"A DETERMINED GENERALIST"
Professor George H. Williams as Philosopher

Danièle Letocha
Professeur agrégé, Département de philosophie
Université d’Ottawa

"Williams’ idea of becoming a medievalist in specialization, while remaining out of conviction and out of a sense of professional-ministerial responsibility a determined generalist, had come from the seminars under Kantorowicz." From George Huntston Williams, Biographical Statement and Bibliography for the Period 1940-1994, Presented to him on the Occasion of his 80th Birthday, 7-8 April 1994.

AN INDIRECT LOOK

In an article published in 1994, 1 Theodore K. Rabb, independent spirit that he is, uses twice a remarkable text of George Williams entitled "Erasmus and the Reformers on Non-Christian Religions and the Salus extra Ecclesiam." This text was written in 1969. 2 Then, a quarter of a century later, Rabb declares that "this article is the best treatment on the issue during the first half of the sixteenth century." 3 What an uncommon and admirable longevity for an historical text! Not only do I fully agree with this statement, but I would also extend it without hesitation to many other writings by George Williams. Let us consider, for example, a twenty-year-old text covering a vast and less-known theme such as "Erasmianism in Poland: An Account and an Interpretation of a Major, Though ever Diminishing Current in Sixteenth-Century Polish Humanism and Religion 1518-1605." 4 In both cases, we have before us breakthrough essays. And the discourse in them has lost none of its force of elucidation, despite the publication of a great number of primary sources and


4 The Polish Review, 22 (1977), 3-50. One could add several other titles, for example, another wide-ranging essay, centered one more on a current instead of an individual: “Anabaptism and Spiritualism in the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania: An Obscure Phase of the Pre-history of Socinianism,” in Ludwik Chmąj, Studia nad Arianizmem, (Warsawa: P.W.N., 1959), 215-62. These three inquiry-syntheses interest lies in the originality of the principle organizing the vast scholarship.

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intermediary commentaries. It must be, then, that the writings of George Williams have a specific virtù. In the course of the present study I shall try to outline these traits, to show their genesis, grandeur, singularity, and meaning. Not being a theologian this is a very difficult task for me, therefore I must question this vast body of literature from my own standpoint.\(^5\)

Stepping back and gaining some perspective from my own trade, I would like to offer a picture of what we learn in the style of Professor Williams, that is, his relationship of identity and distance with the symbolic universe with which he is engaged. In the two texts that have been mentioned as well as in others, I find something admirable in George Williams that astonishes so many specialist readers. Beyond the firsthand meticulous archival information, beyond the very elaborate picture of mainstream theses which he may judge as inexact or insufficient I find a sort of transcendence in the accuracy of perspective, tone, judgment, and in extrapolation as well. More precisely, I mean something more than the accuracy of facts, skills of methodology, or the demonstrated cautiousness that is certainly evident here. I mean an indirect perspective that dwells in the writing and that is a part of intellectual wisdom.

These texts, which are famous for achieving an actual documentary prowess, first have in common an ample monographic format, largely extending the usual length of an article.\(^6\) This is made necessary by the author’s choice. He puts into place with the greatest rigor the foundations of his reading, the elements that he intends to raise up among the flow of events, the selection of the parameters shaping his hermeneutic model, and finally the part of ambiguity that he discovers in his own conclusions. The reader therefore meets with a speculative, questioning discourse carrying a strong theoretical tenor, which gives these three texts an authentic and compelling quality, able to cross the ages because they rely on a theory of culture and a philosophy of history which, though not always explicit, is nevertheless articulated and assumed in the works of George Williams that I am familiar with.\(^7\) And perhaps my indirect perspective underscores what might otherwise go unnoticed. To examine this philosophical dimension here is also to make an inventory of my debt to these works and to make plain the determining importance of his views in the elaboration of my own

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\(^5\) My own interests belong to the fields of political theory and philosophical anthropology, focusing on the idea of rationality in Renaissance era culture and early modernity, to which is added the relationship between church and state in the Polish Renaissance, the area where I first encountered the work of George Williams.

\(^6\) The first has fifty-one pages, the second forty-seven pages, and the third, mentioned in n. 2, has forty-seven pages. This is an oversize format by university standards but, paradoxically, it perfectly conforms to the difficulty of the balance of location, thought, and criticism exercised by the author.

\(^7\) If I might refer to the impressive bibliography of the Bibliographical Statement that has been cited, my selection focuses upon a set of works made up of seven books, twenty-eight articles, and twenty-one chapters in various collected works.
theses on the prehistory of Cartesianism, on political and religious pluralism in sixteenth-century Poland, on cis-alpine and trans-alpine Humanism and especially on the fate of rationality at the end of Renaissance Humanism.

I had the opportunity to express elsewhere the depth of my personal gratitude toward Professor Williams as human being and friend. Restricting myself to some of his works on the history of ideas and of culture, I wish to demonstrate here that his intellectual world is as hospitable as his welcoming sense of dialogue and his personal manners.

