then at Christ's College, Cambridge. He studied for his doctorate at Christ Church and Wadham College, Oxford, working with the Russian Orthodox theologian, Vladimir Lossky.

His career began as a lecturer at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield (1975 to 1977), before returning to Cambridge as Tutor and Director of Studies at Westcott House. After ordination in Ely Cathedral, and serving as Honorary Assistant Priest at St George's, Chesterton, he was appointed to a university lectureship in divinity. In 1984, he was elected a Fellow and Dean of Clare College, Cambridge. During his time at Clare, he was arrested and fined for singing psalms as part of the campaign for nuclear disarmament protest at Lakenheath airbase. Then, still only 36, he returned to Oxford as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity for six years, before becoming Bishop of Monmouth, and, from 2000, Archbishop of Wales. In 2002, he became the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury.

Dr Williams was awarded the Oxford higher degree of Doctor of Divinity (DD) in 1989, and an honorary Doctor of Civil Law degree in 2005; Cambridge followed in 2006 with an honorary DD. He holds honorary doctorates from more than a dozen other universities, from Durham to Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Toronto and Bonn. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1990, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2003, and a Fellow of the Learned Society of Wales in 2010. In 2013, he was made a life peer, becoming Lord Williams of Oystermouth, in the City and County of Swansea, and he sits in the House of Lords as a crossbencher. Upon his translation to the See of Canterbury, he was sworn of the Privy Council, and upon his retirement, Her Majesty the Queen conferred the Royal Victorian Chain upon him.

Dr Williams is a noted poet and translator of poetry, and, apart from Welsh and English, speaks or reads nine other languages, including Spanish, French, German, Russian, biblical Hebrew, Syriac, Latin, and both ancient (*koine*) and modern Greek. He learnt Russian in order to read the original works of Dostoevsky which led to his book, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Baylor University Press, 2008). He has also published studies of Arius, Teresa of Avila, and Sergii Bulgakov, together with writings on a wide range of theological, historical, and political themes. In 2013, he delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh on *Making representations: religious faith and the habits of language*.

In 2016, his play, *Shakeshafte*, was staged for the first time. It concerns a meeting between William Shakespeare and Edmund Campion, a Jesuit priest and martyr. Dr Williams suspects that Shakespeare was Catholic, though not a regular churchgoer.

# Overcoming political tribalism

## Tribal reality and political tribalism

Perhaps we should begin by establishing one obvious point. The very word ‘tribalism’ tells a story, about the demeaning or marginalising of cultures that we call ‘tribal’: whether in Tsarist Russia or in British Imperial India, ‘tribal peoples’ were a category needing special administrative measures, on the assumption that they represented a departure from the norm of social life or citizenship. And to speak of ‘tribalism’ or of ‘tribal’ attitudes and behaviour is to mark out certain kinds of human behaviour as aberrations from the norm; these behaviours may be intriguing, even sympathetic in certain ways, but they are ultimately both doomed and deviant; they are forms of life that are, at best, noble but destined for extinction. And the rational and ‘normal’ dominant group will, where necessary, with whatever appropriate expressions of regret,<sup>1</sup> act as the agents of fate, and accelerate this extinction by one or another form of genocide. It may be unequivocal, literal extermination: the hunting and slaughtering of Indigenous peoples, in Australia and Tasmania; the slower extermination of the San peoples of Southern Africa or the original inhabitants of the Caribbean. Or it may be what is now widely recognised as cultural genocide: the ‘native schools’ of Canada saw it as their calling to ‘kill the Indian in the child’, to redeem children from the curse of their inherited identities and affiliations so as to make them proper citizens of the nation.<sup>2</sup> Genocide can wear the dress of benign progressivism as well as that of murderous violence.

The ‘tribal’ is that which is doomed because it has failed to change. In the prevailing mythology of modernity, what is normal is a particular kind of rationality which sees itself as universal – as opposed to the partial and unreasoning traditions that have been overthrown by enlightenment. What is unfamiliar or impenetrable to the rational mind is thus not just something other; it is something past. It does not belong now.<sup>3</sup> And – as we’ll see shortly – this ‘now’ is a moment that is presented as timelessly and obviously true. The illegitimacy of non-‘modern’ social patterns, ‘tribal’ life in the most literal sense, lies in their belonging to another age. What modernity confronts and opposes is (naturally enough) the past; what is other to modernity is essentially

