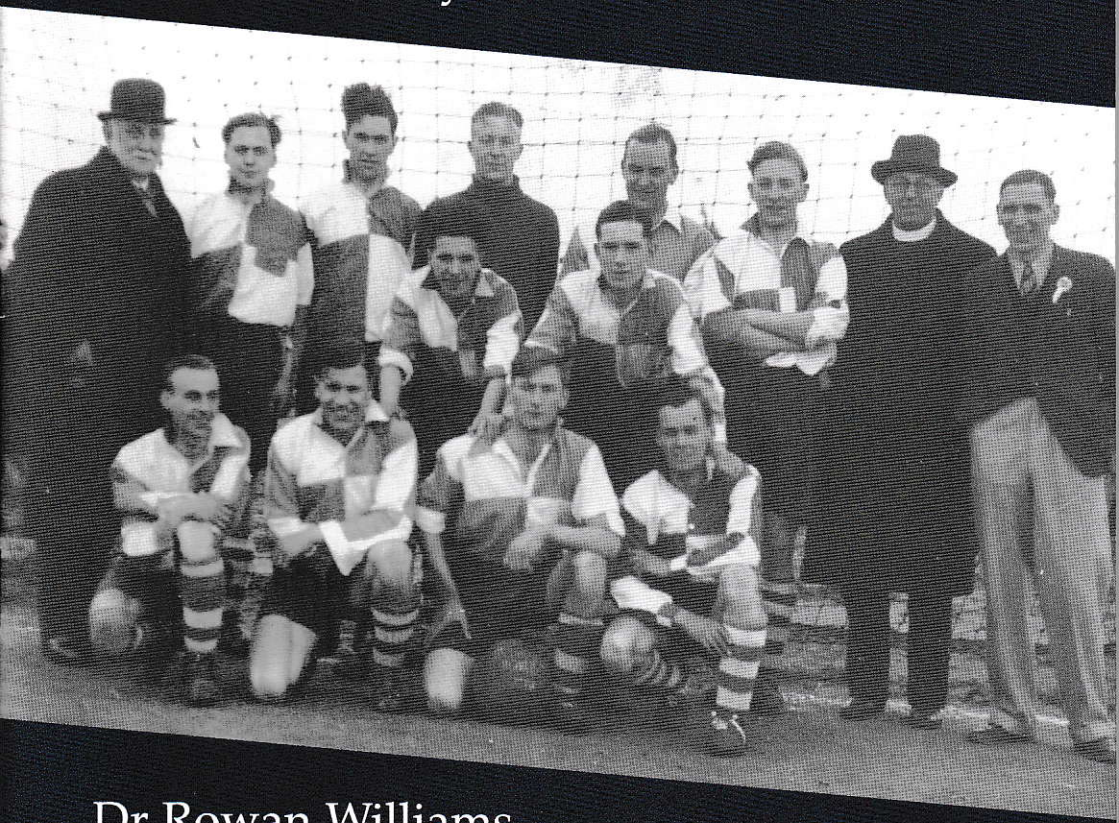


The Third George Lansbury

Memorial Lecture

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Wednesday 18 November 2015



Dr Rowan Williams

104th Archbishop of Canterbury

THE THIRD GEORGE LANSBURY MEMORIAL LECTURE

Dr Rowan Williams

RELIGION AND POLITICS

The People's Palace, Queen Mary University

18 November 2015

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Cover Illustration. George Lansbury (*left*) with the St Mary Bow Football Team, 1937–8, and the Revd George Ansell, Rector of Bow.

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The Rector Manley Power sent me word that a very interesting man with whom he had been having some talks might be there and would like to meet me at supper afterwards. He was a secularist lecturer, by name Lansbury, who seemed to be feeling his way back to the Church. He came to Bow Church, very shamefacedly, and sat at the back behind a pillar. After supper he poured out doubts, questions, desires, as out of a long corked up bottle; and I was much moved by his sincerity. Thereafter he threw in his lot with the church, taking St Francis of Assisi as his ideal Christian. For some time, until increasing political work made it difficult, he held a class for lads on Saturday afternoons.