In general, his discourse searches for and accepts radical otherness, distant in space and/or time, external and foreign, without overshadowing it or rejecting it, without confusion or assimilation, without even getting caught by the easy bias of the picturesque or the exotic. It seems to me that his thought enters naturally into spheres of otherness, accepting «inherent gaps» and some destabilization. I would say that this fruitful rapport constitutes the center of gravity of his thought in several of his works that I became acquainted with and often revisit. Here the difference is not an illusory difficulty. It does not mask any call to some deeper identity. It is not the pretext for some redemptive Aufhebung. George Williams treats otherness as a first datum, fundamental and even ontological, irreducible and calling for an ethical stance.

In principio, there is not a perception but an intellectual decision to think from within the difference. It is the task of dialogue to deepen the richness of differences. In contrast with a Hegelian spirit, Williams' thought moves about to discover the wide spectrum of the human condition such as it unfolds in the time of the Reformations in a Christian space. It is evident that such an approach to becoming in history is appropriate for centuries of crisis and of rupture, especially for a century of reform. Besides, one sees in this work Williams' genial capacity for the de-centration from oneself, for the transformation of the insights and the references, for the translation of geometric axes (speaking more geometrico). This play of metamorphoses exercises a powerful fascination on the reader. A structure of meaning always draws together the heterogeneous in strict fidelity to the hermeneutic principles, under the reign of regulating ideas that have varied little over forty years. The three levels to bear in mind, which are the facts, the hermeneutic model and the regulating ideas, stand together and are necessary to an intelligibility that comes out of their conjunction.

These three dimensions operate together in the writings of Professor Williams: first, a centrifugal line of diffraction into the particularity; the second, the synoptic and synthetic; and the last, the speculative and reflective. This allows us to understand why his critics place the accent now on openness and now on

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8 This debt remains despite some minor disagreements.
the solid resolution of his thought. Let’s think, for a moment, about the happy expression of his friend Rodney Petersen, “It is a life of constant accretion, never deletion,” ⁹ which characterizes the elegant Erasmian copia and the terrifying erudition of his writings. ¹⁰ There is an undeniable truth to this judgment. But on the other hand, I think that Hans Hillerbrand’s just as friendly comments (in his assessment of the third edition of the Radical Reformation ¹¹) need to be borne in mind, to the effect that Williams shows a stubborn will in having kept almost all of his fundamental postulates in this last edition despite the criticism offered to the two previous editions. It is equally true that we find in George Williams a strong axiomatic continuity: a linear framework on which are woven indistinguishably abounding ramifications and riches, free and curious, running in all directions. Very few historians know how to hold together these contrary acts of the mind.

For my part, therefore, and with the bias of my profession, I would like to suggest some clarification on this complex sense of otherness which I have learned to decipher and appreciate in his writing. ¹² I shall do this in two phases. First, considering his intellectual biography I will show the exceptional weight exercised by the European heritage at the three levels of the facts, the theoretical model and the regulating ideas. Then I shall try to characterize the philosophy of history and of culture that operates in his works. Understandably, my comment will not focus on the inquiry that is theological, properly speaking, which is evidently central to his thought. Rather, I shall turn to his intellectual ecumenism. Whatever distortions to his thought this might produce are to be ascribed to me.

⁹ See the Foreword to the Biographical Statement, op. cit., 4.

¹⁰ The year 1995 saw publication of the edition by Fortress Press of The History of the Polish Reformation by Stanisław Lubieniecki edited, translated and commented by George Williams. One can find here, with rich iconographic commentary (in 132 pages) his new translation. The text of the History, properly speaking, comprises 239 pages, while apart from seventy-four pages of introduction, the literary commentary (in the form of notes on the text) under the hand of George Williams makes up 370 pages of information, explanation, citations of all of the known sources, mention of the lacunae and historiographic problems, corrections to the principal text, and often qualified positions in favor of an hermeneutical option. This is the paradigm of serious German erudition. For example, one can cite the case of the exact date of the visit to Cracow of the person called Spiritus and of his true identity. After the examination of all of the current hypotheses, one reads, “I would opt for 1547, with the proviso that ...,” 737, n. 4.

¹¹ In the printed program of the Sixteenth Century Studies Society in Atlanta in 1992, communication from a symposium in honor of Williams was transformed in a book review showing that George Williams was quite sensitive to the criticism of the first volume, and particularly to that which addressed his general typology of the Reformation, but “Yet... Williams’ concession and recantations are far and few between,” Sixteenth Century Journal, XXIV, 2, 1993, 494. One can see the response which the author made to these objections in Radical Reformation, 1307.

¹² I have myself benefited from the extreme richness in the knowledge of the European Renaissance, which we owe to George Williams. I shall speak here of a point of view that is essentially epistemological, which only offers a poor and weak glimpse into the ample generosity of his work.
Professor Williams is certainly one of the greatest historians of Christianity in this century and a monumental theologian. However, he never follows a purely theological discourse. From the beginning he chose a kind of porous structure into which filter various discourses: sociological, political, literary, anthropological, epistemological, and so forth, which evidently produce a complex work. Complex, though not at all obscure.