1. See, for example, the statement of Robert Ramsay in 1848, concerning his Aboriginal neighbours: “The inferior must give way to the superior race, and, if this be so, . . . the subjugation – and, I very much fear, the extermination – of the black fellow must follow” (quoted in Damien Freeman and Shireen Morris (eds), *The Forgotten People: Liberal and Conservative Approaches to Recognising Indigenous Peoples* (Melbourne University Press, 2016), p. 53).
2. For the background and recent discussion, see the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 1: *Summary, Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Co, 2015). On the Canadian residential schools, I must acknowledge my debt to the researches of the Reverend David Bryant-Scott.
3. On this theme of the temporal displacement of the ‘other’, see especially Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

over, and its persistence is an anomaly. What's more, it is – again, naturally enough – seen as imperfectly human, so that life lived within these terms is less than it should be, less than the fullness that we now enjoy and have grown into. Non-modern life is a deprived life, so that the efforts to eradicate it can be seen as part of a struggle for fullness of human experience – the struggle that shows we are, in the odd but persistent phrase, 'on the side of history'.

Of course, it is never quite so simple: the uncomfortable fact is that non-modern patterns of life have not gone away. We (rational moderns) are still actually contemporary with our supposedly displaced predecessors; and the recent history of massive and overt genocide in the 20th century has left us uneasy about older methods of ironing out cultural difference. Apologies have been offered for the cruelties of colonial rule, and a new configuration of ideas about human rights has done something to balance out the crudities of sub-Darwinian models of cultural evolution. But the default setting of 'modern' society (Westernising, 'technocratic', rights-oriented, and committed to individual autonomy as an ideal) is still to picture itself as the rational norm for fully flourishing human existence. It does not really see itself as a culture among others. And this is why the record of modern (post-16th century) European encounters with the 'tribal' other is illuminating in thinking about the much wider question of political tribalism. The fundamental irony lies in the way that the claim to universal validity made by modernity entails a sharply exclusionary rhetoric about what is not standard modern practice, even when the human rights culture of the day mandates some sort of tolerance for non-standard communities. As will become clear, the lack of a fully coherent philosophical anthropology in modernity has a lot to do with the tensions, conflicts, and imbalances that this leaves us with. But for our immediate purposes, the point is a simple one: modernity's rejection of an outmoded or superseded other is itself a 'tribal' response, to use the word in the pejorative sense that has become normal for Western society.

Of course, to identify modernity and the broadly 'Enlightenment' mindset as a form of tribalism is not to license some sort of easy relativism, nor is it to seek to reintroduce unchallengeable systems of traditional authority. It is simply to say that modernity becomes toxic at many levels when it loses the capacity for self-critique, and when it canonizes the myth of automatic improvement through time. 'Being on the side of history' is a wholly vacuous notion; and if we want to speak of and support something we can call a progressive political agenda, we need to be clear that we are assuming an anthropology with some normative force – i.e. that we are assuming there is actually an objectively 'better' place to arrive – not appealing to the naked process of change as such for moral (or, indeed, rational) justification. There are many diverse stories of social and intellectual change to be told; and when we tell these stories in

terms of advance, triumph, liberation, or indeed enlightenment, we are telling them as stories of *learning*.

## **Learning**

This is, I want to suggest, the key concept in any challenge to 'tribalism' in its malign sense. When we now speak about a tribalised politics, the politics of zero-sum conflict and polarised interest groups, when we characterize these groups as sharing a set of moral priorities that may not be obviously connected with one another but are held by the same sort of people, and are considered in aggregate as constituting 'liberal' or 'traditional' identities, then we are creating a political discourse in which it is very hard to admit having *learned* anything. This is a bit paradoxical: we have seen that the superior claim of modernity is that it is the deposit and effect of change, where other forms of life have failed to change. But the truth is that change is not the same as learning or 'progress': learning is a way of *telling the story of change*, selecting this or that feature of what is remembered, making and testing links that are not instantly self-evident, identifying moments of significant conflict and the perception of choices to be made. Like all serious knowing, it is a *cultural* affair, bound up with inherited and internalised habits of seeing and representing, habits that have proved trustworthy or sustainable. When learning occurs, it is when sustainable habits encounter difficulty and frustration, and new habits and strategies emerge to modify what has been taken for granted. And when we tell such a story, we acknowledge that what once seemed adequate may be challenged; that moments of conflict and difficulty may be generative; that therefore our practices of knowing and understanding are about responding with tolerable success to what we don't control. If we lose sight of how this complex process of adjustment actually works, we are in trouble.