Cosmo Lang, Dean of Magdalene College, Cambridge (1893–5), Bishop of Stepney (1901–9) and Archbishop of Canterbury (1928–42). Lang and Lansbury were both members of the Central London Unemployment Body

Religion and Politics

Simon Gaskell, Principal at Queen Mary, University of London

Welcome to the third George Lansbury memorial lecture, and let me thank the Poplar HARCA Group and the Canary Wharf Group, both of whom have joined us in sponsoring this evening's event. I'm delighted that we are again hosting this event at Queen Mary University of London, partly because I think it's a terrific event and partly because it is entirely in keeping with our character as a university that is very firmly embedded in the East End of London.

And of course George Lansbury, though he was not originally from the East End of London, held an attachment to the area that is reflected in his long, distinguished, and very varied career. He was a man in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who campaigned in various ways, for the fairer treatment of the often marginalised, and always impoverished, inhabitants of this part of the capital city. And one might reflect that, in relative terms at least, not much has changed. And the work he did in the East End was brought to national prominence with his appointment in 1905 to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, culminating in his authorship with Beatrice Webb of the famous Minority Report in 1909. The following year he was elected to Parliament for the local constituency of Bow and Bromley, he lost that

seat in 1912 fighting a by-election for women's suffrage. By then, Lansbury had established himself as a figure, and as a campaigning figure, and he established the campaigning newspaper the *Daily Herald*.

At the start of the 1920s Lansbury was one of the leading figures in the revolt of the Poplar councillors over the unfair way in which the poorer areas were being treated, while in the early 1930s he became leader of the Labour Party at a particularly low-point in its history, building its recovery as an underrated Leader of the Opposition, and I will refrain from drawing parallels with today's position. During that difficult decade he was presented with an increasingly stark choice between the dictates of his conscience and preparations for the approaching horrors of the Second World War.

To all his activities Lansbury brought a deep sincerity and purpose based not least upon his deep faith, and this is again anchored in the long history of the area because he served as Church Warden of the ancient parish church of St Mary's Bow. And it's this relationship between religion and politics, so central to George Lansbury's life, that this lecture this evening addresses. It reflects the efforts of the George Lansbury Memorial Trust to commemorate the wide range of Lansbury's activities, consider their contemporary relevancies, and communicate them to a new generation. So to deliver a lecture on this theme it would be hard to find a more appropriate speaker than Lord Williams of Oystermouth.

Like George Lansbury, Lord Williams is a man of many parts, including a theologian, a peace campaigner, a poet and a public figure, most notably of course, as the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, and he is now master at Magdalene College, Cambridge. He has reflected profoundly on the relationship between religion and politics in both the private and public spheres, as indeed Lansbury also had to do. And this has been, in Lord Williams' case, through his long and distinguished career in universities and the Church, and through books such as *Faith in the Public Square* which was published in 2012. Indeed his tenure at the see of Canterbury was noteworthy for his efforts to reconsider the role of religion in national life in a changing and multicultural Britain, again sharing resonances with the East End of London. So accordingly it gives me great pleasure to welcome Lord Williams to deliver the third annual George Lansbury Memorial lecture.

Religion and Politics

Dr Rowan Williams

Thank you very much indeed, both for the welcome and for the invitation to deliver this lecture. I believe that the first time I came across the name George Lansbury was in a very unlikely context. It was in a biography of Ronald Knox by Evelyn Waugh. Ronald Knox was a well-known Roman Catholic writer and apologist who had been an undergraduate in Oxford before the First World War and had very briefly, been active in left wing politics in Oxford. As Evelyn Waugh remarks in the biography 'he showed no signs of this in later life and remained "an unenthusiastic conservative" until his dying day'. But when he was a student, he did briefly campaign on behalf of 'the Labour interest', and he mentions in one of his letters that he's about to go to a talk by one George Lansbury, 'a good Catholic and a good socialist' – Catholic in the sense of a high church Anglican which Knox himself was at that point. He adds that he intends to do a little bit of canvassing on behalf of the Labour Party for no particular reason as there is no election coming. That gives some indication of just how serious Knox's political commitment was at the time. The mention of Lansbury intrigued me then; I wanted to know more about this 'good Catholic and good socialist', and something more about all the things Ronald Knox had not paid very much attention to.