His explicit and direct object consists in the vicissitudes of the people of the Covenant through the first sixteenth centuries of Christian history. He knows very well that pure chronology does not completely deliver the meaning. It aligns the fragments of the discourse and points to an anomic scattering of events that for the Christian historian must be detected, registered, surveyed, described, and understood on the basis of some relationship to the Christian faith. Each of his writings contributes to a reflection on the work of duration, in other words on how Western culture stands the test of time.

It is through the double relationship to facts and to theory that George Williams reveals himself clearly to be European. Several traits define a way of understanding present and past, a way of handling data, a specific relation between the author and his work, and, finally, a view on the finality of knowledge. So, against the empiricism and the positivism that dominated the Anglo-Saxon university while he was being trained (from 1929 to 1951), since his youth George Williams found himself inclined towards the German and French cultural worlds. The initial occasions for this were the German archaism of a neighboring Amish community, the elaborate apprenticeship of the vernacular and literary German language in his high school and, at the age of 20, the uprooting experience of staying a year at the University of Munich. However, I will not show myself more of a determinist than he is. To be sure, opportunities do not necessarily make the thief and there was a personal choice made by George Williams to enter into these cultures as one might enter into a religion. One can see that in addition to the classical languages and German, he mastered French wonderfully and moved once more to enter into a new culture, claiming, as he always does, the burden of the tools of communication before initiating contact. For Williams this never means a vague, passive, and

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13 The use of the singular here reveals the horizon construed by the historian.

14 This leads to an ethical and political responsibility.

15 This was the same year that Adolf Hitler received his plebiscite as chancellor.
approximate knowledge, but (as I have been able to benefit from with great pleasure) a delicate, subtle, and aristocratic expertise that became part of his elegant personality for life. It is with such openness that he stayed, again by choice, in France during the “drôle de guerre.” He spent part of the year at the Catholic Institute of Paris (a fortress of high Roman Catholic orthodoxy) and then at the Protestant Faculty of Theology of the University of Strasbourg, which was moved to Clermont-Ferrand during the war. One can imagine what the Third Reich and occupied France were exhibiting at that time to a young American: a state of tension and the reality of societies in crisis, which was not pleasant to see. Communist Poland, which he visited later on and whose language he will also learn (once more making the effort to encounter the other as the other is, not through translation) was not in a much better political position. However, that which he came to look for in Europe was not an immediate temporal picture of the Germany of 1933 to 1934 or of France from 1939 to 1940, but some deeper substance.

He allowed himself to be disturbed by his century and to discover by himself the experience of otherness that one finds in his books. Clearly, George Williams is not a journalist. He does not cultivate the picturesque of tourist guides. The bonding he cultivated with the spirit and methods of Europe could not come from the journeys themselves. He sought to enter two worlds of experience, each being shaped by history according to a particular internal logic, according to their own facts and values, according to their own long-term diachronic sense of becoming. Through his choice of inquiry, through his will to meet with symbolic worlds foreign to his own, Williams soon acquired the capacity to differentiate among contexts, eras, environments, linguistic connotations, styles, and so forth. Others made a university career riding on only one of those vectors, while Williams assembled them all as conditions of the innovative work he had in mind in the theoretical realm, all the while pursuing his own pastoral and liturgical agenda.

The Framework of Facts. George Williams is not an empiricist. He never presents a collection of facts as if the meaning should spontaneously flow from them. Of course, he uses his philological, paleological, and historiographical erudition to search the depth of archives in order to establish the significant facts. However, he seems to think that the facts are not really primary since they already constitute answers to the historian’s questions. We can observe the philosopher in Williams here. The philosopher is one who hears as well by the inward ear. And these facts only become intelligible when they are placed into a whole context characterized by formal traits that are conscious, explicit, and fully legitimated. The researcher is

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16 Other North Americans fled Europe in the face of such difficulties and risks.

17 These biographical segments are told in detail in the Biographical Statement, cited above. Nothing of these Christian confessions other than his own will be retained here. He returned to the University of Strasbourg (in its usual location) in 1960 and 1961 on a Fulbright Scholarship. In many spiraling circuits, known places are revisited and their ties renewed.
judged on the quality of his questions. For example, why see here an era? Why bring back such writings into a contemporary debate? Why bring together individuals and communities under the three categories of Anabaptists, Spiritualists, and Evangelical Rationalist? Why frame them, then, into the category of “Radical Reformation”? Why put together an idealistic causality as much as a materialist one? The philosophical lines are obvious in this continuing concern to account for his own foundations and to clarify the validity and the type of specific light that he is able to bring to the aspects of reality that he has chosen to highlight. We find that his book, The Radical Reformation, implements a didactic framework using territorial and chronological grids, but the conclusion tells us that reality is neither one nor the other. There is never any denominational partiality in the sorting out of facts for the benefit of a clan, as is done, for example, by Daniel-Rops. However, we are not at all left with the illusion of positivist objectivity. Because in the discursive theory of George Williams, to be at the same time right and useful, any information must always indicate its relationship to this or that specific conceptual frame from which the questioning proceeds.

