

The Bedell/Boyle Lecture 2002

# THE BIBLE AND POLITICS

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## **INTRODUCTION**

### The Bedell/Boyle Lecture Series

The National Bible Society of Ireland has inaugurated an annual lecture series known as the Bedell/Boyle Lecture. It is intended that the series will provide an opportunity to promote the Bible and the effective use of the Holy Scriptures. Each year a speaker of stature will be asked to lecture on a topic relating some aspect of the Bible to current developments. It is hoped to publish each Lecture.

The Lecture series is named in honour of William Bedell (1571-1642) Bishop of Kilmore and Ardagh, because of his commitment to the translation of the Bible into Irish. Linked with Bedell's Irish Bible, published for the first time in 1685, is Hon. Robert Boyle (1626-1691) who ensured the publication of Bedell's Bible. Boyle was very committed to Bible distribution and he was a distinguished scientist known for Boyle's Law. Thus key elements of modern Bible Society work — translation, publication and distribution — were foreshadowed by these two men.

The 2002 Lecture was given by Trevor Sargent T.D. on 24th November 2002 in Purcell House, All Hallows, Dublin. Deputy Sargent is President of the Green Party in Ireland.

We are pleased to publish the complete text of the Lecture, and believe that this will aid our reflection and response to the living Word of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Judith Wilkinson

## THE BEDELL-BOYLE LECTURE 1997.

### THE BIBLE AND POLITICS

I am not a theologian but I do have a deep respect for God's creation. I am a Christian however, and I feel called to help bring about a fair and just way of life where humanity can thrive in harmony with a healthy and diverse natural world on this finite and fragile planet. The Bible has greatly influenced the practice of politics down the centuries and depending on human priorities at the time, its commands have been translated into political action. For example, the Brehon Laws in Ireland determined that anyone working on a Sunday would be penalised by having to pay a fine in the form of cattle. It is worth saying also that any person who failed to report a person working on Sunday at the time was also penalised.

The Reformation in Europe of 1517 gave rise to a strong tradition of personal responsibility in one's Christian life. This tradition also had the effect of elevating Calvinist individualism above community wellbeing, so much so that personal economic fortune was interpreted as a Divine blessing, as 'God's money', not only to be hoarded but to be multiplied by what became known as a Protestant work ethic.

The concept of 'having enough' in a Western society is seldom discussed, especially where the dominant political agenda is to maximise growth in consumption. So, here we are in the top 20% of the human population living in the rich countries, consuming 86% of natural resources such as fossil fuels and other finite raw materials. In spite of this glaring and hatred-inciting level of inequality the International Monetary Fund seems able to assuage the consciences of the West by giving one of the poorest countries in the world - Senegal - 4.7million £Stg. in debt relief last year, while at the same time collecting £Stg.26million in interest repayments (ref. The Ecologist, Nov 2002).

The selective way in which Biblical pronouncements are interpreted makes it interesting to speculate on how a number of Old Testament rules could affect the present day doctrine of economic growth. Economic development is normally stimulated through the accumulation of large capital sums, but various laws acted to prevent individual families from acquiring these. Wages had to be paid promptly, debts were cancelled in the Sabbatical year, work could not be substituted for leisure on the Sabbath, and any need to save food for the Sabbatical year (when land was given a rest) would have encouraged savings to be more often in kind than in monetary form (ref. Leviticus 19:13, Deuteronomy 15:1, Exodus 20:10).

There was the Jubilee Principle that every 50th year the land was to be handed back to its original trustee (the owner being God) (ref. Leviticus 25:8-17). The land had originally been distributed on the basis of shares of equal productive potential (ref. Numbers 26:52-56). Usury, the taking of interest on loans was normally prohibited (ref. Deuteronomy 23:19-20) which would have been a disincentive to lending in a capital-scarce economy, (ref. God's Green World, the Christian Ecology Group 1983).

It is difficult now to find a bank which does not charge interest. Scandinavia has about a dozen. One such bank, JAK - the initials stand for Land, Labour and Capital in Swedish - was started in 1931 by Kristian Englebrecht Kristiansen. His parents had faced difficulties paying interest on their farm which was poor land. He believed that real capital was created when bad worthless land was made fertile but that money in itself produced no return. The JAK movement believes the charging of interest leads to the concentration of wealth, the increase of indebtedness and the growth of unemployment (ref [www.yesmagazine.org](http://www.yesmagazine.org)).