George Lansbury remains for me one of the most intriguing figures of his very distinctive political and religious world, that world where Catholic-minded Anglicans were often, unexpectedly, at the forefront of a number of profoundly radical movements. When the very conservative Bishop of Durham Hensley Henson spoke about the 'unholy alliance of Socialists, Feminists and Anglo-Catholics', he put together a group that perhaps in more recent decades has not been so obviously associated. But it was a world where those in the Catholic tradition within the Church of England felt a deep obligation to think through the kind of society we lived in, and to ask some very awkward questions about where power was located. I'll mention a little later the influence of one

of the most remarkable and unusual political thinkers of that era, John Neville Figgis, who was a priest, an historian, and a political theorist. They drew upon some of the major Cambridge historians of the nineteenth century, such as Acton and Maitland, and someone who had quite an impact on the development of what is sometimes called associational socialism, cooperativism, within the political spectrum, Harold Laski, who read and ingested a good deal of Figgis.

I read Figgis in my twenties and continued to read him avidly. Part of my own interest in reading Figgis has to do, I think, with the way Figgis begins from a point that might be described as *making politics difficult*. What do we actually mean by politics? Or political philosophy? Do we simply mean the analysis of how power operates, and the management of power? Or do we mean also the difficult question of *what it is that we can expect from one another*? Figgis argues with a great deal of sophistication that the question of what we can expect from each other is more fundamental, because that has to do with what he would call the phenomenon of 'primary' political communities: the trade unions, the churches and the universities are the examples that he uses, again an unusual bundling together of interests. But he sees them as connected because these are the communities in which people imagine a set of relationships and mutual expectations that are not sent down from on high, either theologically or politically, but arise as the natural first kinds of association that human beings enter into.

State authority comes in at a later stage of the discussion, as that which holds the ring for the natural first-order communities in which people organise their lives. The state doesn't dictate what people expect from each other – that arises from the communities of which the state is composed. It's a very tempting and slightly seductive model, which rather overlooks what we would now I think put in a slightly more key position in our discussion: the question of how Law secures universal access and equity in a society.

But that's a rather different question. What's interesting in the political thinking of that era and that group is the strong emphasis on the primacy of communities, not communities in a sentimental contemporary sense, but those intentional communities where, as we might say, promises and commitments are made mutually, where what we can expect from one another is spelled out and realised with some precision. So, it's with

that in mind that I move to address the rather formidably large question of religion and politics that forms tonight's title.

I begin with Lansbury's context and with people like Figgis as a reminder that how we define the political is already a political and ethical, and, I would dare to add, theological business. If politics is always and only about the management of power, then the question of what we can expect from one another, even the question of law, becomes very different. There are quite a lot of political theories and political perspectives which are fundamentally about the question of where sovereignty lies; and the only interesting question then becomes 'why should you obey it?' – the answer often being 'because it's there, and because it's powerful'. The question of 'why you should obey' already spills over into the question of what human beings can expect from each other. And that why I'd like to say at the start that I don't think there can be any discourse of politics that's not also at some important level a discourse about ethics, and, to use a jargon word, about 'anthropology' – that is, a picture of human nature, and what human beings might expect.

The political, in other words, isn't ever as neutral a space as we sometimes think, certainly not a neutral space that religion then enters to complicate. The rhetoric of quite a lot of what we say about religion and politics these days still preserves a kind of dualism, assuming that political association is the primary, the primitive privileged way in which human beings relate, and other forms of association come in rather later. I'll give some reasons for being sceptical about that in a moment.

It's sometimes said that if you begin with the political, religion comes in as a means of solidifying political power. Those in power appeal to transcendental sanctions; the god or gods on our side, to cement power. But if you look at it from another point of view, power is consolidated in this way by appeal to religion because there's *already* a category of the sacred, of what is to be venerated, and that frame of reference is what makes it credible or possible that political power should appeal to religion, rather than religion being invented by political power; the sense of a world in which objects exist in relation to what we can't control, or what we can't map or chart, in relation to something that is at an angle to the ordinary.