This leads to the discipline of exercising an outward sensitivity to all thought, to all conceptualization, to all systems. For any historical fact considered, the historian has the epistemological (and not only ethical) obligation to preserve behind the scene its reference to a religious or cultural, economic or social, temporal or spatial externality. In fact, all the writings of George Williams imply and show that to understand theology, it is necessary to know much more than theology. To understand the Reformation, it is necessary to be a medievalist and a patristics scholar. To understand the facets and compelling positions of anti-trinitarianism, one needs to have studied at length the theology of the Trinity and to be able to gain insight in the first degree. This is the antithesis of the figure of the specialist who is defined (and comforted) by the closure of his encyclopedic and univocal knowledge. This is what I understand when Rodney Petersen speaks of “accretion” and of “ambiguity.” The principle of grandeur means that the mind has the obligation to actually inhabit any doctrine it seeks intellectually to judge, regardless of personal faith.

These heavy epistemological requirements for the sole treatment of facts illustrate what ecumenical thinking is about: working to produce convergences between entire distinct regions, i.e., cultures, languages, religious confessions, philosophical creeds, political ideologies, and so forth. George Williams does not deplore such diversity as a vice, a punishment, or a mistake to overcome. The choice is not between the One and Babel. Quite the contrary, one can see that he makes out of such differences a truly fundamental cognitive asset, a theoretical leverage affirming the discontinuities, a means of sketching and anticipating the truth, which never coincides effectively with any particular sphere although it demands crossing them all. This is why one cannot find a text by his hand that tries to even out the differences through some indistinct fusion or by the syncretism of juxtaposition, implying that all would ultimately be equivalent or
joined together. He implicitly asserts together the acknowledgement of irreducible gaps and the obligation to know ourselves through the experience of otherness, with which one must first negotiate without reservation and from which one must distance oneself in the end. This is also why the positivist historian's logic of identity, exclusive and repetitive, has no place in the historical project of George Williams.

The European heritage played largely in the development of his world at different successive and cumulative stages, beginning with his attentive parents, then at a secondary school of his German "gymnasium," then in Europe itself (Lebreton, Héring); furthermore in books (Tillich, Troeltsch) and with his Californian and New York university teachers (Adams, Kantorowicz, McNeill). To be sure, it is the prestigious paradigm of the German historian, from figures like von Ranke or like Meineke that Williams got norms for his almost superhuman erudition. This training in an all inclusive general culture produced two typical effects: on the one side one can see the development of an autonomous power of investigation of the facts, on the other side this European formation calls the thinker to withdraw from the Lebenswelt and exercise his intellectual responsibility.

However, this is only one part of what makes a historian of the European type. The other aspect is the acknowledged relation to a theory of interpretation of the facts. If beforehand George Williams was already convinced that the genesis of ideas, of environment, and of institutions is a part of their intelligibility, on the other hand, he is one of those who makes history from above rather than from below. In other words, he easily places himself in the Franco-German current, which adopts a constructivist hermeneutic. I repeat, he does not believe that factual findings can speak for themselves. He witnessed how Kantorowicz constructed the categories of his interpretative model, how he associated theoretical concepts in a working hypothesis very personal and very rigorous at the same time, all these steps at a speculative a priori level. It is impossible from this perspective, to maintain that facts preexist the interpretation. For, far from being an empirical datum, like mere independent or separated atoms, historical facts are themselves produced by the encounter between the questioning subject and the shapeless flux of things to be arranged in some partly arbitrary order. Let us consider the narrative structure of his perfectly convincing portraits of Stanisław Hosius and of Piotr Skarga where are conjoined a Polish and a non-Polish readings of the facts at the level

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18 After the manner of the German teacher of Montaigne who would only speak to him in Latin, the teacher Marie-Antoinette Karp would only address student Williams in native German, which made for a high standard.

19 Contrary to what is claimed by analytical theory.
of micro-history. All of the European models of thought are more or less hermeneutic when it comes to history, which means, in the technical sense, more or less “gadamériens” (Hans Gadamer).

**The Framework of Theoretical Models.** Clearly, George Williams did not encounter fully formed the paradigm of the “Radical Reformation.” He did not find it in the mere collection of facts. It is not because he was more fully informed about documentary details that he formulated that which others had not yet “perceived.” On the contrary, he had to turn away from the known facts temporarily to examine their formal structure: particularly, the a priori, the university clichés and the cognitive prejudices which legitimate the standard narrative chain. He had to ask himself which pattern could account for the “abrasion,” the “fanaticism,” the “delirium,” or the “aberrations” attested to in the margins of the two grand recognized Reformation types. He had to shift the reading and treat the margin as the center for there to emerge an intelligible order. The critical revision that he made does not add atoms of isolated meaning to a configuration in progress. It builds a new object of thought under the name *Radical Reformation*. It replaces the standard profile of the two contenders in interaction: Catholic Counter-Reform and “Magisterial Reformation” find themselves first obscured, then redefined and reevaluated by this third current, the convergence and internal unity of it not having received its theoretician before him. In this epistemology the configuration of facts forms clusters. The contrast with the atomistic view of the positivists is that here, the signification of each term depends on the sense of the regional totality by which they are embraced. Consequently in the new ternary division in the structural shape of the Reformation period, all the discourses of the reformers which do find salvation dependent upon pure doctrine suddenly appear to be narrowly related while those who find piety and virtue to be the principal ways to redemption constitute a second platform. One can see for the first time how much the positions of the Romans and the Genevans resembled each other for some twenty years.

