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Christianity and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Wales[1]*

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The Historical Background to 1914

Although the coming of Christianity to Wales predated the birth of the Welsh nation, the huge missionary thrust which created a specifically Celtic Christian civilisation in the Isle of Britain coincided with the emergence of Wales as a distinct national entity. If the birth of Wales is dated sometime during the latter part of the fifth century, the 'age of the [Celtic] saints' during which David, and a generation previously, Dyfrig and Illtud fulfilled their ministry, lasted between about 450 and 600 AD. By the beginning of the seventh century Christianity and the life of the emerging nation had become so tightly intertwined as to be virtually indistinguishable and for nearly a millennium and a half thereafter Welsh identity and religious affiliation were aspects of the same reality. 'Of all the associations between religion and social values in Wales the most intriguing and longest lasting has been that between religion and nationality. From the outset, the Christian religion seemed to be part of the essence of Welshness.'[2] In other words being Welsh *meant* being Christian.

Given the nature of European civilisation during the early Middle Ages such a claim is hardly unique. Wales belonged to Christendom as did many other peoples and kingdoms and as such was happy to identify itself with the faith. However, whereas the onset of modernism and later (and especially) the presuppositions of the Enlightenment threatened to sever the unity between religious affiliation and citizenship, in Wales that unity was preserved. Modern Wales, no less that Celtic and medieval Wales, remained quite blatantly Christian. Even more remarkable was the fact that industrialisation, far from being a harbinger of secularisation as it was in England and abroad, if anything *strengthened* the hold which Christianity had on the mass of the people. The lead which Wales took in the industrial revolution from about 1770 onwards, first with the production of iron and then of coal, steel and slate (in the north), did nothing to lessen the influence and appeal of the faith, by now in its nonconformist guise. If Victorian Christianity in England was a bourgeois and even then a minority affair, by the mid and late nineteenth century the faith in Wales remained sturdy, proletarian and overwhelmingly popular. Such was the degree of interpenetration between faith, life and national consciousness that 'by 1890 being a Welshman and being a Christian were virtually synonymous'.[3] Even in industrial and

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increasingly urban Wales, for the majority of the people being Welsh still meant being Christian.

During the Edwardian era Welsh Christianity was at its most ebullient. 'There is good reason to believe that the sun will yet shine brighter on our land, and her religious life will show forth even more glory during the twentieth century than ever she did during the nineteenth' wrote one nonconformist minister, quite typically, in 1900. 'Thus we can look forward with utter confidence to the even greater success of the Kingdom of God in tomorrow's Wales'.[4] The naïvety of this forecast only struck subsequent generations as being foolish. To many at the time it must have seemed quite reasonable. Institutional religion was massively influential. The 'four great nonconformist denominations', the Calvinistic Methodists, the Congregationalists, the Baptists and the Wesleyans, had a shared communicant membership of some 535,000 to say nothing of the huge phalanx of 'listeners' (*gwrandawyr*) or adherents, as many as 950,000, who though not baptised and confirmed members were officially attached to the chapels and regularly attended services. Along with 500,000 children in Sunday Schools, nonconformity commanded the loyalty of nearly a million and a half Welsh adults in a population of 2.5 million. Two out of every five Welsh people were Protestant Dissenters. Anglicanism was also growing in confidence and numbers at the time. During 1914 24,500 infants and adults were baptised in the four Welsh dioceses of Bangor, St Asaph, St Davids and Llandaff, 17,000 candidates were confirmed by their bishops, 155,500 worshippers attended Easter communion and 169,000 children were taught in the Church's Sunday Schools. In all 13.78 per cent of the population belonged to the established Church. If this was less than the total number of nonconformists, it represented considerably more than any other single denomination. Whatever separated the different religious traditions during these years, the presence and influence of mainstream Christianity, whether dissenting or established,[5] was taken as a fact. 'We think that from the evidence advanced before us' wrote the authors of the *Report of the Royal Commission on the Church of England and other Religious Bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire* (1910) 'that the people of Wales show a marked tendency to avail themselves of the provision made by the churches of all denominations for their spiritual welfare.'[6] Between the turn of the century and the outset of the Great War Wales remained a remarkably Christian country.