What happens when we forget how to tell our story in this way? We come to resist any notion that what we take for granted as settled is not instantly self-evident, and we lose the sense that engagement with the alien and the unplanned is a potential source of insight and enrichment. It is as though a willingness to tell the story of learning brings an unwelcome vulnerability for us: if we admit we have had to learn through complex and protracted interactions, we admit that a story of self-evident advance, an inevitable, *unarguable* advance in truthfulness, will not work. Contingency creeps in: things didn't have to be like this, and so things do not *now* have to be like this. And if that's the case, then argument and discovery are not over. There is always work to do in establishing and defending the truth or rightness of a consensus. And to the extent that this suggests an unwelcome strenuousness about our social discourse, an acceptance of ongoing difficulty, there is likely to be a degree of unspoken pressure to minimise the scope of this narrative of protracted learning, and to maximise the

area of what is taken to be obviously and timelessly true, simply *given* (if we are free enough and wise enough to open our eyes). Denying this 'given' and obvious quality in current convictions comes to be seen either as malign anti-humanism or as a mark of mental and spiritual enslavement.

The more a moral or social position is taken to be timelessly self-evident in this way, the more moral *reproach* is attached to any doubt or denial of it – and so the less room remains for any attempt at finding a common language for debate and shared reflection. This particular aspect of political discourse is currently one of the major challenges to the future of democracy. A political debate in which your opponent is not merely mistaken, unwise, or uninformed, but malignant and/or sub rational, is one in which (say) the winner and the loser in an election have no stake in accommodating one another after the vote; and this slips readily into majoritarian tyranny – however close a vote may be in simple numerical terms.<sup>4</sup> As I've argued elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> a democratic majority establishes roughly what a majority of citizens can recognise as *lawful*, and what it requires of the minority is to abide by that recognition: a majority makes the rules and has a claim to be obeyed, in the terms in which elective democracy is set up. What it does not and cannot establish is what must be recognised as *true* or *good*; which is why working democracies make provision for liberty of conscience, without which no intelligible *debate* continues. And if no intelligible debate continues, the elective process itself becomes an empty sham, a contest purely about interest and power. It is a moot question how far down this road some modern democracies have actually travelled; but that is for another day.<sup>6</sup>

It's perhaps worth mentioning at this juncture another aspect of our current social and intellectual environment that is perhaps not strictly material to our main topic but throws some light on the implications of Enlightenment tribalism as a search for timeless, 'unlearned' truth. We are notoriously governed by algorithms, via the electronic monitoring of our patterns of behaviour – especially preference and choice; and we are fascinated (and intermittently panicked) by the capacities of artificial intelligence to solve problems more rapidly than human minds. We are still awed by the ability of computers to win at chess, let alone to predict patterns of consumption and even preferred points of view on various subjects. We are encouraged to have high expectations of the capacity of AI to diagnose medical conditions, given its ability to process a range of reported data far more speedily and comprehensibly than a human physician. But precisely this last point reveals a key problem, admirably discussed by a British doctor in a recent article.<sup>7</sup> The diagnosing doctor retains

4. Recent instances would include the British referendum on exiting the European Union (which delivered a roughly four percentage-point majority) and the United States election of 2016 (where an absolute numerical majority nationwide in fact voted for the unsuccessful candidate). In both cases, subsequent political rhetoric has presented these as overwhelming popular endorsements, and there has been little or no attempt to frame policy in the light of the slenderness of the majority and the continuing needs and arguments of the 'losers', and it has to be said also that the unsuccessful minority has bought into the same absolutism and oppositional ferocity.

5. E.g. in "Arguments don't stop after a vote", *New Statesman*, 31 March-6 April 2017, pp. 40-41.

6. See Greg Palast, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

7. Phil Whittaker, "The computer will see you now", *New Statesman*, 2-15 August 2019, pp. 39-43.

two critical advantages. She or he is likely to have – or have access to – information about the social, personal, and relational context of a patient in a way that allows an interpretation of reported symptoms more nuanced than could be offered by a mechanical process; and they are also – simply as routinely functioning human beings – likely to have learned skills of ‘reading’ the tone of a voice or the gesture and movement of a body. The latter is the sort of *cultural* skill that depends on one’s own self-awareness as a bodily subject. ‘Information’, as conceived in AI terms, is, in contrast, not something dependent upon this sort of learning, whatever may be said about the learning capacity of AI systems; and, as the article mentioned points out, any informational blind spot in what is introduced into an electronic system remains an absolute blind spot, not merely a deficient understanding.

