

AN OLIVE LEAF

USING OTHERS “TO THINK WITH”

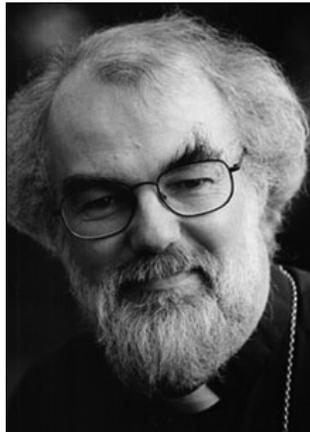
By Rowan Williams

This reflection is excerpted from the book, Writing in the Dust: After September 11 (Eerdmans, 2002, 63–73), written by Rowan Williams, who has been archbishop of Canterbury since July 2002. British spelling and punctuation conventions have been retained.

RECOGNISING common experience is the exact opposite of using someone else to fit with your agenda, using them to play out roles you have worked out and assigned. We have been very resourceful in this over the centuries. Christians have conscripted Jews into their version of reality and forced them into a role that has nothing to do with how Jews understand their own past or current experience—what one scholar called ‘using Jews to think with.’ In the Middle Ages, Muslims too were made to play a part in the drama written by Christians, as a kind of diabolical mirror image of Christian identity, worshipping a trinity of ridiculous idols. This was a distortion nurtured by popular religion, of course; responsible theologians studied the Qur’an and knew better. But those very writers who were so careful not to parody Islam were also capable of calmly and authoritatively writing nonsense about women; it would not have occurred to them that there was a Christian principle involved in listening to what women had to say about themselves.

And yes, of course, Jews and Muslims cherished equally bizarre beliefs about Christianity at times. They, like us, needed to assert some kind of control over the stranger, the other, by ‘writing them in’ in terms that could be managed and manipulated. What happens is that the stranger is assigned a meaning, a value, in the dominant system. When, as with Christians and Jews in Europe, this is allied to a hugely disproportionate distribution of power, the effects are dreadful.

‘Using other people to think with’; that is, using them as symbols for points on your map, values in your scheme of things. When you get used to imposing meanings in this way, you silence the stranger’s account of who they are; and that can mean both metaphorical and literal death. Death as the undermining of a culture, language, or faith, and, at the extreme, the death of tyranny and genocide. I have been using religious examples, but it isn’t essentially a failing of religion itself. The collective imagination needs the outsider to give itself definition—which commonly means that it needs somewhere to



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project its own fears and tensions. . . . Living realities are turned into symbols, and the symbolic values are used to imprison the reality. At its extreme pitch, people simply relate to the symbols. It is too hard to look past them, to look into the complex humanity of a real other.

The World Trade Center and the Pentagon were massively obvious symbols of American dominance, economic and military. To target them was clearly a blow against that entire system of dominance. The trouble is that, while burning the Stars and Stripes in a demonstration is one thing, the Twin Towers and the Pentagon

were inhabited buildings; they may have been ‘natural’ symbols, but the people in them were not (people never are). . . . It is always people who suffer and are killed, not symbols. When we strike out at a symbol such as a flag, we hurt nothing except perhaps the self-esteem of those who use the language of which it’s a part. When we decide to treat people as symbols, the story is different. . . .

ONCE the concreteness of another’s suffering has registered, you cannot simply use them to think with. You have to be patient with the meanings that the other is struggling to find or form for themselves. Acknowledging the experience you share is the only thing that opens up the possibility of finding a meaning that can be shared, a language to speak together. . . .

[I]t is only here, with the renunciation of all our various ways of making suffering a weapon or a tool of ideology, that we are going to learn how to grieve properly. Of course, we just grieve anyway, ‘properly’ or not; but where does our grief take us? And what do we mourn for? If, as St. Augustine says in his *Confessions*, we can fail to ‘love humanly,’ then surely we can also fail to grieve humanly, to grieve without the consolation of drama, martyrdom, resentment, and projection. Are there words for grief that can make us more human, so that we mourn not just for ourselves but for those whose experience we have come to share, even for those whose moral poverty is responsible for murder and terror?

What use is faith to us if it is only a transcription into mythological jargon of the mechanisms of that inhuman grief that grasps its own suffering to itself as a ground of justification and encloses the suffering of others in interpretations that hold it at a safe distance?