Even since 1960, the year I was born, the concentration of wealth in the hands of the richest 20% of humanity highlights for me the folly of policy makers to turn their back on the values in the Bible. In 1960 the top 20% were 30 times richer than the bottom 20%. By 2000 the top 20% had become 75 times richer than the bottom 20%.

Meanwhile, neglect of ecological ground rules has contributed to the United Nations Environmental Programme assessment that each year 11 million hectares of productive land are turned into desert. 7.5% of all arable land is abandoned every decade. By 2020 AD most tropical forests outside of the Amazon and West Africa will have been cleared. The Amazon itself is losing forest cover at the rate of an area the size of Croke Park every minute. This scale of forest clearance is directly affecting climate change and the survival of many cultures, animal and plants. Fresh water consumption is doubling every 20 years, yet already 1 billion people suffer water shortages. Climate change is causing more and more floods and hurricanes. Hurricane Mitch alone killed 18,000 people. Sixty per cent of the world's ocean fisheries are at the point at which yields are declining. A third of all fish species and a quarter of all mammal species are in danger of extinction.

Such is the accelerating scale of the ecological crisis which now confronts life on earth that the holistic wisdom of the Bible is now more vital than ever to alert humans to the mandate given by God to co-operate rather than compete, and to cherish biodiversity rather than exterminate it.

Such is the scale of the challenge facing humanity that what ever way one looks at the crisis, a miracle is needed. If everyone is expected to adopt a western lifestyle, another four planets like this one will be needed to support us all.

A miracle which is less greedy would be to ask God's help in finding ways for us all to live peacefully within the carrying capacity of the Earth. Currently to support its present patterns of consumption, the world needs 2.3 hectares of productive land per person. However, the finite nature of the planet dictates that only 1.5 hectares is available for each of us.

To quote Senator Tom Hayden from the USA, whom I met in Dublin at the launch of his book *The Lost Gospel of the Earth* exactly six years ago 'Unless the nature of the State is harmonised with the state of Nature our greed and ignorance will eventually take us beyond the capacity of the very ecosystems that support human existence'.

I would argue that the Bible does indeed give much food for thought and guidance to a people who have free will to create harmony or disharmony as they wish on this fragile planet. Disharmony has generally been the order of the day and it is a travesty of human narrow mindedness that an interpretation of Genesis 1:28 has been used to justify enormous suffering and exploitation.

'Fill the Earth and subdue it' is read as a simple utilitarian creed by leaders of public opinion down the centuries. St. Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274) wrote in *Summa Theologica* that 'dumb plants and animals are naturally enslaved and accommodated to the uses of others by a most just ordinance of the Creator'. Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) drew on the imagery of the witch trials at the time to declare nature was to be 'placed on the rack enslaved bound into service and forced out of her natural state and moulded'.

Rene Descartes in his *Discourse on Method* (1637), declared that human destiny was to be 'masters of nature'. This allowed him to reassuringly explain that animals did not feel pain when being whipped, skinned or amputated since they lacked souls. Their screams were only apparent expressions of pain, but in reality just noises of their body machinery (ref: *The Lost Gospel of the Earth - a Call for Renewing Nature Spirit and Politics*. Senator

Tom Harden, Wolfhound Press 1997 p 52-53). It is interesting to wonder therefore what Descartes would have said when told that the Irish word for soul - 'anam' shares the same Latin root 'anima' meaning breath, spirit or soul with the English word 'animal'.

The esteemed philosophers mentioned above seem to have overlooked a fundamental point that the words spoken in Genesis 1:28 were intended for humans in a state of grace with God before the Fall, and it is fair to assume that the greater good would have been uppermost in Adam's mind rather than narrow species or even misogynist self interest. Likewise, before the Fall in Genesis 1:29 God gave Adam 'every seed bearing plant'.