But the fascination and the high expectation persist; as if the timeless, mathematically constructed binaries of the intelligence system represent some sort of ideal for knowledge and judgment. It is as though we are eager to be ‘defeated’ by mechanical means, to prove that the ultimate, unanswerable mode of knowing is indeed bodiless and timeless – not learned in any familiar sense of the word. The romance with AI, the ‘charm’ and attraction, in Wittgenstein’s word,<sup>8</sup> of ‘knowing’ that we are at the mercy of bare cause and effect, actors in a script written by a force other than ourselves, is a telling reflection of how and why we choose our myths in modernity: our dependence and materiality are as much an embarrassment as ever they were for an ancient Neoplatonist or Manichaeist.

### **Creating a shared language**

What we call tribalism is, in its contemporary forms, a curious and ironic by-product of rationalism. It takes for granted that we don’t need to rehearse the labour and negotiation, the difficulties, the false starts, by which moral and political perspectives are arrived at – because then we don’t need to see the perspective of the other as (to borrow a turn of phrase from Gillian Rose) ‘invested’, or developed as a way of responding to and managing certain sorts of difficulty that I/we can recognise. Political tribalism is above all a shrinkage of the scope of mutual recognition: I resolve not to think of the other’s view as sharing any of the moral anxieties or emotional tensions I experience. Someone who supports assisted dying will characterise the principled opponent as emotionally deaf to the force of unmanageable suffering. A committed pro-life advocate will characterise the physician performing an abortion as a murderer. Brexiters and anti-Brexiters alike describe their opponents as undermining democracy. The critic of Israeli government policy is an anti-Semite, and the critic of antisemitism is a dupe of Zionist conspiracy. The Green activist who argues against the fiction of limitless economic growth is blind to the pauperising of vulnerable workers.

8. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 24, 43-4, 51-2.

To be clear: this is not a bland appeal for civility in political debate. That would too easily be reduced to an appeal not to be so emotionally invested in our beliefs, which is a futile recommendation. It is an appeal for some kind of work to grasp the history and structure of the ‘investment’ of the stranger. And for any such work to advance, there has to be an exercise in translating this investment on the part of the other into terms that resonate for me. This points in the direction of one of the central aspects in any discourse that looks beyond tribalism – the formation of as much of a shared language as possible. Shared languages certainly don’t necessitate shared views; but they enable a more protracted engagement on issues, an engagement that does not instantly turn into the naked contest of power. It means the effort involved for the pro-life activist in seeing the defender or provider of abortion as driven by a *recognisable* compassion for women deprived of agency and dignity, not as a murderer; as it involves the pro-choice activist in recognising the opponent of abortion as seeking to defend the most radically vulnerable of human organisms, the unborn child, not as a single-minded misogynistic oppressor of women. It means the pro-Palestinian taking time to weigh the human cost of antisemitism over the centuries and to recognise a common story of displacement and insecurity – and again, it means the mirror-image for the passionate Zionist, called to recognise the reality of profound insecurity and disadvantage that their absolutism creates on their own doorstep. The point is in no way to relativise or weaken commitments or to accept an indefinite standoff. It is to try and discover what the ‘grammar’ of another’s moral energy has in common with my own, *as the condition for intelligent action*. Damien Freeman’s illuminating essay on getting inside the Indigenous perspective in Australia’s debates over the public acknowledgement of Indigenous history and presence<sup>9</sup> provides a helpful take on this in noting that movement happens only when we see that debate is not necessarily about different solutions to a single, clearly defined problem, but about the factors that make us see problems differently. When those factors are articulated and explored, it is harder to see a conflict wholly in terms of absolute victory and defeat: to recognise a credible moral perspective in the program of a successful majority allows a minority to see where argument can continue; to recognise that an unsuccessful minority holds views with at least some roots in common with those of the ‘winners’ is to find a rationale for accommodating that minority. And, crucially, this labour of recognition can also serve in helping to identify and conceptually isolate those conflicts that are beyond ordinary argument and negotiation, those *ultima ratio* questions where common language can’t be found because some political interest is systematically and deliberately not recognising the claim of fellow human beings: totalitarian and genocidal systems are by definition those that embody this refusal, this drastic abandonment of any intelligible claim

9. “Conclusion: Understanding where they’re coming from” in Freeman and Morris, *The Forgotten People*, pp. 172-178.

to legitimacy. But, for our present purpose, the important thing is to recognise that political tribalism, insofar as it inexorably moves towards de-legitimising the other in debate, is a fertile seedbed for totalitarianism.