Nonconformity, Disestablishment and the National Question, 1890–1914

Despite the impression current at the time, there was nothing specifically Welsh about the chapel religion of Protestant nonconformity. Three of the larger nonconformist bodies, the Congregationalists, the Baptists and the Wesleyans, had come into Wales from England, the first two during the seventeenth century and the third at the beginning of the nineteenth. Only the Calvinistic Methodists, who had seceded from the established Church in 1811, had their roots within the principality. The specifically Welsh character of Protestant Dissent was unselfconscious and pragmatic rather than being a matter of principle. For most of the nineteenth century preaching, worship and spiritual fellowship were conducted through the medium of Welsh for the simple reason that that was the language of the people and the only language which many of them could understand. Yet by the 1870s it was clear that a specifically Welsh national consciousness was growing and that questions concerning the relationship between religion and national identity were being asked. Indeed, in an increasingly anglocentric world religiosity was the one sphere in which

the Welsh could claim superiority over the English.

Although by the mid-century nonconformity was shown to have displaced Anglicanism as the principal religious means through which the Welsh people expressed themselves, it was certain representatives of the established Church – which was almost invariably referred to in Wales as the Church of *England* (*Eglwys Loegr*) – who had shown themselves to be most theologically sensitive to the particular claims of Welsh nationality. For Dean H. T. Edwards of Bangor, brother of the first archbishop of the disestablished Church in Wales, a commitment to Welsh nationality was not a matter of pragmatism but of deep principle. The episcopal Church in Wales was the linear descendant of the early Church of David, Teilo, Seiriol, Beuno, Cybi and all the Celtic saints whose existence long predated the see of Canterbury and the political union between England and Wales which had been created in 1536. For centuries it was this Church, Celtic, catholic and reformed, which had been the one Church of the Welsh nation, and it would have remained such had it not been for the erastianism of the Tudor, Stuart and Hanoverian states – especially the latter. 'The policy which arrayed all the forces of nationality against the Church was not adopted in Wales until the eighteenth century', claimed Edwards. 'At that point its effect was to make the Welsh people not Romanist, but Nonconformist'.[7] The alienation of the mass of the Welsh people from their ancient Church had not occurred because of their spiritual apostasy but was due to the politically motivated policy of appointing English clergy to principal Welsh benefices. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries not a single Welshman had been appointed bishop in the Welsh Church. It was no wonder, claimed Edwards, that the ordinary men and women whose forefathers and mothers had been so staunchly loyal to their national Church had forsaken what they had come to regard as an alien institution. 'The regeneration of the Church of the Cymry, by the restoration of the masses to her fold, can assuredly be effected by none other than native Bishops and native clergy.'[8] With verve, erudition and a sincere patriotism, Dean Edwards staked his claim that despite everything it was the established Church which was the true Church of the Welsh people and still best placed to renew the nation's spiritual and national life.

The elegant logic of H. T. Edwards cut little ice with the majority of Welsh nonconformists nor with those of the greatest influence among his own communion. His untimely and tragic death in 1884 coincided both with the increasing politicisation of Welsh dissent and with the deepening intransigence of the Anglican hierarchy against the current spirit of national resurgence. Even before the widening of the franchise in 1868 to include tenant farmers and workers as well as landowners, Welsh nonconformity under the leadership of David Rees, William Rees 'Gwilym Hiraethog', Thomas Gee and others[9] had become a political force. Thereafter its radicalisation was apparent to all. Toryism collapsed, to be superseded by the ideologies of the Liberal Party with whom virtually all the newly-enfranchised nonconformist Welshmen were identified. By the mid-1880s land reform, tithe abolition, the plea for a nonsectarian scheme of general education and the disestablishment of the Church of England had become the issues of the day. Whereas the first generation of nonconformist politicians, so admirably exemplified by Henry Richard MP, had entered politics for specifically religious reasons, the spiritual sincerity of their successors was more suspect. David Lloyd George, who had been returned for the Caernarfon Boroughs in 1889, although nominally a Baptist, was in fact nearly totally secular in outlook and by the later Victorian period his values were becoming commonplace. By then the policy of the Welsh parliamentary party was to play the