So it depends on the historian (in the European tradition) to grant the status of a significant event to this or that incident. Often it is because intuition anticipates its role and weight that an historical inquiry “discovers” a “fact” and thoroughly documents it. It is also the role of the historian-philosopher to give meaning to events and sequences of events and further, to justify rational periodisation.

For the historian who thinks along certain lines of influence originating from Hegelian historicism

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21 *The Radical Reformation*, 1296: “While helping us to understand normative Protestantism, a fair delineation of the Radical Reformation is also as requisite as a grasp of the Magisterial Reformation for our comprehension of the direction taken by Tridentine Catholicism.”
(already revised in many ways before the 1930s), part of the historian’s task is to invest the historical space with theory. If George Williams has no reservation about operating with such “long temporal sweeps,”

which is horrific to such positivists and atomists as referred to by us), he does not at all fear the construction of various conceptual models as well as many typologies by means of which he brilliantly manages to question and to balance a vast assemblage of information without deformation or reduction. Following the doctrinal taxonomies and socio-theology of Lebreton and of Troeltsch, he elaborates his own paradigms, introducing a high degree of technical distinctions needed for the clarity of the fine subdivisions of his composition. Let us take the case of the cartography of the reforms of the European Renaissance as he draws it in the introduction to the third edition of The Radical Reformation. He holds to the one given in the introduction to his first edition to criticize and perfect it, mentioning in passing that he was responding to the positive and negative criticisms of his tri-partition of the period. At the other extreme, he tries to allow for individual singularity, aware that each law of coherence forces itself on the given facts, creating, in effect, a strong artificial frontier between the rule and the exception.

The models and typologies, which make of George Williams a thinker with a philosophical impact and reverberation, indicate by their boldness and critical freedom a rejection of the fashions, accepted views, and epistemology in historical studies in the American universities of the time. Moreover, one cannot reduce the making of his mind to some European borrowing since the itinerary that he followed added some clearly identifiable layers: California, New York, the Midwest, and finally Harvard. That which makes for the grandeur of the work of George Williams are not the European influences he faced. It is, rather, that he chose to exercise a real freedom toward these sources, methods and models that guided him toward a powerful synthesis. This synthesis, «son ouvrage», means a personal/ethical commitment as much as a technical accomplishment, both outstanding. Being European means a way of organizing discourse: George Williams as much as Isaiah Berlin, Fernand Dumont as much as Raymond Aron. Is there not a North American way of being European? Without a doubt, he favors the ideal of the intellectual generalist and critic who is

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22 Biographical Statement, 15.


24 Op. cit., 10. For a review of the criticism of his typology, see, among other places, n. 69 on 1280-1. For a discussion of the relations between medieval Christianity and the diverse claims of the radicals considered under the headings of simple antecedents, conditions, tendencies, or narrow causation, see 1290-3. Williams writes here, “To be sure, we have not solved the problem of the relationship of the Radical Reformation to the Middle Ages.”

engaged in his interpretation of the past, preferring this to the ideal of the detached and objective scholar, who perfectly controls information and the discussion of knowledge within a limited area and with the ideal of exhaustive encyclopedic knowledge.

**The Framework of Regulating Ideas.** Now, such a thinker capable of taking calculated risks and of testing the accuracy of several regional theses about the fate of Modern Christianity, does not leave in the shadows the regulating ideas that govern his enterprise, particularly as he thinks that they also govern history. This takes us even further away from empirical facts. Indeed, these ideas are not announced like the intuitions of referential truth but rather, after the manner of Kantian principles, function like a guide for inquiry: marking orientation, finalities, and offering glimpses of the ultimate sense of human adventure. Professor George Williams works under the empire of a few regulating ideas that give to the great body of his work a strong unity of inspiration. I have been able to isolate four, among others.

(1) The first of these regulating ideas concerns religion. As a historian of Christianity, George Williams chose to follow the guiding Christian thread in the destiny of the West. The people of the Covenant forms a community bound by the normative reference to Scripture. The unity of faith is at work under the plurality of forms of the faith. This unity is not posited by a scientific observation from a conceptual standpoint. The history of salvation is more mysterious than that of science.

(2) The second regulating idea is epistemological. The genesis of a doctrine, of an institution, or of an event is a part of its intelligibility, therefore of its definition. It is impossible to explain and to comprehend an idea, a religious crisis without mastering its history. And in retracing this origin and evolution the historical disciplines ultimately work to clarify our present.