If this is more than just an appeal for civility, it is also more than a plea for empathy.<sup>10</sup> Mere fellow-feeling does not specify any solution to serious conflicts of power and to the inevitabilities of loss or cost in the processes of negotiating a shared future. The intelligent recognition of the history of another's moral perspective and the deeper intelligent exploration of one's own history in the same mode should illuminate the fact that, in the actual world of moral decision-making, especially when it is being done in the public and political sphere, it is virtually impossible to find courses of action that are without cost, that is, without some sacrifice of an ideal level of doing equal justice to diverse claims. And this in turn might dispose us to see our decision-making as a matter of *clarifying* problems, identifying claims as clearly as possible, and looking for a sustainable way forward. One of the difficulties in a climate so much dominated by the discourse of rights is the temptation to cast our decision-making in terms of the simple binary alternative of whether we are or are not honouring or realising a clearly-defined and discrete 'right'; not doing so would simply constitute a legal tort, taking something unlawfully from its owner. I don't in the least share the scepticism about rights discourse that is popular among some of my theological colleagues, including some for whom I have great respect;<sup>11</sup> but I believe it is essential for an intelligent, compassionate, and (to use the word again) sustainable political democracy to focus more on manageable solutions to specific unjust situations rather than being paralysed by maximalist general demands. To take an example many Western societies will currently recognise, there are many specific injustices and disproportionate challenges and sufferings experienced by people who are gender-dysphoric or who have undergone reassignment treatment and surgery. The default 'conservative' position which declares the whole thing to be impossible, misguided, blasphemous, or whatever, has generally not been troubled to attend to the particular narratives of these persons, and is inclined to read the phenomenon as necessarily bound up with a general campaign of relativism and revisionism about human nature. But some sorts of generalising language about transgender rights have not helped either, because they move attention away from finding sustainable solutions to particular challenges or inequities, and play into the hands of conservative polemicists.<sup>12</sup> The right that matters is the liberty to act within the shared life of a society without unjust restraint and to contribute a perspective of

10 Simon Baron-Cohen's *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Understanding of Cruelty and Kindness* (London: Penguin Books, 2012) provides some rather startling illustrations of the simplistic idea that 'empathy' alone is the solvent of all major moral and political conflicts.

11. I have in mind especially the work of John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan.

12. Think here of the concerns raised by the insistence that there should be access to women-only facilities, or indeed women-only sports, by *any* individual self-identifying as female. It should be possible to understand the legitimate anxieties here and the need for negotiated problem-solving without compromising justice for transitioning or transitioned persons.

self-understanding to democratic argument and discernment – rather than a list of particular entitlements whose denial is a taking away of lawfully-owned ‘property’.

### **The ethics of cultural change**

All this, and more, is entailed in the business of looking for elements of common language. We could express it slightly differently by saying that it has to do with the work of constructing a *culture* that is capable of containing disagreement and managing change in ways that do not violently disrupt the life of a society. In the present political climate in many ‘developed’ societies, there is heavy emphasis on prescriptive and protective legislation; and this is in significant measure a mark of cultural failure or dysfunction. Some citizens – usually with good reason – are persuaded that they cannot trust their society to respect and protect their interests. Legislation around all sorts of questions, from ‘hate speech’ to gender pay gaps, reflects an underlying anxiety that some groups are silenced, intimidated, or otherwise disadvantaged to a level where the informal workings of a culture seem unable to offer a positive adjustment in their favour. And the larger and more complex the social unit, the more such legislated guarantees seem unavoidable. The trouble is that the apparent simplicity and decisiveness of the legal guarantee can give us an alibi for the more protracted work of cultural change – which involves just the kind of attentive narrative exchanges that we have identified as building shared languages and avoiding zero-sum tribalism.

The labour of cultural change, then, is a matter of looking for or constructing contexts in which narrative sharing is possible, and different groups and interests can work together at what a manageable (sustainable) future might look like – acknowledging that such a future will *not* be simply the embodiment of one group’s ideals. This labour assumes a *general* willingness to learn, both in the sense of learning to understand an alien perspective and in the sense of devising new pathways and strategies. It acknowledges, above all, the fact that the other is not going away. As our opening reflections noted, one of the most dangerous elements of what I’ve called Enlightenment tribalism is the tacit belief that history has an automatic moral, value-laden direction such that the pre-modern or non-modern have no real legitimacy; their survival is an unhappy accident, and their eradication (with or without active persecution) is something *destined*. But if this powerful myth is challenged, if we come to see Enlightenment rationalism as another set of learned perspectives rather than a timeless and self-evident system, then what defines itself as rational modernity cannot simply assume that all other narratives will necessarily vanish. The other is not only still here but has a legitimate claim to be here, as a culture that managed, endured, and made sense. The Canadian poet and philosopher Robert Bringhurst captures this (characteristically) with force and clarity:

Other cultural models have worked, and some of them have worked for long stretches of time. Are any of them perfect? Hugely unlikely. Does the tradition of Enlightenment thinking have something to teach them? Very likely. Do they have things to teach it? Almost certainly they do.<sup>13</sup>

Bringhurst is writing in response to an egregious example of Enlightenment triumphalism from Steven Pinker.<sup>14</sup> But he is at pains to insist that what he is *not* doing is turning his back on “good science and sober humanism”.<sup>15</sup> The humanism that matters is a humanism that reckons with the actual diversity of learning and conviction, and the science that matters is a science that knows what it can and cannot measure. The indispensable contribution of European Enlightenment is its challenge to any authority that refuses to explore and justify its perspectives; ironically, one of its great insights is the reminder that authorities have histories. The mistake is to see this as a simple demand made of *any* form of inherited custom or belief because of the conviction that the act of critical exploration arises from a universal rationality that needs no justification. It is parallel to the question I have discussed elsewhere of the distinction between ‘procedural’ and ‘programmatically’ secularism in society – the difference between critical habit or practice (essential to any ‘sober humanism’) and the systematic de-legitimising of all habits and practices except those of a self-conscious instrumentalist version of intellectual modernity.

### **Beyond political tribalism**

To sum up so far, pushing back against political tribalism means recovering an awareness of what human learning is actually like as a time-taking, relationally shaped process, with a sense of purposiveness built into it, an inchoate and often elusive or unspoken conviction about what human meaning is at its fullest, that is more than just an intellectually dressed-up chronological snobbery and superstition. It means nourishing those practices and intuitions that allow space for hearing the memory of discovery and conviction that lies behind an opponent’s view and seeking to recognise comparable kinds of moral energy. And it means accepting that the other, even the opponent, has a continuing presence and stake in a shared social territory, so that the task becomes one of finding what sustains that shared territory and defends us from zero-sum violence in our conflicts. In plainer terms, beyond political tribalism lie a deeper literacy about our histories, a commitment to identifying the grammar of a common language, and the work of negotiating a shared future by looking for solutions that have a degree of durability and credibility, even if they are no-one’s ideal.

In the final part of this lecture I want to turn briefly to some of the ways in which the practice and language of religious communities may turn out to be a key element

13. Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwecky, *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis* (Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2019), p. 87.

14. He is commenting on Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (London: Penguin Books, 2018).

15. Bringhurst and Zwecky, p. 75.

in resisting the tribalism we have been thinking about. Lord Acton observed<sup>16</sup> that religious liberty was not just an *instance* of political liberty but its foundation: a state acknowledging freedom of religious belief and behaviour is acknowledging that it is not the sole measure of the identity of its citizens, and thus that a citizen may quite properly regard himself or herself as answerable to something more than the commands of a superior political power. From this acknowledgment, fully understood, flows a whole range of elements in what we now take for granted in democratic states, especially the rule of law and the rights of minorities. “Everything is politics, but politics is not everything,” it has been said; or, to put it rather differently, the truly emancipated citizen is someone who is not just a citizen. Civic virtue is bound up with affiliations and convictions that have more than just civic roots and sanctions.

So a first respect in which the religious community is a resource against reductive polarisations in politics is the reminder it offers that purely ‘political’ debates are not routinely about issues of final and absolute import; they are typically debates about method and process, and the underlying debates about ends rather than means are never going to be decided by political means – that is, by the contingencies of who it is that happens to be exercising power. And this also means that resistance to the determinations of political power in the name of conviction or conscience cannot – except in the most extreme of circumstances, and not even then with clear legitimacy<sup>17</sup> – be conducted by violence, by a counter-bid for coercive force. “Politics is not everything”; the most significant kinds of human solidarity do not derive from or depend on the state, and – as a range of nineteenth and twentieth-century Christian political thinkers have argued<sup>18</sup> – the apparatus of the state serves as a broker of interests between a natural diversity of local and voluntary networks of affiliation. Whatever ‘orthodoxies’ the state imposes need to be justified as intrinsic to its essential role of securing protection under law for all (which may also involve calling communities to account for their own failures in securing protection and human dignity, as in the realm of child protection).

But we can go further and look at the positive as well as the negative in the role of communities of belief. Religious discourse is heavily invested in narratives of learning; most notably the ‘Abrahamic’ traditions tell stories of unexpected developments, initiatives from beyond history, which clarify and reconfigure human goals – the law of Moses, the recital of the Qur’an, the creation of a new and unlimited form of solidarity and mutuality in the Church. To belong in the communities

16. See, e.g., John Dalberg-Acton, 1st Baron Acton, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays*, ed. John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 30ff.