So I don't accept the idea that the political is where we start, the neutral space that religion is something added on to. I don't accept that religion is something simply constructed and comprehensively manipulated by the political. There is something for the political to use that is already around, and of course has often been corrupt and toxic. But that ought not to cloud our sense that the relation between the two categories of my title is not quite as simple as might at first appear. If you go back to the pre-modern environment (and there's still quite a lot of the pre-modern environment around both in this country and in other countries), the idea of a separate space for religion as a voluntary activity is quite a difficult one to get across. The notion that religion is a voluntary activity like other leisure activities, extra to ordinary life and society, is very eccentric in terms of a great deal of the contemporary world and the overwhelming majority of cultures that the world has so far seen. That itself doesn't establish anything about the truth or falsity of religious categories, but it ought to give us pause before supposing that the *natural* way in which religion works is as a very elevated leisure activity, adding a little bit of colour and interest to otherwise boring social facts, or that it is simply a slightly more demanding and eccentric variety of golf club.

So, in talking about religion and politics, as you see, I want to begin by making both of those terms a little more strange than they might at first appear. Indeed you might say that the puzzle is how they ever got separated, given that in ancient society and most pre-modern societies they are interwoven very closely and religion was not in any way a private concern or an optional one. So in the next stage of what I want to say, I'm going to try and tell a story of how they did get separated, how it was a very good thing they got separated, and how at the same time it's rather dangerous to assume that separation is a complete schism. How did the European, especially western European, disjunction of the religious and the political first come into focus? And to raise that question as a puzzle is not to seek to raise nostalgia for the premodern, but just an attempt to understand where the modern actually comes from (and I might add in brackets here, that one of the problems of our contemporary cultural situation is an enormous apathy about 'how we got here': the worst thing that can ever happen in a culture, is an erosion of interest in how we got here). Refusing to see how we learned to be who

we are is in all kinds of ways lethal, because that leaves only the current contests of power and no sense of how we learned to be who we are, only a sense of who now defines our words and our ideas for us. I don't think that's a very good idea.

So to my story, and you won't be surprised, that I'll start with Hebrew scripture. What we see in the story that's told in what Christians call the Old Testament and Jews call the Tanakh is a history of how an identity, a corporate identity, emerges in uneasy and unstable relationships before it is an independent political state. Jewishness begins as an informal association of runaway slaves; it develops into a political order of kingship and other institutions. It loses that independence and becomes a community in exile. When it ceases to be a community in exile, it becomes, in the time of Jesus, a very complicated polity indeed in which indigenous forms of rule and the authority of the occupying Roman power exist in complex, tense relationships.

The point of all this is to note that there is something about Judaism's sense of its community which is not tied to a particular kind of power system. As the history of the Jewish people evolves, in the way the biblical records tell the story, it becomes an identity which is very profoundly bound to the *law* – law understood not as simply a set of commands from heaven, but as a set of *dependable mutual expectations*.

To be Jewish may or may not be to be part of a Jewish state with a Jewish monarch; what it is *irreducibly* is a set of mutual obligations. And that idea, that you can imagine a community defined by its mutual obligations rather than by its system of royal authority, is one of the things that made Jewishness and the Jewish people such a complicated issue for the Roman empire to deal with – no administration could fully understand how this worked, but they knew that it did, therefore there were exceptions made for the Jews in the Roman empire on the grounds that it was no use trying to persuade the Jews to treat the empire as sacred in the same way everyone else did. And that sacred truce lasted till late in the first Christian century, when that uneasy settlement began to unravel, ending in the catastrophic destructions of Jerusalem towards the end of the first Christian century and the beginning of the second Christian century. The point is that Jewish history illustrates how the religious and the political are in some sense pulling apart. The 'religious' has to do with establishing a system of mutual expectation in the

community in relation to God and God's call and purpose, the strictly political in the other sense that is the management of power, the rationality of royal power, is remarkably unstable. It's curious that Hebrew scripture features such polemic against monarchy alongside quite so much theologizing of monarchy, and this illustrates what a very uneasy relationship there is in that history.

