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Of Druids, Bards and Archbishops.

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Following the announcement of Rowan Williams as the next Archbishop of Canterbury the media, and in particular *The Times*, made hay out of the fact that he had been invited to be made a Bard at the Welsh National Eisteddfod in August. Dr Williams is not alone in having accepted this literary 'honour'. Many Welsh clergy have accepted it in the past including former Archbishops and evangelicals. It seems that in the past few have protested against the ceremony but it is undoubtedly the high profile of Dr Williams that has attracted attention. Is it wrong for him to have accepted this honour?

The event at the centre of attention is the Gorsedd which forms part of, or according to some, the 'icing on the cake' at the National Eisteddfod. The Gorsedd as practiced was invented in 1792 by Iolo Morgannwg. It was first held at Primrose Hill, London and then for many years in Cornwall. It appears to have taken over half a century before it became part of the developing National Eisteddfod in Wales. Today it is just part of the Eisteddfod and is likened by the organisers to the awarding of honorary degrees. Many Welsh people see the Eisteddfod as an important part of their cultural identity and most do not seem to see it as a religious ceremony.

Iolo Morgannwg was a Unitarian. He claimed that he had discovered accounts of ancient Druidic festivals including the Gorsedd and his version was an attempt to re-enact these. He appears to have claimed that historic Druidism was monotheistic (and Unitarian). His deceit fooled many and has continued to be perpetuated over the last 200 years. There are similarities between Druidism and Freemasonry but it is not known for certain whether Morgannwg had any masonic links.

The Times reported that the ceremony at the Eisteddfod involved prayers to the god and goddess of nature. This is not true. Modern Druidism has arisen in the time since Morgannwg. Because it has no ancient texts or central organization it is very diverse. However, a Gorsedd is an important ceremony for many modern Druids. The prayers used by some of them include a prayer to the god and goddess of nature but the wording used at the Eisteddfod does not. This raises the question of the relationship between the Eisteddfod Gorsedd and modern Druidism. Genuine Druids seem to see the Eisteddfod as a bit of a joke and to some it is a mockery of paganism, that is the religion of Druidism without the heart! But is the Gorsedd more than just a joke? How should Christians assess it and respond to it.

I suggest three questions which ought to be asked.

First, is it helpful? If it is not helpful then on the basis of 1 Corinthians 6.12 genuine Christians ought not to be involved unless they are convinced that their involvement can be turned to the good of the gospel. It is difficult that some Welsh evangelicals do not see it as any more than a daft part of Welsh culture. Nevertheless Dr Williams could have done far more good for the Kingdom by refusing the 'honour' and using the opportunity to proclaim the gospel and its implications.

A second and more serious question is whether participation in the Gorsedd is incompatible with Christian faith? For example early Christians refused to engage in the pagan practices of the empire which included acknowledgement of the divinity of Caesar. They could have advanced their position in society by joining in but saw such action as incompatible with their love of Christ.

From what I have seen of the wording used at the Gorsedd it is not actually incompatible with Christian truth. Because, on the face of it, the ceremony at the Gorsedd is not pretending to be paganism, it is possible to say that whilst it may not be helpful it is not actually harmful.

The wording used at the Eisteddfod is certainly not explicitly Christian, but it is no worse than, for example, the hymns used in many school assemblies or the promises used in Scouting. What is more troublesome is the ceremony. If Druidism were a dead religion of the past then the ceremony might be more akin to a piece of theatre. But paganism has grown in modern times and the ceremony cannot simply be seen in this way. As more people have been attracted into paganism such events are not religiously neutral. The Eisteddfod Gorsedd is identified with genuine Druidic ceremonies and whilst it may be rather muted, it is of the same breed.

Therefore, the third question is whether the Eisteddfod Gorsedd encourages paganism? Genuine pagans seem to think this very unlikely. Consider whether, for example, a television programme which mocks genuine Christian faith, such as 'The Vicar of Dibley', could ever lead to a promotion of genuine Christianity. However, the growth of modern paganism has undoubtedly owed much to the dishonest scholarship of Iolo Morgannwy. The aims of the Gorsedd as he perceived it were to promote an interest in Druidism and to strengthen a vague Unitarian position. Ultimately this means denying the essential divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ and must be rejected by all who own the name of Christ. Perhaps in the past the foolish goings on of the Eisteddfod Gorsedd would not have seemed so bad. But today, when modern Druidism has a foothold, we cannot look on the Gorsedd as something that is just innocent fun. For the sake of Christ we must be willing to reject those things which bring dishonour to Him or which may in any way lead people into error, falsehood and eternal destruction.