17. Reflection on the conditions for ‘just’ resistance to unjust government (even by force) goes back to Aquinas’s discussions of the subject see, e.g., *Summa theologiae* II.ii.42, ad 3. In the 20th century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s wrestlings with this in his fragmentary *Ethics*, translated by Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), Vol. 6 in the new complete translation of Bonhoeffer’s works, have become a *locus classicus*; see especially pp. 246-298.

18. Especially those in the succession of Lord Acton, such as the Anglican political philosopher and theologian, John Neville Figgis; the stress in 20th-century Catholic social teaching on ‘subsidiarity’ is a closely related theme.

thus created is to be offered a variety of models of learning – and, in all the major traditions, to be reminded of the gap between what is verbally and conceptually communicated, or enacted in gesture, habit, and ritual, and the inexhaustible agency from which life flows. In the Christian tradition, this is the ‘apophatic’ style of theology, reminding us that truthful speech about the divine reality is not necessarily exhaustive, final, definitive speech. There is always more to see and more to learn, and the paradigm of faithful life is precisely ‘discipleship’, the status of a learner; the classics of spiritual practice set out the shape of a journey.

History and the acceptance of an always incomplete and developing understanding are central themes for most religious traditions: the very idea of ‘tradition’ (contrary to the conventional modern understanding of it as static and beyond argument) carries the assumption of a continuing process of acquiring skills of perception and judgment, and testing these skills in changing contexts.<sup>19</sup> The subject or agent in a religious context is a person in the process of formation within a community that teaches habits of seeing and responding and that urges caution about supposing we have access to final certainty simply as individuals equipped with tools of reasoning. Jan Zwick, another noted Canadian thinker and writer, sums up the ways in which we might redefine classical, ‘Socratic’ virtues for our own day as comprising self-awareness (including awareness of our limitations), courage, self-control (the restraint of naked appetite), justice (a commitment to ordered harmony in relations and the freedom of each to contribute a particular gift and skill to the whole), ‘contemplative practice’ and compassion.<sup>20</sup> Her discussion of ‘contemplative practice’ is an exploration of some of the resources offered by traditions that train us in attention to what is before us, the silencing of an aggressive, fearful, greedy age. As she says,<sup>21</sup> this does not always accompany or arise from specific religious doctrine, but she is clear that the kind of ritual practice that slows and focuses our seeing of the world is a distinctive contribution from religious tradition, essential for the balanced wellbeing of person and community. And this slowed and focused attention is a habit that cannot survive in the neighbourhood of the sort of tribal allegiances that make my value or security dependent on knowing who my enemy is and where I must fortify my borders.

Attention is another word for the kind of unpressured listening to the narratives of neighbour and stranger that we considered earlier. As such, it is a key element in the search for a common language and a sustainable shared future. To be aware of the time it takes for me – as an ego normally inclined to fear or greed – to acquire the habit of seeing receptively or generously is to be aware potentially of the time in which another lives, and of the various pressures and contingencies that shape and

19. Hans-Georg Gadamer might be said to have begun this kind of reevaluation of ‘tradition’ among social philosophers, echoed by Paul Ricoeur and Alasdair MacIntyre.

20. Bringhurst and Zwick, *Learning to Die*, pp. 49–66.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

perhaps abort or mis-shape their learning. It is a specific against the idea of a truth that can be delivered instantly as a timelessly valid given. But, of course, once this is said, it will very reasonably be pointed out that religious traditions are not exactly unfamiliar with claims to timelessly valid, instantly accessible truths; and worse still, with an identification of the disciplines of communal learning and acquired habit with obedience to a teaching 'caste', employing sanctions. The unhappy disjunction in some modern theological thought between 'teaching church' and 'learning church' is a dramatic illustration of the problem. Arguing for the vital necessity of tradition and the positive role of religious conviction in modern society is not credible if there is no *self-critical* energy in a tradition, and no living practice of contemplative formation.

Which is to admit, of course, that religion, theology, liturgical tradition, and so on can become yet another 'tribal' system of allegiances. There is, as we all know, polarisation within communities of faith between 'guardians of tradition' and 'revisionists'. To identify as a 'traditionalist' is to define an essentially political stance – and so, I would argue, to do much less than justice to tradition itself as a mode of prolonged learning and exposure to truth. The sad fact is that – as some have put it in recent discussions – tradition is an 'orphan' in the contemporary cultural climate; rather than being the unselfconscious transmission and reworking of an organic set of skills and habits, it becomes an option, preferred by certain individuals in the trenches of our culture wars. And if that happens, it is in danger of being reduced to an item in the market of ideas, to be defended against competitors.