So that's one way in which the story begins to unfold of a drifting apart of two categories, a community imagining itself as defined by the lawfulness and mutual 'recognition', as a Hegelian might say, of its social relationships and a political system of authority. And it's this tension that was pushed a stage further by the emergence of the Christian movement, which removes from this equation the ethnic component, and says that an imagined community of mutual responsibility and accountability can exist on a basis other than just ethnic continuity; that is, the law that is part of the Jewish identity now becomes something which is applicable across the human world, and in that process radically changes its character.

The tension between categories already at work in Jewish history and Jewish identity is given a twist by the emergence of the Christian *ecclesia* – the Christian assembly – that sees itself as a people, sometimes as a race, sometimes as a polity, the emergence of a community which is not in any simple isomorphic relationship with political power. In plainer words, Christians are even more of a problem for Romans to deal with than Jews, they are not even ethnically connected. What is the Roman Empire to make of a body, not just an ethnic body, but a voluntary body, which sees its obligation as defined by something other than Roman citizenship, and refuses, once again, to treat the emperor as sacred?

It's fascinating to see how this works itself out in the trials of the early Christian martyrs. In the second Christian century we hear Christians in North Africa trying very hard to explain to Roman governors when they are on trial, how this works. No they will not pray *to* the emperor, yes they will pray *for* the emperor; yes they will pay their taxes, no they will not assume that the state has the right to forbid to them to do what they do as a community. And this rather complicated exercise of political philosophy, conducted under circumstance so under pressure that you lose the argument if you die, is one of the most

interesting theoretical and theological dimensions of the early literature about the martyrs. These are not people simply dying for the sake of conscience, but people dying to renegotiate the boundaries between politics and religion, dying for the sake of what I called earlier 'an imagined community' – a community for which the existence of worldly power is in some ways provisional. It's almost unnecessary to underline the fact that as soon as the Christian Church had the chance to run the political world it took it all too avidly; that's another story. But what is interesting is how that traditional tension between these frames of reference, power and community – the rationalisation of authority and the clarification of what we expect of each other – continues to affect the way in which successive philosophers and theologians think through the nature of human society. You'll find it at its most eloquent and developed in the work of Saint Augustine at the beginning of the fifth Christian century, again, the firm conviction even in a Christianised Roman Empire the existence of the empire and the existence of the community living under law and mutual obligation are independent of each other. Augustine is able to contemplate the collapse of civilization as we know it in the fifth Christian century because he does not believe that the community which he serves as a bishop is defined by and dependent on the existence of a particular kind of Christianised political authority.

And of course the whole question is then reimagined and reworked yet again with the next great revolutionary religious movement around the Mediterranean emerging from that same narrative, and that is the rise of Islam in the 7th and 8th centuries. Here again we find a very complex and very tense relationship between the community of faith and other communities. The Ummah, the community of faithful brothers and sisters who are followers of the word of the prophet, is a community that does not depend for its existence on any licence from any political authority, it is its own polity. And in Muslim history, that has sometimes meant of course the existence of extremely monochrome Islamic States with strong penalties and disabilities attached to non-Muslim citizens. It's also meant a long history of complex, juridical, legal arguments about the differences between the authority of the monarch and the authority of the scholar or religious interpreter, the jurist. So it's not accurate to say, as some do, that Islam simply reinstates an identity between religion

and politics, it's more as if Islam pushed to the furthest possible point to the redrawing of the map that Judaism and Christianity had already begun, in desacralizing monarchy and the empire, and privileging the community of law and mutuality.

A story not completely dissimilar can be told of the relation between Hinduism and Buddhism, but my lack of expertise deters me from trying too hard. But it is at least interesting to note at least one parallel from the Eastern Asian world in how Buddhism emerges from its Hindu background as (once again) a community with strongly defined ways of speaking about mutual obligation, intentional belonging, forms of belonging and social cohering that are not dictated from on high. Buddhism has almost nothing of a theology, if that's the right word to use in this case, of monarchy or power. It *has* a very strong theology of how community exists as itself both a locus and an object of faith.

