



MORLAN'S ANNUAL LECTURE 2010

Religion and Politics

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Archbishop of Wales**



Background

Morlan is a centre that aims to promote community life – culturally and spiritually, locally and further afield. It was established in April 2005 to create a bridge between the church and the local community and has developed into an important centre in the area.

But Morlan is so much more than just a building ...

It's a meeting-place – to create and discuss, to perform, to learn, to promote and encourage, to understand one another, to share and contribute ... a common ground between the church and all who live in our multicultural society.

Morlan is a welcoming and friendly place that reflects those principles that bind the human race and all races and creeds together. The trustees of Capel y Morfa, the Welsh Presbyterian Church that owns the centre, consider the establishment and support of Morlan as central to their mission.

Its various rooms – a large hall, two committee rooms and a coffee bar – can be hired for all sorts of events and activities, and it has the facilities for musical and dramatical performances. And it's a busy place! Prayer meetings, Welsh classes, dance classes, a lip reading group and youth club take place there on a weekly basis, and several local groups use Morlan as their 'home', holding regular meetings there. The place is used by both local groups and national organisations.

In addition, Morlan has its own programme of activities and events that it organises and hosts throughout the year on a wide range of themes – social, political, religious and cultural themes.

Between this programme of events and the activities of the hirers, all sorts of events take place at Morlan – committee meetings, conferences, plays, concerts, all sorts of fairs, public meetings, social events, lectures, debates and art exhibitions.

This is Morlan's first Annual Lecture.

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Religion and Politics

There are many who claim that religion and politics don't mix. I regard that as an inaccurate reading of the Scriptures. I can best explain what I mean by describing to you two models of Christian discipleship as exemplified by people I will call Sion and Sian. I may exaggerate the approaches in order to illustrate my point, so I hope you'll forgive me for that.

Sion is a Christian who takes his personal faith very seriously. He sees life as a process of making himself more holy. Matters such as conversion and the journeying of the soul are, to him, the essence of discipleship and he is devoted to the study of the Scriptures, to prayer, to intercession, to simplicity of life. For him, the Gospel is the Gospel of salvation of faith in Christ crucified. What is important in discipleship is that people should take Jesus as their personal Saviour and Lord.

Sian is a Christian who takes the Magnificat very seriously especially the words:

*“He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;
he has brought down the mighty from their thrones
and exalted those of humble estate;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”*

Sian stresses the importance of community living and she sees as central to an understanding of God's way with the world, the liberation of Israel from an oppressive regime in Egypt through the Exodus, and the establishment of a Covenant relationship. That was a Covenant concerned with justice, right dealing and righteousness, where the whole community is urged to look after widows, strangers and the landless.

For Sian, this approach is endorsed by Jesus who in His ministry goes out of his way to minister to those who have been excluded and marginalised and for him this is the essence of being a Christian. Jesus began His ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth by proclaiming that He had come to set captives free, to give sight to the blind and to liberate those who were oppressed.

For Sian, therefore, the Gospel is about social justice. She is concerned about poverty, racial discrimination, nuclear arms and so she spends a great deal of her time in organising protests and campaigns, in leading people in demonstrations for political causes which fire her and she is always talking about race, poverty, war and their evils.

Now from these descriptions you will know I have not been talking about actual people but types. Nevertheless, although that is so, it is true that some Christians do put all the stress on individual salvation. The Christian life for them has to do with sanctification, a preparation for eternity. Others see the Christian life as an exercise in showing the compassion of Jesus to those in need, and struggling for justice. The question is, where does the truth lie?

Perhaps there are problems with both approaches.

Sion can live in the world and be totally unaware that anything is amiss in it as long as souls are converted and saved. He does not want to ask the question “*converted to what*” and “*saved for what*”. The world in one sense is a place to be endured. What is really important is a relationship with God through Jesus in this world and the next.

For Sian conversion affects all aspects of her life and that of the world. She does not exist in a vacuum. She is a wife, mother, employer, citizen. She has amusements, hobbies, money, income, wealth. Conversion is the conversion of her whole being and affects everything and has to do with more than her personal devotion.