A very different story emerges after the Fall in Genesis 3:15. God tells the Serpent 'I will put enmity between you and the woman'. The harmonious relations between humanity and the rest of the animal kingdom worsen however as God tells Noah in Genesis 9:2-3 'The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air. Upon every creature that moves along the ground and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything'.

However, it is clear that God still holds a place in his heart for every species, not just humans, when he says in Genesis 9:16 'Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds I will see it and remember the everlasting Covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on earth'. Again, the Bible states 'all living creatures' - not just the edible ones, the cute looking ones, the friendly ones. Indeed, many species are still unknown to humanity.

Many others have been brought to extinction following human exploitation or destruction of habitat.

The New Testament continues the inclusive theme in the words of Jesus recorded at the end of St. Mark's Gospel 16:15 - 'Go into the world and preach the good news to all creation'. St. Paul in his Letters to the Colossians 1:19-20 declares 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ, and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the Cross'.

Again, Paul is clearly and totally inclusive when he talks of 'all things' everywhere. Meanwhile, even human parents and children find it difficult to be reconciled at times. Even those who profess themselves followers of Christ seem suspicious of reconciliation as a possible sign of weakness. As for reconciliation between humanity and the rest of Creation, for many Christians that seems remote and even comparable to the political objectives in De Valera's time of draining the Shannon or restoring the Irish Language.

However, it is clear to me that Jesus Christ is highly motivated and well equipped to bring about the reconciliation of all things. To understand the meaning behind the words of Jesus Christ, I believe that the political context of life in Galilee is important to know. Also important to know is something about the languages Jesus spoke - Aramaic as well as Hebrew.

I recently came across a book by Neil Douglas-Klotz called *The Hidden Gospel - Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*. The Aramaic interpretations have a truly cosmic quality and show up the familiar English verses as being limited and lacking in the awesome and poetic quality of the Aramaic. For example, 'Our Father in Heaven' has four possible Aramaic interpretations:

1. Oh Thou the One from whom breath enters being in all radiant forms,
2. Oh Parent of the universe from your deep interior comes the next wave of shining life,
3. Oh fruitful nurturing life giver. Your sound rings everywhere throughout the Cosmos,
4. Father, mother who birth unity, you vibrate life into form in each new instant.

The English word God which derives from a Germanic root meaning goodness, is very different from the Aramaic 'Alaha' or the Hebrew 'Elohim', which both mean the sacred unity, or indeed, the definite article. The latter interpretation means that every created thing when described using the definite article, reflects the sacred unity.

The story of Jesus healing the deaf and mute man in Mark's Gospel 7:32-37 retains the powerful command 'ethphatah!', which is translated in English Bibles as 'Be Opened'. However the word in Aramaic can mean 'be opened to the healing power of sacred unity' or 'expand! give up your small identity as a person without sound' or 'clear the way! receive the healing power that is all around you' or 'allow yourself to be flooded by the waves of sacred space which give and receive all sound, hearing and speech'. The Aramaic for 'he looked up to Heaven' is 'har bashmaya' which also means 'he contemplated the Universe of vibration, sound and light'.

Jesus often uses phrases like 'your faith has made you well'. The Aramaic word for faith is 'haimanuta' which can be translated as one's confidence, firmness, integrity of being in sacred unity, connected to the sacred life force.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that 'No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again' John 3:3, the term born again in Aramaic is 'min d'rish', which means literally to be born from the beginning. In this context it seems to me that Jesus is advocating that Nicodemus recreate the Creation story within himself as Jesus uses the Hebrew words for water and spirit which are found in Genesis 1 where it is read that the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Jesus again set some ground rules in John 4:24 when he says 'God is spirit and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth'. However, the Aramaic interpretation is at once more challenging than the English version but also more awesome and exciting. Verse 24 could read 'God is breath. All that breathes resides in the only being. From my breath to the air we share to the wind that blows around the planet: sacred unity inspires all'. Or Verse 24 could read 'Those that surrender to unity, bowing to it in utmost adoration, must do so in breath and harmony, like the sense of direction that drives the universal winds'.

Even more profound concepts are to be gleaned from Aramaic interpretation of The Beatitudes. For example in Matthew 5:5 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth'. An open translation in Aramaic could read 'Ripe are those who soften what is rigid, inside and out: they shall be open to receive strength and power - their natural inheritance - from nature'.

