

2nd Opinion: Between spirituality & religion

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Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the leader of the worldwide [Anglican Communion](#), announced he would step down by year's end. A few days later, the Church of England rejected a Williams-backed unity plan for global Anglicanism, a church fractured by issues of gender and sexual identity. The timing of the resignation and the defeat probably are not coincidental. These events signal Anglicans' institutional failure.

Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams.

But why should anyone, other than Anglicans and their Episcopal cousins, care? The Anglican fight over gay clergy usually is framed as a left and right conflict, part of the larger saga of political division. But this obscures a more significant tension in Western societies—the increasing gap between spirituality and religion, and the failure of traditional religious institutions to learn from the divide.

Until recently, the archbishop of Canterbury was chief pastor for a global church bound by a common liturgy and Anglican religious identity. Expectations for leaders were clear: Run the church with courage and vision. Bishops directed the laity, inspiring obedience, sacrifice and heroism; they ordered faith from the top.

Today's world, however, is different.

Institutions are being torn by tension between those who want to reassert tested leadership patterns—including top-down control, uniformity and bureaucracy—and those who welcome untested but promising patterns—grassroots empowerment, diversity and relational networks.

It is not a divide between conservatives and liberals. It is a divide between institution and spirit.

Top-down structures are declining. In the Anglicans' case, spiritual and institutional leadership have been severed. The emerging vision maintains spiritual leadership must be learned, earned and experienced distinct from, and often in tension with, the ascribed role of bishop.

Williams illustrates the conflict. Early on, he was recognized as a teacher and pastor of deep spirituality who practiced what he preached. He had the character and imagination Anglicans most needed to move toward a new future.

✘ And that is where the trouble started—and where the story turns tragic. Williams' situation was impossible. As Anglicans around the globe quarreled over homosexuality, they called his authority into question. Williams struggled to be both a spiritual leader who embraces the emerging vision and the leader of an institution committed to guarding the old order.

The archbishop may be "spiritual head" of Anglicanism, but he also acts as CEO of the Anglican corporation. He must manage policy, ensure profitability, maintain properties, open new markets and negotiate politics. It is a bureaucracy, often more a religion business than a vibrant spiritual community.

For centuries, faith was top-down: Spiritual power flowed from pope to the faithful, archbishop to Anglicans, priest to the pious, pastor to congregation. This changed as regular people confidently assert spirituality is a grassroots adventure of seeking God, a journey of insight and inspiration involving authenticity and purpose that might or might not happen in a church, synagogue or mosque. Spirituality is an expression of bottom-up faith and does not always fit into accepted patterns of theology

or practice.

Fearing this change, many religious bodies increasingly fixate on order and control, leading them to reassert authority and be less responsive to the longings of those they supposedly serve. And that will push religion further into its spiral of irrelevance and decline.

Williams demonstrated how wide the breach has become between spirituality and religion. The gap between spirit and institution not only is problematic for religious organizations. The gap exists in business, where work and craft have been replaced by venture capital and profitability; in politics, where the common good and democracy are crushed by partisanship and corporate money; in education, where critical thought and the humanities are sacrificed to test scores.

The Anglican crisis is not about Rowan Williams or even religion. It is about the drive for meaningful connection and community and a better, more just and more peaceful world as institutions of church, state and economy increasingly seem unresponsive to these desires. It is about the gap between a new spirit and institutions that have lost their way. Only leaders who can bridge this gap and transform their institutions will succeed in this emerging cultural economy.

Williams will return to teaching—a good choice. Spiritual renewal is taking place among friends, in conversation, with trust and through mutual learning. A new thing is happening on the streets, in coffeehouses, in faith communities, and in movements of justice and social change. Far from demands of institutional religion, he will see a new kind of faith being born.

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