For Sian, individuals cannot be divorced from the communities in which they live. It is impossible to care for people without at the same time caring about the issues which affect them and about the structures which impinge on their lives. Love of neighbour is not just about concern for that neighbour’s soul, but also involves concern about some of the problems he faces and, once one gets involved in that, one is automatically involved in the structures of a society that lead to his particular social problem – there is no way of avoiding it.

Moreover, for Sian, the salvation of one’s own soul or self sanctification may well be the goal of Buddhism or Greek philosophy or modern psychology. It is not the goal of Christianity. To embrace Christianity for the purpose of self fulfilment or self salvation is to misunderstand the Gospel at its deepest level. Christianity is first and foremost a community religion, not a personal religion – the religion of a body – the Body of Christ and it is a body that basically exists for others. The Church and, therefore, individual Christians, exist for the world God loves and God invites us to join Him in loving it. As the Epistle of John says, “*we cannot say that we love God whom we have not seen when we do not love our neighbour whom we have*”.¹

But the Sian approach also has its dangers. It is easy to be stirred into protest about the misdeeds of others in one’s own country and in other countries and to overlook one’s own misdeeds and failures.

Moreover, it is easy to substitute causes and opinions for God, and forget about the spiritual life and the need for prayer and repentance, and this can lead to bitterness and shallowness rather than love and service. Religion can become the handmaid of political propaganda and ideology.

So there are dangers in both models. To be a true Christian both are necessary. One cannot have a solely individualistic personal religion that relates to no-one and nothing else, but it is impossible also to have a faith that does not take the process of sanctification seriously. We need to discover a spirituality, a faith that is not merely concerned about the state of one’s own soul but also about God’s world and the issues that confront it. But we need in our concern for that world and what goes on in it, to

¹ 1 John 4:20

be open to the spirit of God, to seek to do His will in it and to be re-made ourselves in the light of God's purposes of love.

In short, we have to love God and our neighbours and to love God in our neighbour and our neighbour in God and see these elements, not as separate entities, but as intrinsically and inextricably bound up with one another and that inevitably involves us in politics.

Now by politics, I do not mean party politics but politics with a small 'p' – about how we organise ourselves in society.

The first Christians came to the belief expressed in their credal affirmation that Jesus was Lord. It was a conviction arrived at after Jesus' resurrection from the dead. That conviction runs through the whole of the New Testament. For us the revolutionary nature of that declaration "*Jesus is Lord*" has lost something of its sharpness and freshness. In the time of the first Christians it was a public statement which could lead to death.

I will try to explain its implications with reference to the birth stories. The Wise Men came to Herod and asked where the King of the Jews had been born so that they might go and worship him.

Herod was the actual King of the Jews and so he had all Jewish boys killed because he didn't want any rivals. That fear in Herod points to the contrast between Herod's idea of kingship and Jesus' idea. As the Gospel unfolds, we realise that there are two kinds of kingship, politics, revealed. Opposed to Herod's violence and oppression and terror, is Jesus' lordship of service and vulnerability and love. And says St Mathew, Jesus is the real King of the Jews.

But to proclaim that, even though His kingship was different, was to threaten the throne of Herod and was, therefore, political. And to say Jesus was Lord – '*Kyrios*' – was also to claim the official title of the Roman Emperor. Whereas at one stage, only dead emperors were called Lords (that is, divine) gradually, living emperors also came to be seen as Lords or Gods. Temples were built to them and a test of loyalty as a citizen of the Empire was whether people could say "*Caesar is Lord*".

In the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, the word '*Kyrios*' was used to translate the word for God '*Yahweh*'. In other words, for Greek speaking Jews, the word '*Kyrios*' was the equivalent to the name of God. So to say Jesus was Lord as opposed to both Herod and Caesar not only had political connotations but religious ones as well. The claim is that Jesus is not only the earthly ruler, but the heavenly one as well. A revolutionary political message indeed.

