

WILLIAMS, CYRIL GLYNDWR (1921 - 2004), theologian

Name: Cyril Glyndwr Williams
Date of birth: 1921
Date of death: 2004
Spouse: Irene Williams (née Daniels)
Child: Martyn Williams
Child: Eirian Williams
Child: Ann Williams
Parent: David Williams
Parent: Hannah Williams
Gender: Male
Occupation: theologian
Area of activity: Religion; Education
Author: D. Densil Morgan

Cyril Williams was born on 1 June 1921 in Pont-ïets, Carmarthenshire, the youngest in a family of nine born to David Williams, a coal miner, and his wife Hannah. After having attended for a time the local Elim Pentecostal fellowship, the family returned to Nazareth Congregational chapel where, apart from being more staid and traditionalist, the medium of worship was Welsh.

Educated at the Gwendraeth Valley Grammar School, he proceeded to the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire in Cardiff where he read for a degree in Hebrew before training for the Congregational ministry at the Presbyterian College, Carmarthen, taking the degree of BD. Having begun preaching at the age of fifteen, he was ordained at the Tabernacle Church, Pontcymmer, in 1944, moving to pastor the Radnor Walk Welsh Congregational Church in Chelsea in 1947, and between 1951 and 1958 the Priory Street Chapel in Carmarthen. He married Irene Daniels from Bancffosfelen, only a few miles from the family home at Pont-ïets, in 1945, and they were to have three children, two sons, Martyn and Eirian, and a daughter Ann who died in an accident when aged only three.

After fourteen years in the pastoral ministry, Williams was appointed by his academic mentor, **Professor Aubrey Johnson**, head of the Semitics department at Cardiff, to teach the History of Religions and to complete his MA degree in the Hebrew prophets. It was there that he began to specialize in the Phenomenology of Religion, and following a year as visiting professor at Carleton University, Ottawa, in 1969 he was appointed Professor of Religion and chair of the department. Returning to Wales in 1973, he taught the Study of Religions at the University College of Wales Aberystwyth, and in 1981 became dean of the Aberystwyth/Lampeter School of Theology and at the same time dean of the Faculty of Theology of the federal University of Wales. In 1983, the small department of Religious Studies at Aberystwyth merged with the long-established School of Theology at the University of Wales Lampeter and relocated to the town, and it was there, as Professor of Religious Studies that he would remain until his retirement in 1988. Serving as president of the British Association for the History of Religions between 1985 and 1988, he did much to establish Lampeter's reputation as a foremost centre in the United Kingdom for inter-faith dialogue and the scientific study of religion.

Throughout his career Williams strove to preserve the concept of Christian uniqueness within a fully pluralistic religious milieu. As well as being an informative narrative history of the world's religions, his *Crefyddau'r Dwyrain* ('Religions of the East', 1968) argued that each world religion possessed a character of its own which should not be subsumed into some bland syncretistic spiritual entity. His *Yr Efengyl a'r Crefyddau* ('the Gospel and the Religions', 1985), a compendium of previously published papers, took this theme further, while his *Y Fendigaid Gân* ('The Blessed Song'), the first full Welsh translation from the Sanskrit of the sacred Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita, was published in 1991.

Although he had long moved away from his family's early Pentecostalism, an abiding interest in religious phenomenology inspired a fascination with the concept of 'speaking in tongues', a key aspect of Pentecostalist faith. His *Tongues of the Spirit: A Study of Pentecostal Glossolalia and Related Phenomena* (1981), the fruit of his PhD research, was a scholarly assessment of the practice coinciding with the popularity of the Charismatic Movement which sought to recover the New Testament gifts within the contemporary church. By now very much a liberal in his doctrinal views - he had come to interpret both Christ's resurrection and his Virgin Birth as symbolic rather than actual truths - he nevertheless continued to value the concept of Christian mission overseas. During his retirement years he was increasingly captivated by the life and labours of **Timothy Richard**, the nineteenth-century Welsh Baptist missionary to China.

Soft spoken and contemplative, though committed to the pacifist values of radical Welsh Nonconformity, he kept his international links intact and regularly addressed academic gatherings in Japan, South Korea and India as well as the United States and Canada. He was awarded the DD degree honoris causa by the University of Wales in 2003 and honorary fellowships at Cardiff University and Trinity College Carmarthen. His latter years were clouded by Parkinson's Disease. He died on 31 March 2004 and his ashes were interred in the cemetery of Plisgah chapel, Bancffosfelen.

Author

D. Densil Morgan

Sources

Further reading

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