(3) The third regulating idea has a metaphysical dimension. It is necessary to adopt the principle of structural discontinuity and at the same time to reject the strict necessitarianism of the German models (idealistic or materialist) inherited from the nineteenth century. Because the Christian nucleus reveals itself in history through concrete situations, contingent events, and free human will, it is necessary to decipher it on a concrete level in the context of internal contradictions. In order to counterbalance theory, it is important to search for the presence of facts, that is to say, concrete givens, the literal language of texts, the sinuosity of metaphors, the disorder of experiences, and the short-sightedness of testimonies (the phenomenologies of Husserl and of Heidegger are pertinent here). It is essential to let the documents have their own way, if one can put it as such, in their basic plurality, so as to avoid the flattening out of reductionism: that is if one wishes to work with authentic difference. This is the role of micro-history.

(4) The last regulating idea is in the order of anthropology. Between the macro-historical level of
the first sixteen centuries of Christianity and, on the other hand, the level of micro-history there exists an intermediate level of regularities and convergences (a sort of Zeitgeist or a structure of meaning) forming unstable but coherent symbolic ensembles. This is the case of collective identities such as culture, ideological current, or of given groups of reformers. One has to assume that they form a dynamic agency, capable of exercising on consciousness some kind of causality (typical of the hermeneutic tradition elaborated by Gadamer). The writing of a historical essay is adapted to this middle level. It corresponds to the oversize articles mentioned earlier.

One can recognize without much effort what brings together the work of George Williams with well-known francophone historians of his generation or of the one preceding his. I am thinking of four among the most famous, Pierre Mesnard, Ambroise Jobert, Pierre Chaunu, and Jean Delumeau. It is not the purpose here to locate the topical influences (some obvious) but rather to bring out certain parallels where they pertain, through several essential examples, showing that the historical work of George Williams belongs to the particular intellectual style of the engaged critic.

One finds the same multi-disciplinary (political theory, literature, philosophy) ease in the work of Pierre Mesnard embracing the long duration (Machiavelli, More, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Modrzewski, Bodin, Montaigne, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and others). In his most well-known work, he constructs a theoretical model of political philosophy unfolding in the many-faceted discourses of the sixteenth European century. Just as George Williams determined his own postulates, fixing his definition of what is and what is not the idea of the Radical Reformation, in the same way Mesnard’s model states the criteria of what he believes accompanies political modernity and rationality. In both cases one can see that the historical procedure is based upon the reflective ground of philosophy.

The example of Ambroise Jobert shows even more clearly such similarities, although he limits himself to the study of the example of Poland, which covers only a part of the interests of George Williams. His solid Slavic erudition allows Jobert to “feel” the cultural milieu of Poland in its internal complexity through participating in an empathetic purpose. Like George Williams, Jobert has access to the secondary Polish sources. Also like him he operates through successive decentrations toward the world of the other, moving between Roman Catholicism, Ruthenian Orthodoxy, Karaite Judaism, and Turkish Islam.


which had developed at the time of Northern Renaissance ancient and familiar relationships. Certainly George Williams transcends Jobert by the diachronic amplitude of his erudition and by the profound detail of his command of the theological stakes of the Reformation in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Nevertheless, one and the other offer us a powerful narrative synthesis and critique.

Regarding the work of Pierre Chaunu on the crisis of the church and the movements of the reformers,\(^\text{28}\) it deals as well with a “long temporal sweep.” Like George Williams’, his writing also obeys a triple polarity: 1) the participation in archival detail still filled with local flavour and accent, 2) the hermeneutic model, clearly more oriented towards economic and sociological vectors in Chaunu’s research; and 3) the explicit regulating ideas meaning, as in the work of George Williams, that the author engages his personal moral authority in his conclusions and preoccupies himself with their consequences in the present. However, it must be said that Chaunu expresses the color of his Protestant commitments in his scholarly work more strongly than our author.

Finally, the example of Delumeau is tightly linked to that of George Williams by certain methodological aspects. In his voluminous monothematic works,\(^\text{29}\) Delumeau holds to the same topical line through four or five centuries of Christian culture. Synthesizing the results of his research team’s documentary harvest, he succeeds to compile (and to translate into French) a thematic corpus largely unedited in which coexist scholarly and popular discourses, clerical and lay, ironic and solemn, Protestant and Roman. This constellation of texts manifests a reflection of the spirit of the times. It brings together a mass of material allowing readers to understand it in other ways than his own in case of disagreement with the hypotheses of his work. Thanks to the texts, Delumeau reconstitutes successive and distinct moments in the long historical period. Generally, he develops one single hypothesis that stands the test of texts and asserts itself against mainstream historiography.