A couple of weeks ago, writing a review of two new books, one on Saint Augustine and one on Saint Paul, for the *New Statesman*, I suggested that one of the things they had in common and one of the things that made them distinctive from all the other writers of the ancient Mediterranean world is that they regarded society as something you can *imagine* rather than something you *inherited*: what humans could expect from each other was something you could explore, define and develop in ways that were not dictated by the particular social forms or power systems they inhabit. Both Augustine and Paul are compromised in this context. Both of them are ready to appeal to authority when it suits them, both have ways of talking about authority within community, especially between men and women, which, let's say, somewhat qualify their initial starting point. But what's important I believe, is that virtually no one else in the ancient Mediterranean world is talking about society as something you can imagine. Virtually nobody is talking about how you might conceive a set of human relations and an ordered human community of mutuality. And whether or not the form that Augustine and Paul give this is one that appeals or one that is viable, I believe it is important to recognise this is what they are actively seeking to do. And it's in that *imagining* of society, that working-through of the tension between the religious and the political, that what we tend to take for granted in the modern western world as 'the modern', the characteristically modern, not to mention 'the secular' begins to have its definition.

One of the things that is going on in all of this history is a process whereby people acquire a confidence to believe you need not take existing power structures or social relations for granted – that is to say, what you confront in your society is not necessarily *natural* – it is, to go back to something I hinted at earlier, something that has been learned and unlearned. And what matters for the religious community is the imagined community in which relations are specified, not by power from above, but by a particular vision of the ethical and the human. Religion in general, and perhaps Christianity in particular, are not necessarily always obviously on the side of the progressive or the liberal. At the same time, the history I have been trying to sketch may help to explain why it is that in certain circumstances the religious motivation or vision moves in that direction in one way or another – whether it's Lansbury's commitment in Poplar, or Desmond Tutu's in South Africa, the refusal to take for granted the relationships which society dictates is rooted in the sense that the community of faith is not at the mercy of or defined by the community of political power.

And that suggests some rather wider reflections on the nature of politics and the nature of society today. What I've been sketching is the way in which, within our own historical tradition, religion comes to be potentially a source of critique, a ground for awkward questions. It's a phenomenon which, as I've said, performs unevenly in this respect. Time and again it allows itself to be conscripted and instrumentalised by monarchical authority, and the history of the Church of England in this respect would be an interesting example to follow through, just as would be the way so many of the Eastern Orthodox churches have become (and in many contexts still are) bound up with ideologies and mythologies about national sovereignty and holy monarchy. But, irreducibly, that ground or critique remains; you can't understand very much that's interesting about religion without understanding how and why it works in contradistinction to the schemes of legitimate authority in a society. And in that sense, of course, what it does in emphasizing its own integrity is to say to the society around that there *is* a space for the 'secular', there is a space where we know our writ does not run, where we have to be in argument, conversation, conflict and cooperation with you; we recognise that society at large is not us, that society does not overall necessarily work on the basis of what we think we owe to each

other, though we would like it to and we will go on to argue that it should. But we don't expect this to be written in, to be 'natural'. And that's one point worth pondering in this connection: the secular presupposes the religious, the space for society outside the sacred is something that the history of Judaism, Christianity and, surprisingly, Islam helps to shape.

But if societies were to become *totally* 'secularised' there is an open question as to where the grounds for critique would ultimately be found, when there is not a recognition that there are other sorts of community around than the political. This can be generalised a bit further. The political, in the narrower sense of the management of power and authority, is always tempted to see itself as not only the usual starting point but as the *only* frame of reference. The political is always moving towards total interpretation of the human experience, unless you have within political society a number of vivid, robust communities, traditions and discourse which remind the political environment that politics isn't everything.