As a result, the early Christians, because of this belief, refused to pay homage to Caesar. Since Jesus was Lord, they were not going to acknowledge the Lordship of Caesar. They faced death of course by calling someone other than Caesar, Lord. It was revolutionary because they gave this title '*Lord*' to a man who had been crucified by

the express decree of the Roman power occupying Judea at the time. Jesus was a disgraced figure, a dis-owned citizen, a reject. Crucifixion was reserved for the scum of the earth. The Romans didn't crucify their own citizens, they only crucified those non-Romans convicted of crime, evil-doers of the lowest class – rebels, criminals, slaves. And yet, knowing that the penalty was death, people were still prepared to stand up and confess that Jesus was Lord.

What the early Christians were saying was that Jesus was their Lord not Caesar and that this Jesus partook of the power and authority of God. The early Christians felt that the title '*Lord*' was the only adequate name by which to call Jesus. Just imagine how the Roman authorities must have felt about that. Caesar was Lord through conquest and oppression and violence. Jesus was Lord because He had come to bring justice and non-violence to the earth. So to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and they used the present tense not past because they believed in his living presence, was seen as sedition by both Herod and Rome. The New Testament proclaims the Lordship of Jesus and the reign of God over and against the rulers of this world. So much then for keeping religion and politics apart.

To proclaim Jesus as Lord is a radical political statement. It continues to pose questions for us as individuals, as churches, and as a nation – how do we use power and influence, be it military, political or economic? Where do we stand? Are we with Herod and Caesar who rule through domination and fear and intimidation or are we with Jesus who rules in a different way through justice, peace and non-violence? Fifteen years ago the ecumenical response to some moral questions in Wales commissioned by Cytûn reflected that:

“A society which is built on growing individualism, self-centredness, unjust competitiveness and material greed is bound to disintegrate. Governance is fundamentally about developing responsible and accountable instruments which can create and establish communities of justice and mercy, where all belong, where personal dignity is affirmed and where all are cared for.”²

This is the political imperative which still confronts us in 2010.

For to be a disciple of Jesus is to be involved in His kind of Lordship of servanthood of washing His disciples' feet. To say that Jesus is Lord means acknowledging His headship but also being committed to His way of service, love and compassion. It is about being transformed into His likeness but it is also about joining Him in His fight against everything and anything that de-humanises and degrades human beings. It is a combination of the understandings of John and James, personal holiness impelling us into social action, and working to alleviate the issues facing individuals which brings with it the force for systemic change. Acknowledging the Lordship of Jesus is to help God bring about the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven – a world of justice, peace and sustainability. We are co-workers with God in prayer and action.

² *Wales: A Moral Society, an ecumenical response to some moral questions in Wales*, Cytûn: Churches Together in Wales, June 1996, Chapter 7, p. 68

To proclaim Jesus as Lord is to say that He is the Lord of the whole of life as God is, not just what we label as the religious bits or the churchy bits. God's Kingdom is coextensive with the Universe and there is nothing within it which is not of concern to Him. If we are God's people and proclaim the Lordship of Jesus, then the concerns of His world are our concerns too because they are His. It is part of what it means to be his disciples and that inevitably involves us in political action.

Frank Weston was one time Bishop of Zanzibar in East Africa and in 1923 he addressed an Anglo Catholic Congress in these terms:

"If you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in His Blessed Sacrament, then when you come out from before your tabernacle, you must walk with Christ through the streets of this country and find the same Christ in the peoples of your towns and villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slums. It is madness to suppose that you can worship Jesus in the Sacrament when you are sweating Him in the bodies and souls of His children."

Desmond Tutu in apartheid South Africa proclaimed the equality of all races in God's name. That brought him into collision with a government that disagreed and led to political protests. Mother Teresa founded an order to alleviate the misery of the destitute in India whilst also agitating for a greater recognition in society of their plight.