From reading these open translations from Aramaic it is clear that Jesus was very much tuned into nature's ways. The Aramaic word to pray is 'shela' which suggests creating a sense of space to listen as indicated in the Lord's Prayer where 'hallowed be Thy name' can be read as 'clear Holy space around your name, let it be the centre on which our life turns'. The Aramaic word for name here is 'shem' which can also mean 'light'. This adds further to the potent imagery of Jesus' words.

Another well known passage from the Gospels is often to be seen printed on noticeboards outside churches and on Christian billboard advertisements - from John 14:6 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'. In any language this is Jesus providing a doorway between realities, but as expected the Aramaic translation is more cosmic in expression.

The 'I am' is the path, the sense of right direction and the life force to travel it. Simple presence illuminates what's ahead, frees our choices and connects us to nature's power. No one comes into rhythm with the breathing life of all, the sound and atmosphere that created the cosmos, except through the breathing, sound and atmosphere of another embodied 'I' connected to the ultimate 'I am'.

The invitation by Christ as well as by John The Baptist to 'repent for the Kingdom of God is near' in Matthew 3:2 and 4:17 had many contemporaries of Jesus wondering what his political agenda might be. Did Jesus intend to set up a Kingdom with a select group of devotees who would receive their reward later? Was he advocating a political revolution? Was he predicting the imminent end of the world? Did he change his mind about whether the Kingdom was here and now or later and somewhere else? Why did he use some obscure parables to try to describe it to his students? The Aramaic context and the social context of the time suggests it is worth looking at the meaning of the term Jesus used for Kingdom. The Aramaic word 'malkuta' and the equivalent word in Hebrew 'mamlaka' are both feminine nouns and could properly be translated by the word Queendom. We now know from archaeological records that Queens historically preceded Kings in the Middle East as in many other parts of the world. Whether male or female the nomadic tradition in the Middle East meant that a person who emerged with the self-confidence and wisdom to direct the tribe towards food, good grazing or water, became the empowering Counsel that ruled by an ability to express the most obvious next step for the group. This title is loosely translated as the 'I can' person. It is my belief that Jesus wanted to generate wisdom and self-confidence so everyone could be an 'I can' person.

The English word 'Kingdom' is again heard in the Beatitudes, Matt. 5:10 where we read 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs in the Kingdom of Heaven'. Here are three versions as to how this might read in an open translation from Aramaic:

Blessedly ripe are those who are banished for seeking justice within and without. Their new home is a larger universe of empowerment.

In tune with the Cosmos are those who are dominated and driven away because they long for a firm foundation of community; their domain becomes the activity that rules the Cosmos.

Happy and right on time are those who draw shame for their pursuit for peace between all the conflicting voices; they realise their part in the vision that vibrates through all of creation.

The passion and earthy quality of Jesus' message are to be found in the parable of the mustard seed. Mustard was not planted as a crop to eat as it was said to cause insanity if eaten. Instead it was useful as a green manure as it added nitrogen and so fed the soil as well as providing a roost for birds. In other words it only indirectly helped the human community. Its most obvious quality was that it spread like wildfire. If the mustard seed is like the Kingdom of Heaven, then it seems that Jesus was emulating the quick spreading nature of the seed in sowing a divine sense of 'I am' and empowerment. People have speculated that Jesus might have been less ambiguous if he had stated simply 'Let's

have a revolution' or 'Go take care of your inner life', but the parables created a sense of awe and enlightenment. This approach may also have something to teach modern day politicians.

The profound Jewish and Middle Eastern concepts of heaven and earth also have deep meaning when heard through Aramaic interpretations. In Western religion earth is something we are stuck with as a necessary evil. Later we are promised a reward in a disembodied place called heaven. Arising from the meanings in Genesis, heaven is a communal connected existence through a wave of light or sound, whereas earth means an array of infinitely diverse and unique beings referring to all of nature from a plant to a star. I certainly feel more enlightened about the meaning of heaven and earth having read the Aramaic translations through the words of Jesus in Matt. 5:18. Most readers of Bibles in English will be familiar with the words of Jesus 'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the law until everything is accomplished'. Another reading of this saying from the Aramaic could be as follows: 'Until light and form, individuality and community, heaven and earth finally merge again into unity, not the smallest part of every guidance that relieves our weakness will pass away, until it has fulfilled its purpose and is no longer needed.