Each one of these historians, and George Williams with them, chose as a theme of inquiry a matter that constitutes a problem for their respective quest, in other words, a place for reflection with an existential component. It is in this sense that I spoke of the audacity and intellectual courage of George Williams. Together with them he considers that the historical narrative is the creation of the historian who must account

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\(^{28}\) *Le Temps des Réformes*, vol. 1 *La Crise de la Chrétienté 1250-1550* and vol. 2 *La Réforme Protestante* (Paris: Fayard, 1975). This is only one of the erudite works of Chaunu on this period.

\(^{29}\) For example, *La Peur en Occident (XIVe-XVIIIe Siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 1978) and *Le Péché et la Peur: La Culpabilisation en Occident (XIIIe-XVIIIe Siècles)* (Paris: Fayard, 1983), the latter being the second volume of the same enterprise, showing that a strong sense of nothingness and of the fall of humanity penetrated he whole period during the Renaissance, and even in Italian poetry. He proves the ubiquity of Augustinian pessimism up to the French Revolution.
for it, as he has to defend the tradition that formed him. The place of historical work is not, then, some documentary vacuum to fill with pseudo-neutral and unimaginative knowledge. This powerful European perspective is now disappearing in Europe as much as here. There is good ground for being nostalgic about the decline of this grand manner and for saluting in George Williams one of the best representatives of it on two continents.

PROFESSOR GEORGE WILLIAMS PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THEORY OF CULTURE AS BY-PRODUCTS OF HIS THEORIZING IN CHURCH HISTORY

Notwithstanding my endeavor to pull Professor Williams' thought towards philosophy, I cannot forget the fact that all of his intellectual enterprises from the most political-polemical to the most speculative are, in the end, ruled by an interrogation of a religious essence. For him, history is first of all the stage where the supernatural destiny occurs. It has a finality which is to offer a place where individual wills can cooperate with redemption. This level of religious telos transcends the other areas of historical becoming, without taking away from their own proper standing. There are two perspectives that come into view at this point to bring clarity to the situation of humanity in history. First is the conviction that time can never be univocal or transparent, even when deciphered in a religious perspective. Let us state it plainly: historical science does not have as its end finding the key to the design of the Creator. Indeed the supernatural destiny seems to be accomplished, to his eyes, only through an incarnation in contingent temporal and local human communities. It follows that the historian must go through the plurality of persons and texts to construe with precision the vast diversity of frameworks and scattered atoms of meaning.

It appears to me that for George Williams the historian, historical science should not aim at producing a perfectly integrated final picture, since these levels of meaning are not entirely commensurable. Therefore, they will resist being forced into some rational synthesis claiming to reveal their ultimate truth. However, it accords well with science in the following sense: never does the recourse to a mystical position fill in to respond to a historical problem. Therefore William's doctrine is neither rationalist nor mystical. Let us remember that he learned his trade, in part, from Ernst Kantorowicz who did not make Christian history of Christianity, but who knew how to detect without error the echo of a Greek Father in a medieval Latin liturgical formulation. This unerring sense of the sources, of tonality, metaphor, style, and way of thinking according to the period, this substratum of disciplined erudition that shelters the mind from all forms

30 “Under McNeill he found congenial the idea that a Church historian bears some responsibility for, and owes something in further scholarship to, the tradition and the institutions that originally nurtured him or her and shaped his or her mission and sense of academic responsibility no matter how expanded or altered the vocation,” Biographical Statement, 14-15.
of anachronism, George Williams shares with his teacher and with many great figures in the cultural history of the West who found refuge in North America during and after the Second World War.

The second of these two perspectives on the very complex relations between mankind and the unfolding of duration resides in a non-Hegelian necessitarianism. In effect, the sense of causality that George Williams shows us implies that any particular moment of time always remains, by definition open to new radical interventions by the active will.

How did the Radical Reformation take form? Right at the beginning of his introduction, he affirms that one can think of it as occupying the social interstices between the Magisterial Reformation and the Tridentine Counter-Reform. Here his text postulates that segments of history do not follow a rule of saturated pre-determination capable of revealing their ultimate, total and transparent meaning. This philosophy of history is able to accommodate itself to exchanges and debates with secular and profane historians. A philosophy of history which is either deterministic or dogmatic, be it marxist or Roman, cannot compose as easily as his with positions like my own secular view. For instance, I have heard George Williams discuss with Richard Popkin the internal tension at work in Renaissance Christianity and philosophical discourse. How were the turns to Hebraicisation and to Hellenisation to be interpreted? Richard Popkin brought to the discussion his immense erudition in Judaic studies; both benefited from an encounter with each other's scientific sense, information, and hypotheses of work. I see in George Williams an intellectual who, far from presenting himself as a kind of apatrid, has cultivated the spirit of citizenship and a strong sense of belonging to a scholarly tradition, a university, a religious confession, but which have never made of him a prisoner. Considering these multiple loyalties, he elegantly manages to think in a way

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31 This intellectual relationship to history permitted the young George Williams to bring with him not only the science of Kantorowicz but also his advice when he went from the University of California to Union Seminary in New York in order to work under the direction of John T. McNeill in 1944. He never repudiated this first formation. At the time when he chose to do his thesis on medieval science with Kantorowicz, Kantorowicz had not yet published his well-known book, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957) where the author thanks his former student (cf. XII) for his revision of the manuscript. From scholar to scholar, George Williams dedicated a work to him in 1962 (cf. *Biographical Statement*, 14). But in another dimension, he included in his dedication of *The History of the Polish Reformation* John T. MacNeill, his thesis advisor in theology, one of the three dedications (posthumous) cited in that book forty-three years later. This indicates intellectual fidelity beyond lines of friendship. Again, it shows something quite rare, the capacity of George Williams to correlate without confusing them symbolic worlds that are completely distinct: the natural history and the supernatural history of Western Christianity.