There are, therefore, not two aspects to life, the spiritual and the temporal – the former having to do with God, faith, prayer and the interior life, with the latter being concerned with the material sphere of work, politics and living in the world. Faith cannot be restricted to the home and church and excluded from the public square as if religion is what individuals do with their leisure time – a marginal and private pursuit for those who like that kind of thing. To accept that is a denial of what it means to believe in God who has brought all things into being.

Christians also believe that human beings are made in God's image and are His sons and daughters and therefore that every aspect of our lives matter to Him because we bear the very stamp of His nature. To take a contrary view is like telling a human parent that he or she should restrict their concern to one or two aspects of the child's life, rather than that life as a whole.

Let me spell this out even more precisely than I outlined before. If one studies the Scriptures even cursorily, one soon discovers that God does not restrict His concern to so-called religious matters. In fact, the God of the Old Testament, through his prophets, castigates the people of Israel for thinking that all He requires is right worship – what the prophets called sacrificial burnt offerings whilst ignoring the needs of the poor, widows, orphans and strangers in their midst. In fact, the prophets proclaim that what God requires is not sacrifice but mercy and He hates religious feasts that are divorced from just living. Micah, writing in the 8th century BC, indicts a society corrupted by the power of wealth and the exploitation of ordinary citizens. A man could no longer call his home his own and his family lived in fear, Micah trumpets.

In Micah's affluent society, human life was cheap, and the leaders of Israel were the ringleaders of its social disintegration. With courageous conviction Micah declared that there would be an inescapable destruction, for they had ceased to be God's people owing to their inhumanity. The most moving passage of Micah, defining his call, is in chapter 6, verse 8:

"He has shown you, O man, what is good: and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God."

Social action, compassion and thoughtfulness towards others, go together with the blessing of God. A century later Jeremiah was prophesying this same theme. People learn little and that slowly!

The New Testament goes a step further. Its central tenet is that in Jesus Christ, God became man (incarnate) because in the words of one theologian, *"matter matters to God"*. God is so concerned about the world – the world of flesh and blood – that He becomes part of it to show His solidarity with it; that's what incarnation means.

So Jesus begins His public ministry at Nazareth with these words:

*"God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed."*³

And Jesus, who reveals to us as much of God as it is possible to be revealed in a human being, spent most of His ministry not in synagogue and temple but preaching to the poor and marginalised and reaching out to all those people whom His society found unacceptable or untouchable for religious moral and political reasons (sinners, Gentiles and tax collectors). Each of the Gospels makes explicit reference to the compassion of Jesus, to his healing of those marginalised, his acceptance of those ignored or rejected by society. He was killed, condemned by both religious and secular authorities because He was a threat to them.

Marcus Borg, the American theologian believes there were two things important to Jesus – God's spirit and God's compassion. He was open to both. Thus he prayed to God and addressed him as Abba – Father – and had a deep and continuous relationship with Him. Jesus was compassionate according to Borg because he believed compassion was God's defining characteristic. Compassion he defines as associating with the sufferings of another and being moved to do something about it.

In his ministry of compassion, however, Jesus came into conflict with his critics because for them God's chief characteristic was holiness – *"You shall be holy as the Lord your God is Holy"* (Leviticus). And holiness meant separation from everything that was unclean. Holiness meant purity and Jewish society was structured around a purity system where everything was classified as being either pure or impure, clean or

³ Luke 4:18

unclean. Jewish society was ruled by purity laws. Your job could make you impure if you were a tax collector or a shepherd. You were regarded as ritually impure because in the one case you were dealing with a foreign power and in the other with animals and to be impure made you untouchable. People who were maimed or chronically sick were seen as impure. To be poor meant that you were regarded as impure because wealth was seen as a blessing from God and poverty as a sign of God's displeasure.

Men were more pure than women because of child birth. Gentiles, people who were not Jews, were impure and unclean. The effect of the purity system in Jesus' society was to create a world with sharp social boundaries between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile. The centre of purity was the temple and the priests who upheld it.