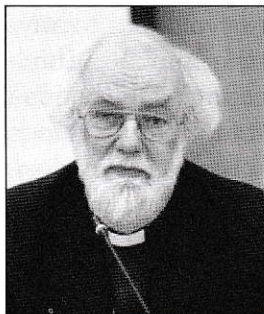
Let me put as epigrammatically as I can. To be a good citizen, you have to be more than just a citizen. A citizen who is just a citizen, whose identity and horizons are shaped and defined entirely by membership in a political society and participation in the processes of its power, is not the ideal situation because it leaves no hinterland, no inner liberty to ask the most awkward questions of the relationships and power relationships that characterise the society you're in. To be a good citizen you need to be more than just a citizen; you have to affirm and explore your other associations.

This is where I go back to Figgis and the associational socialist tradition. What that language takes for granted is that societies are made up of overlapping groups to which people belong in very different ways for very different reasons; and the different kinds of belonging that exist in a healthy society are part of that society's health. A political system in which everyone's primary definitive relationship is to the state is not a particularly promising model for democracy, and it is a model that had been tried from time to time, as we know. To put it in contemporary context, the philosophy of the People's Republic of China, at the moment, still takes for granted, if you look hard at its practices and constitutional conventions, that all authority is 'franchised' by

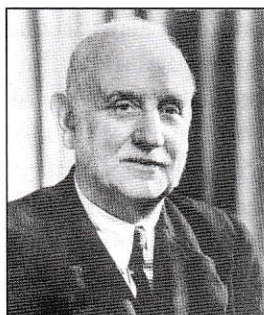
the state, because the fundamental relationship that anyone has to anyone else is *through* the party or the state, seen as coterminous. China since the 1949 revolution has had great difficulty dealing with the idea of civil society and its plurality; and one of the most fascinating things about contemporary China is not just its distinctive economic development but the way in which civil society institutions are trying to find a space and a rationale within an overall political ethos where it is still taken for granted that everything is licenced from above.

Being more than just a citizen means allowing your different forms of belonging – linguistic, familial, religion, artistic, and so forth – to shape how you are involved as a citizen. Your involvement as a citizen is to be informed by more than just your relationship to the state; if that involvement draws on your imagination then those other kinds of belonging will matter.

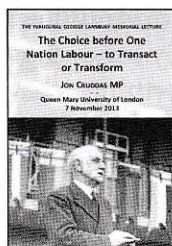
Thinking through how religious belonging impacts in this way is a key to understanding some of what my late friend David Nicholls called the 'pluralist' state, that is the state in which the independence of primary communities is essential to the health and well-being of the wider political unit. Communities, different kinds of belonging, don't exist just because the state says they can; the state is there to manage their very complex relations with each other, and, as I suggested earlier, to guarantee certain things about universal access to the law. But woe betide the state in which relation to it becomes the ultimately definitive thing. People may or may not find religious discourse, imagery and ethics appealing or persuasive, but I would like to think they can recognise it as one of the resources for critique, and one of the things that makes citizens more than just citizens. And in that sense we should recognise religion as one of the things which, in a society like ours, keeps political questions both large and difficult in the way they ought to be. Thank you very much.



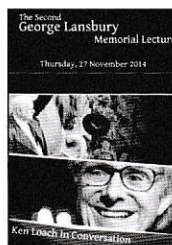
Dr Rowan Williams' distinguished career as a theologian culminated with his appointment successively as Archbishop of Wales (2000–2) and Archbishop of Canterbury (2002–12). His tenure of the See of Canterbury was notable for his efforts to re-consider the role of religion in national life in a changing and multicultural Britain. Dr Williams is now the Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge.



The George Lansbury Memorial Trust was founded in 2012 to commemorate the life, work and legacy of George Lansbury MP (1859–1940). A pioneering campaigner for peace, women's rights, local democracy and improvements in labour conditions, Lansbury was an adopted East Ender who made a great contribution to local as well as national life. For over 40 years he was a member of Bow Church, and his funeral was held there. George Lansbury was one of the most distinguished Christian Socialists in British history, whose campaigning politics sought to apply his faith in public life.



Further copies of this booklet and of the two previous George Lansbury Memorial Trust Lectures may be obtained for a cost of £2.50 each, including postage to a UK address, from Raymond Port, George Lansbury Memorial Trust, 34 Brookesley House, Brookesley Street E3 4QL. Cheques should be made payable to 'The George Lansbury Memorial Trust.



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