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An Inconvenient Theology

An Alien in a Strange Land

Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow

Anthony Dancer

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William Stringfellow is one of the most intriguing modern American theologians, but you're far from alone if you haven't heard of him. Rowan Williams, Stanley Hauerwas, Jim Wallis, and Daniel Berrigan have all been influenced by his work, yet since his death in 1985, Stringfellow's legacy has been sorely under-appreciated and his writings far too little sought after.

Anthony Dancer's new book, *An Alien in a Strange Land: Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow*, will help change that. It takes us from Stringfellow's working-class upbringing in Massachusetts, to his coming-of-age in the 1950s as a Christian student leader, through his move from Harvard Law School to practicing law among the poor in East Harlem, and ends with the publication of his important 1973 book, *An Ethic for Christian and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*.

The strength of Stringfellow's theology lies in his exploration, specifically within the context of the Cold War-era Pax Americana, of the worldly "principalities and powers" described in the New Testament. Stringfellow saw these malign spiritual forces at work in the most familiar of secular and religious institutions—in IBM, in the popularity of Marilyn Monroe, and even in Billy Graham's crusades—as well as in all the -isms that seek to shape how we think and act. They're idols, "impostors of God." Stringfellow's work poses a challenge to the imagination, and manifests a refusal to confuse things as they are with how they could or should be. We confuse a Hallmark card with actual love, and next year's car model with actual progress. For Stringfellow, the gospel calls us to something better. He gives a wildly creative, occasionally funny, and often disturbing picture of a world upside-down and a gospel right-side-up. His apocalypticism is far more akin to the Book of Revelation's hope-amid-empire than the *Left Behind*-style sci-fi prophecies of rapture so popular among Evangelicals today.

Dancer argues that the foundation of Stringfellow's thought lies in two experiences with alienation. The first came during his years as a lawyer in Harlem, where he confronted urban poverty firsthand, a system of injustice that was literally murderous to its victims and invisible to its affluent perpetrators downtown and in the suburbs. The second came in accepting his own homosexuality.

Stringfellow was a semi-closeted gay man. Dancer points out that even his awakening as a Christian was, by Stringfellow's own account, through "an unusually close friendship with another fellow"—surely loving, if not necessarily sexual. Though he never made his own homosexuality explicit in his writing, he did write and speak on the topic, always denouncing the idolatry of both homophobia (as we now call it) in churches and the "ostentation" of gay culture, which too often encourages assuaging loneliness with lust and promiscuity. Though in opposing ways, both ways of obsessing about homosexuality distract people from the gospel's call for equality and love. Dancer does an excellent job of showing how sexuality was a central concern in Stringfellow's life and work, even while he always handled it with a light touch.

Stringfellow met the poet Anthony Towne in 1962, and within months they had moved in together. Five years later, Stringfellow's poor health forced them to "immigrate" from New York to a quieter homestead on Block Island that the couple called, fittingly, Eschaton. It was there that they harbored the Jesuit poet and activist Daniel Berrigan after his participation in the illegal burning of draftcards at the Cantonsville Nine protest against the Vietnam War, and it was there that the FBI finally caught up with him. There, also, Towne died of a sudden illness. Stringfellow's 1982 book, *A Simplicity of Faith*, is a tribute to "my sweet companion of seventeen years" that, again, refuses to label their love homosexuality as such—it was just love.

A lifelong Episcopalian and inveterate Bible-thumper, Stringfellow was a Protestant in the most etymological sense. He saw Christianity as a call to dissent. The great Reformed theologian Karl Barth recognized this, and urged an audience at the University of Chicago in 1962 to "Listen to this man!" Barth saw in Stringfellow's writing a "theology of freedom" more concerned with proclaiming the gospel than with catering to the habits and fads of American society—a theology unwilling, as Stringfellow put it, "to interpret the Bible for the convenience of America." Barth also saw in him a way of doing theology free from the pomp and insularity of academia.

That Stringfellow has remained mostly ignored in academic theology is at least in part his own doing. He would say that, for the sake of vocation, he had "died to career," both in law and theology. Though he did quite a lot of each, he refused to define himself by the professional standards of either—they're principalities in themselves. His writing is decidedly vernacular even when demanding, the product of reading far more from the Bible and the newspaper (as Barth urged preachers to do) than from the theological canon. "A person must come to the Bible with a certain naivety," Stringfellow wrote; "one must forego anything that would demean God to dependence upon one's own thoughts." What he wrote is a model for serious, engaged, and yet decidedly lay theology, carried out with a sense of both play and dire seriousness. Caught as we are between the blogosphere rabble and the over-specialized academy, we need more of this today.

In place of academic citations, Stringfellow's books give us stories of his life, from the evil incarnate he saw in poverty to the most quotidian moments at home with Towne and their "Christian dog" Marmaduke. Stringfellow knew as well as Augustine that, especially in a tumultuous age, the gospel can be made most visible in the sharing of one's own particular encounters with it. Dancer's approach, which he calls "biographical theology," is constantly sensitive to this; blurring the lines between person and author, text and context, *An Alien in a Strange Land* is faithful to a man who, writes Dancer, "spoke as much with his life as he did his writing." Stringfellow himself wrote, "We are each one of us parables."

Driver's prose can make for rocky going at times, with distracting typos and an awkward style that too often exposes its origin as a dissertation. Some of the most interesting passages appear in footnotes: Stringfellow's personal finances, the FBI file on him, his correspondence with Thomas Merton, and a 1966 visit to Vietnam, among them. If it weren't for the footnotes (or the curiosity of hearing one's history told through the eyes of a New Zealander), American readers could stand to skip the two long chapters on Stringfellow's cultural context.

The best introduction to William Stringfellow's uncommon writings is still Bill Wylie-Kellerman's reader, *A Keeper of the Word*. Once you fall under Stringfellow's spell, as I did almost immediately several years ago, you'll feel as grateful for what Dancer has given us as I do.

Related: [Impeach Nixon Now](#), by William Stringfellow (published in the May 26, 1972, issue of *Commonweal*)

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