Jesus however replaced the core value of purity with compassion because He regarded compassion not holiness as God's dominant quality and so He criticised the system that emphasised purity and neglected justice and called Pharisees unmarked graves which people walk over without knowing it. In other words, He called a group who prided themselves on their purity as a source of impurity since corpses were regarded as impure.

For Jesus, purity was what came out of a person, rather than what went into a person. That's why He said, *"Blessed are the pure in heart"*. True purity was not a matter of external boundaries and observances, but of the heart. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a criticism of the purity system. The priest and the Levite ignored the man who had fallen among thieves because they wanted to maintain their purity. Contact with death or illness was a source of impurity so they passed by in case they got contaminated but the Samaritan, himself regarded by most Jews as impure, acted compassionately in attending to the man left as half dead.

So Jesus touched lepers and haemorrhaging women and mixed with women and children. He went to a graveyard inhabited by a man full of unclean spirits who lived near pigs – another source of impurity. He ate with all kinds of people. In the world of Jesus, to share a meal with somebody implied acceptance of that person. It wasn't a casual act for no decent person shared a meal with an outcast. Compassion meant an inclusive community. Purity for its own sake meant a closed one.

His followers included women, which was a radical statement in itself. In a society governed by this purity system women were regarded as nobodies and had few of the rights of men. They couldn't be witnesses in a court of law, or start legal proceedings or divorce proceedings. They could not be taught the law and were veiled in public and did not go to meals outside the family. A woman's identity was that of her father or husband yet Jesus is being entertained by women at meals. He even allows one to wash his feet and for them to travel around with Him. So Jesus embodied a radically alternative social vision for women.

Jesus shattered all these boundaries because He wanted people to be as compassionate as God. Whereas purity divided and excluded, compassion united and included. Jesus replaced the politics of purity by the politics of compassion.

The literary critic, Terry Eagleton, puts it like this:

“... the anti God of Scripture who hates burnt offerings and acts of smug self righteousness, is the enemy of idols, fetishes and graven images of all kinds – gods, churches, ritual sacrifice, the Stars and Stripes, nations, success, ideologies, and the like. You shall know Him for who He is when you see the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent empty away. Salvation ... turns out to be not a matter of cult, law and ritual, of special observances and conformity to a moral code, of slaughtering animals for sacrifice or even of being splendidly virtuous. It is a question of feeding the hungry, welcoming the immigrants, visiting the sick, and protecting the poor, orphaned and widowed from the violence of the rich. Astonishingly, we are saved not by a special apparatus known as religion, but by the quality of our every day relations with one another. It was Christianity, not the French Intelligence which invented the concept of everyday life.”⁴

This Messiah, he goes on to say, rejects weapons of destruction, enters the national capital riding on a donkey and gets himself strung up. And if someone responds *“render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and God the things that are God’s”*, it does not mean that religion is one thing whereas politics is another. For any devout Jew of Jesus’ time would have known that the things that are God’s include working for justice, welcoming the immigrants, and humbling the high and mighty.

If then nothing of itself is impure, and compassion is God’s characteristic as seen in Jesus then that must also be true of his disciples and that’s why Christians believe they have a concern for every aspect of life, be it to do with health, education, war, housing, asylum seekers or governance or any aspect of life that is crucial to a person’s or a community’s wellbeing. For unless the Gospel – and the very word means *“good news”* – has relevance to every aspect of life, then it has no relevance to any aspect of it. There is no doubt that this country’s beliefs in freedom and equality and the desire to remove poverty, injustice, oppression and slavery are based on Judeo Christian values.

So if Jesus’ mission was not to save souls from the world but to bring God’s Kingdom and its values to transform that world (that is the meaning of that part of the Lord’s Prayer *“thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”*), there is every reason for every Christian to get involved in the life and death issues of our time.