32 This context of large meaning comprises many theoreticians who take this up in the philosophy of history, at one moment or another, such as Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Hannah Arendt, Erwin Panofsky, Raymond Klibansky, and so forth. Professor Williams is a part of this circle and, to the title that I give him, he seems to be a sort of immigré de l'intérieur.

33 *Op. cit.*, 1, taken up and developed on 1290-3. From a diachronic point of view, these are the interstices of late medieval Christianity, which sheltered the ferment of the rebirth of radicalism.

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which is both committed and distantiated.

A passage in his autobiography shows him on a reflective day, conscious of the essence of culture, “recognizing that one could never speak two languages at the same time, he pondered whether all matured languages were eventually susceptible of universal discourse.” The question of the claim of linguistic, cultural, and religious universality is a true philosophical problem for a historian who studies the institutional history of the church, from the unity of the apostolic Fathers to the splintering in Poland of the Major and Minor Churches, then in the Socinian branch of Transylvania that means a great deal to him as they are at the origin of Unitarianism in which he recognizes himself. This is troubled history, cruel, antagonizing, and polemical, intolerant, and desperately far away from the evangelical ideal claimed by all of the protagonists. If one takes the (exclusive) plurality of languages in themselves, but also as a metaphor for the plurality of cultures and of religious confessions, then one can realize the scope of the question it focuses on the status of particularity. Is it intrinsically a vector for violence? Is it rather an occasion for egocentrism where one can easily insinuate a logic of rejection and of exclusion of the non-self?

If one cannot speak effectively in two languages at the same time, the awareness that a great number of them exists introduces an enigmatic twist in the search for truth. For, as Lorenzo Valla wrote it before Giambattista Vico, it is the essence of a natural language to have the capacity of signifying everything: it construes a complete world where the language, operating as a center, organizes fields of meaning according to a semantic, syntactic and stylistic inner ordination. Fully regional, with the temptation to give into the trap of absolutism as one finds in the case of Roman Orthodoxy: here a particular system of conceptualization already actualized in time works to sublimate the particularity in order to impose (abusively in my eyes) a standard of translinguistic, transcultural, and transconfessional truth.

Certainly the theory of culture which underlies the syntheses of George Williams does not allow so abrupt and authoritative a dismissal of particularity. This generalist does not at all expect unity to emerge from some artificial espéranto naively combined into a patchwork. Evidently for George Williams the truth of faith is part of an order that does not allow itself to be contained into a conceptual scheme. It is something in which we believe rather than a system of specific knowledge which would define a borderline: if faith were a system of knowledge, one could tell conformity within from heresy without. For him, the rallying

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34 Biographical Statement, 10.

35 One can also extend this to the disciplines of the humanities. Historical knowledge is, in a sense, a language, and theology is another that he has the genius to maintain distinct.

36 This is the actual Tridentine spirit, at least as I analyze and understand it.
principle is not a dogma, but convergence in the message of Scripture. Cultures spreading themselves out in historical time are not able, in effect, to attain the possession of a definitive theory of salvation where, from a universal position of finitude it could rule over the breadth and coexistence of particularities. One can well see George Williams' interest in the "Polish case." It is the vigorous and articulated irenicism that is practiced there, on the one side the multi-religious royal state and, on the other, the cultivated ecumenicity, first among Protestants, in the Agreement of Sandomierz (1570), later among all Christians in the Pax Dissidentium (1573) (called the Confederation of Warsaw) to which the Primate of the Polish Catholic Church participated (though he censured it). This is one of the most civilized accomplishments of the European sixteenth century. It implies that the search for faith always remains in statu viatoris and that it should preserve itself from the games of political power. No particular configuration of Christian faith can legitimately claim universal credit or become the self-appointed police of Revelation. From George Williams' point of view, one needs to give up the illusion of some intellectual leap into absolute truth as well as into shapeless relativism. The only remaining way is to welcome the indefinite sequence of particularities as encountered in an I/THOU direct relationship. Thus, otherness reveals itself as human and is recognized as fruitful.

What I have attempted to outline in this sketch of George Williams as philosopher, lies in his decision to part from static thinking in order to explore authentic otherness. There is not doubt that he will pursue much further the search for meaning and that he will still surprise us with his subtle dialectics between risk and wisdom.

This article was translated by Rodney Petersen with the assistance of Anne-Marie André, une amie Vaudoise of Professor George Williams.