nationalist card. Trading on the grievances of their overwhelmingly nonconformist constituency, Lloyd George and his colleagues focused on the intertwined questions of national and religious identity. As the party of privilege and the landed elite, the Tories, they claimed, had always been inimical to the needs and aspirations of ordinary Welsh people, while the established Church, far from being the guarantor of the nation's spirituality, was in fact nothing but the Church *of England* in Wales. By its long subservience to its 'alien' masters, the Anglican Church had forfeited its claim to be the one authentic Church of the people. It was a politicised nonconformity, therefore, which seized upon the glaring ecclesiastical weaknesses which patriotic churchmen had revealed with such candour, to forward its own aims. In short, it suited Lloyd George and his friends to reinforce the claim that Christianity (in its nonconformist guise) and Welsh national identity were one.

Though many of the lower clergy were in substantial agreement with Dean Edwards' thesis (and appalled by the rabble-rousing of Lloyd George's radical dissent), there were significant elements within Victorian Anglicanism which gave credence to the nonconformist claim that the Church was an alien body. By a bitter irony it was Dean Edwards' younger brother, A. G. Edwards, who did more than anyone to perpetuate the view that episcopalianism was inimical to the national aspirations of the rising generation. Appointed bishop of St Asaph in 1889, A. G. Edwards made an immediate reputation as the leading 'Church defender' of the day. His strategy for preventing the disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales was to emphasise its perceived superior social status and links with the anglicised ruling class. Unlike that of his brother, Bishop Edwards' attitude to his own Welshness and that of the common people was deeply ambiguous. 'I am half an Englishman and half a Welshman' he once claimed, 'and have been labouring between the two all my life.'[10] His identity problem not only coloured his diocesan policy, causing huge resentment among his own Welsh-speaking clergy, but it also became the basis of the Welsh Anglican campaign to preserve the Church's established rights.[11] Under his leadership 'Church Defence' became an out-and-out war against popular nonconformity and the voluntary, democratic and proletarian Welsh-speaking culture from which it had grown. Nonconformist reaction was to emphasise further its own character as being unambiguously Welsh (which in fact it was not), while patriotic churchmen, of whom there were many, were put in the invidious position of seeming to endorse the anglicising policies of the hierarchy. It was A. G. Edwards, aided principally by Bishop John Owen of St Davids, who did more than anyone to perpetuate the idea that the episcopal Church even after disestablishment in 1920 was an alien institution and a means of further compromising the national identity of the Welsh people.

The disestablishment campaign resulted in victory for nonconformity when, in August 1914, the Liberal government finally passed the bill declaring an independent, Anglican Church in Wales shorn of many of its ancient endowments and privileges and all of its links with the state. Yet it was a hollow victory. Public concern had long moved away from narrowly ecclesiastical matters, and the mutual vilification in which the most zealous of the protagonists had indulged had served only to cause popular disenchantment with Christianity generally. By 1914 it had become clear that the burning issues would be material rather than spiritual: housing, poverty, unemployment, workers' rights and the like, and the battle lines would no longer be drawn simply between patrician and hierarchical Tories supported by the Anglican Church and chapel-going Welsh-speaking common folk (*gwerin*), but that a class-based political culture would rapidly evolve. If, during the Victorian and

Edwardian eras, nonconformist Wales had been overwhelmingly Liberal, after the Great War the major political influence would be that of the Labour Party. By then a specifically Welsh identity would be less bound up with religion and more with an increasingly secularised scheme of socialist politics.