That does not mean, of course, that Christians do not differ from one another or that any Christian viewpoint is infallible. Neither does it suggest that Christians have a ‘monopoly’ on morality. All I am arguing for on theological and philosophical grounds is that because of their beliefs, Christians have to be involved in the issues of their age because they are concerned, as God is, for the good of society as a whole, not just for their own partisan interests. The fundamental principle of the 1996 ecumenical report I quoted earlier is:

⁴ *Faith, and Revolution – Reflections on the God Debate*, Terry Eagleton, YUP New Haven 2009, pp. 18-19

“The gospel of Jesus Christ is not addressed to individuals in a vacuum. Jesus’ own preaching is directed towards the restoration and extension of God’s people; and the effect of His life, death and resurrection is to create a new community, set apart from others by the quality of its common life, a life in which, as St Paul repeatedly insists, each believer lives for the sake of other and each is recognized as having an unique contribution to make to the life of the Body.”

This country has been shaped by the Christian faith and its history is inextricably bound up with it. True, church attendance is not what it was and the church no longer plays a part in the life of the nation as it once did, but that does not mean that people are not interested in spiritual matters. Most people in this country still believe in God and continue to pray.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury recently pointed out, religion instead of allowing itself to be quietly marginalised *“has continued to be a presence sometimes vocal, often deeply influential in the public square”*. When people are killed on our roads or there are awful tragedies, piles of flowers mark the event, public services are held. It’s as if people are trying to relate their feelings to something or someone greater than themselves. There is a hunger to express something spiritual about human life, to go beyond the merely functional daily existence.

And again, to quote Archbishop Rowan:

“in a rational, carefully administered secular society, there ought to be no superfluous emotions, images, sensations and aspirations. They ought to be catered for, but they’re not. And the Church and other religious bodies remain places where those unformulated, almost unconscious questions and aspirations are still allowed to breathe.”

As someone else put it:

“the Church is still a place where people place the emotions that won’t go anywhere else.”

Christians are interested in the good of society as a whole – the common good, not just their own good. That’s why Christians work for charity, want to change the situation of the poor, the marginalized, the powerless and also want to build a society where all human beings can flourish.

In other words, Christian faith does not believe that we are simply conditioned by purely utilitarian, economic or technological matters. We believe that there are deeper questions about the meaning and purpose to our lives, and that our actions must be governed by them. *“Theology”*, says Thomas Aquinas, *“attempts to say something about everything in relation to God.”*

As I have said, politics is about how we organise ourselves in society and, if society is so organised that people are excluded because, for example, of their colour of skin, or gender, then the Gospel is of relevance. And it is of relevance as to how we organise ourselves as a nation.

But what Christians also have to remember is that we have to love the world with God's kind of love. We aren't social crusaders going about doing good in the light of our **personal** understanding of things. Christians are God's people who need to be open to Him in order to give us a wider greater dimension. **If** we don't subject our interests and ideologies to the purifying power of God's love, then the danger is that we can begin to identify our interests with God's because we haven't brought the needs of the world properly into His presence. We worship God because he is God. When we understand God aright it leads us to right living, social action, compassion, love.

It is easy for any of us to localise God. Loving God and our neighbour means bringing all that we do and think into His presence to be purified by Him so that we don't reduce His love to our understanding.

To my mind, it is at the Eucharist that we are reminded of all that, for the Eucharist is the community act of acceptance and welcome of all God's people, irrespective of creed, class, gender, personal characteristics. It is at the Eucharist that we are:

1. nourished by God's strength and grace
2. reminded that God is the Lord of all Creation
3. released from sin, guilt, paralysis and fear and set free from the past as forgiven people
4. sent out into the world to offer ourselves our souls and bodies to engage with God in His struggle for the coming of His Kingdom.

The Eucharist propels us into God's mission field, the world around us in all its messiness, hurt, and intolerance. That's political activity in the Christian understanding of things.

For the Eucharist is given not for individual sanctification but is indeed in the words of one of the Oxford Fathers, *"a stirrup cup for battle"*. It is the place where we are renewed and remade but renewed and remade not just for ourselves but as God's ambassadors for His world.

Ultimately then the Church, the Body of Christ, you and me, the praying and worshipping people of God, work in the world as God's agents of social change. And if that's not political, I'd like to know what is!

*The Most Reverend Doctor Barry Morgan
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