Heaven and earth also feature in the Lord's Prayer in the line 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Three other ways of reading this line from the Aramaic could be:

1. Let your delight flow through us in wave and particle,
2. Let your pleasure manifest in us in light and form,
3. Let your desire act through us as communal and individual purpose.

Once we reflect on the deeper meanings of heaven and earth then the often quoted passage from John 3:16 becomes quite awesome. In English we read 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have ever lasting life'. Another reading based on Aramaic text could be: 'For unity so loved diversity all the worlds of form, that it brought you a child of unity, fulfilled in all aspects of self, so that who ever would have the same confidence in their own fulfilment, like the earth underneath supporting all, would not fade with their form, but continue from world to world, with and in the ever living life'.

Finally, I would hope that as many people have been motivated to take an interest in politics as have committed themselves to the Christian life by the most important commandment which reads in Mark 12:30-31 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself.' However, as Jesus would render it in Aramaic the words point to a process that involves all parts of the soul. The same commandment could read 'Let compassion unfurl from your inner womb for sacred unity in the form that impresses you most deeply, inside or out. Send this love with and through your whole passionate self, your whole awakening, subconscious self, your whole instinctive mind and with all of your life energy. The second is this: Give birth to compassion for the nearest, yet unfamiliar aspect of yourself, as you do for the one outside who feels like a stranger'.

By comparison, the inspirational writings and policy documents which inform and motivate people engaged in Green politics are in the main secular compared with the holistic and awesome writings of the Bible. However, there are crossover points between politics and the Bible. After all, the Bible has had more political affect than any political

writing even *Das Kapital* or the Green philosophy book *Small is Beautiful, Economics as if People Matter* by Fritz Schumacher.

From a Green political point of view the Green Movement motto of 'Think Globally, Act Locally' is analogous to Christ's commandment to 'Love God and Love your Neighbour'. Green politics also relates to the more holistic view of who our neighbour is, as expressed in creation theology. Indeed, as I think of God's House I think of the Earth, and it is this analysis which gives rise to the science of ecology - literally the 'understanding of the house', taken from the Greek word for the house 'oikos' which examines the interconnectedness of all life.

A logical progression would be to study ecology first so as to understand God's creation and then go on to study economics, which literally means 'the management of the house'. Unfortunately however it is more normal for economics to be practised with little or no study of ecology.

Similarly, I fear that politics (unless one is in the Green Party/Comhaontas Glas) is mostly practised with little or no study of ecology. A study of the Bible would also be useful prior to entering politics, as at least it might engender some level of respect for God's creation as well as establishing a selfless moral code.

A short introduction to three aspects of the Bible & Politics might be found in the book of Job. Job is the Lord's favourite servant. His faith is tested however in every possible way; his children, his health and his wealth are all taken for no apparent reason. Job ultimately breaks down in rage, damning the day he was born. In the usual rendering he loses 'the patience of Job'. But reading the story in a creation-centred framework, it is striking that when God finally decides to answer Job's cries, it is through the medium of an awesome nature spirit. Job's sin it turns out was anthropocentrism, the arrogant and deluded belief that the earth and universe were designed for human benefit and control. The voice lashes out at Job's narrow self-centredness, admonishing that he never can understand the complexity and functioning of the planet and the universe. This is the very opposite of a universe built for us to manipulate as we will. Instead of being given dominion over plants and animals, or a licence to subdue nature, Job is told to bow down and be humble before its dominion over him. He is required to understand absolute humility. His ultimate surrender is not the sort of mindless obedience wished by some clerical authorities; it is the kind of surrender that is the wholehearted giving up of oneself; a giving surrender to the universe, arising from humility that leads to wisdom instead of an anthropocentric pride. Job is born again; converted from an ego-centred to an ECO-centred consciousness based on respect and praise.

We live in hope. Go raibh maith agaibh.