Notoriously, one of the things we simply can't do is to construct a program for being unselfconscious. As we noted earlier, part of the characteristic struggle of modernity arises from the effort to resolve by prescription what is better resolved by culture – a version of what Simone Weil famously identified as the root of most of our cultural problems, our refusal to 'cure our faults by attention and not by will'.<sup>22</sup> But this phraseology gives us, in fact, an important clue about where we look practically for strategies to subvert tribalism. We need to be asking what the communities, institutions, and practices are that allow a more comprehensive and 'attentive' social imagination to come to birth. The answer points to an almost chaotically wide spread of phenomena. Nurturing such an imagination includes the patient attention to stories and priorities not native to us that we were reflecting on a bit earlier; and this requires the construction of environments in which there is enough trust for such things to be articulated. This in turn regularly means finding common actions and purposes, so that we grasp that in some respects the other's 'investment' is like our own. It may be as simple as the sports team or the choir; it may be outcome-focused – a credit union or a school parents' association; it may be a community arts project,

22. Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), p. 105.

a development charity support group or a visiting rota at a residential care home. Or, of course, it may be a religious community – and evidence suggests a high level of local involvement by people with religious convictions in activities like those just listed. To discover or rediscover forms of human solidarity and exchange that do not depend on identifying enemies and are not so driven as to find no time for mutual listening is probably the most significant preservative for law-governed democracy in contemporary societies. It creates a context in which what we owe to one another is learned in the time it takes to build a durable level of trust.

This may seem to be some way from theories of modernity or tradition, but it puts some flesh on what lives look like ‘beyond tribalism’. But the thesis of this lecture is not only about community organizing as a means of social salvation. It is also that the presence in complex and pluralist societies of certain groups holding themselves accountable to more than an immediate social consensus is something democratic societies should be glad of: it keeps fundamental argument alive and obliges settled secular perspectives to articulate argument and justification for what they take for granted. It witnesses to what has been called the *longue durée* of our civilisation,<sup>23</sup> reminding modernity of how other and sometimes very alien cultures have managed their environment – including managing the environment in the most literal sense. Remember Robert Bringham’s challenge as to what technocratic modernity must learn from the ‘pre-modern’ – which takes us back to our starting-point in the destructive confrontation between ‘enlightened’ Western humanity and its ill-fated neighbours in the high days of colonial confidence.

And – to repeat the point – none of this is an appeal to reverse the Enlightenment challenge to arbitrary autocracy, or a bid to establish religious authorities as arbiters of law and ethics in plural and secularising societies, or a relativising of the achievement of experimental and theoretical science. It is to put down a serious caution against the idea of the ‘enlightened’ state as universal arbiter of conviction, simply because this risks binding any kind of public moral discernment to the power of a majority. The deepest problem with political tribalism, the all-or-nothing rhetoric of the electoral politics of the United States or the Brexit debates nearer home, is that it turns its back on the possibility of horizons expanding – even where fundamental orientations don’t change radically. And conversely, the major challenge of moving beyond such tribalism, with its scapegoating and demonizing and lack of collective self-scrutiny, is the building of a culture that is confident, trustful enough to give time for perspectives to interact and interrogate one another and themselves.

Building such a culture is intrinsic to building something more than a ‘strong’ state or nation – the creation of durable human solidarity, within and between states.

23. I take the phrase from Florian Michel, *Etienne Gilson: Une biographie intellectuelle et politique* (Paris: Vrin 2018), p. 319, where he characterises the work of the great philosophical historian and mediaevalist as preserving “le sens de la longue durée chrétienne, l’humilité de l’homme, et une féconde liberté.”

And if communities of faith – unapologetic but reflective, critical, and exploratory – are part of this as they should be and need to be, we may yet salvage an intelligent, compassionate, and pluralist democracy from the wreckage of so much contemporary political habit. From the point of view of one particular faith at least, this is a faint but not delusive shadow of the vision in Christian Scripture of the innumerable multitudes “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” finally united in the loving recognition of one another because they all recognise the infinite act and gift to which finite human hearts and wills must respond.

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OVERCOMING POLITICAL  
TRIBALISM

DR ROWAN WILLIAMS

THE THIRD PM GLYNN  
LECTURE ON RELIGION,  
LAW AND PUBLIC LIFE 2019

PM Glynn Institute  
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2019

“... beyond political tribalism lie a deeper literacy about our histories, a commitment to identifying the grammar of a common language, and the work of negotiating a shared future by looking for solutions that have a degree of durability and credibility even if they are no-one’s ideal.”