Religion, Labour and Secularity, 1920–39

As was true generally, the First World War had an adverse effect on religious faith and affiliation in Wales, though the nature and extent of this effect would not become explicit for some time.[12] Following the trauma of war came the pain of the depression. The two decades which divided the Great War from the conflict of 1939–45 were quite excruciating for the Welsh people. Social dislocation and economic collapse were catastrophic in their effects and hunger, hardship and suffering became widespread. During the 1920s the heavy industry which had been south Wales' mainstay for a century and a quarter went into steep decline. With changes in shipping technology and developments in transport generally the previously insatiable foreign demand for Welsh steam coal ceased virtually overnight. European markets began to be serviced by coal mined more cheaply in Italy, Spain and Poland, while France and Belgium, which had formerly been among Wales' best customers, began to be supplied (ironically) with German coal as war reparations in accordance with the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles. Former South American markets were also importing United States coal at a cheaper rate. Just as the coal industry, which employed 271,000 colliers or 35 per cent of the total working population, was collapsing, south Wales' second largest industry, steel, was also being destroyed. Wales' oldest industrial heartland on the north-eastern rim of the coalfield between Merthyr Tydfil and Pontypool was being made desolate. The closure of the iron and steel works at Cyfarthfa in 1921, Blaenafon in 1922, Ebbw Vale in 1929 and Dowlais in 1930 – all names redolent of the industrial past – was a knockout blow to an area which was already reeling. Ancilliary industries such as railways and shipping, even clothing and housebuilding, also suffered, while those which avoided the worst effects of the slump, anthracite mining and tinplate manufacture in the south-west, slate quarrying in north Wales, and agriculture, hardly flourished. The national situation was exacerbated by a world-wide recession while the lessons of low investment, an inability to respond quickly to changing markets and a vast overdependence on a single-industry economy were bitter ones to learn.

By December 1925 the unemployed in Wales comprised 13.4 per cent of the insured population, two years later 23.3 per cent and in 1930 27.2 per cent. (The comparable percentage in England for 1930 was 15.8). If the 1920s were dire, the 1930s were even worse. In December 1930 the eastern valleys of Rhymney and Tredegar registered unemployment at the rate of 27.5 per cent of the adult population, Pontypridd and Rhondda at 30 per cent, and Newport as high as 35 per cent. By August 1932, when the depression reached its lowest point, 42.8 per cent of all insured Welsh working men were idle. The cost of maintaining the unemployed was in itself crippling. In September 1931 state benefit was cut and all prospective claimants were means-tested. Those who were in a position to leave Wales did so, in their thousands and tens of thousands, to find work elsewhere. The rest had no alternative but to stay. The trauma which this left on the national psyche was immense and its recollection would remain emotively bitter for years to come:

> Do you remember 1926? That summer of soups and speeches,

> The sunlight and the idle wheels and the deserted crossings,
> And the laughter and the cursing in the moonlit streets? ...
> 'Ay, ay, we remember 1926', said Dai and Shinkin,
> As they stood on the kerb in Charing Cross Road,
> 'And we shall remember 1926 until our blood is dry'.[13]

The switch of allegiance from the Liberal Party to Labour had been swift. Before the First World War active support in Wales for Labour had been desultory. For the 21 Welsh Liberals returned in Lloyd George's 'coupon election' in 1918 Labour had gained ten seats; the party won nearly 31 per cent of the Welsh vote. Following the collapse of the coalition government in 1922 the Liberals' popularity began to decline; only 11 members were returned for Welsh seats during the 1922 election, 12 in the election a year later, 11 in 1924, 10 in 1929 and only 9 in 1931. Even these were split between the different factions of Liberal, Independent Liberal and National Liberal. By 1935 Labour controlled every single seat in the industrial south, polling 400,000 votes or over 45 per cent of the Welsh total. By the 1930s most of Wales had rejected the individualism of its Liberal past in favour of a collectivist and more class-based Labour future. This would have profound effects on the way in which Welsh people perceived their own identity and the way in which that identity was linked with the Christian faith.

Long before the deep dislocation of the 1930s Christianity and the Labour movement had striven to accommodate one another. Early Socialists such as Keir Hardie, founder of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and junior MP for Merthyr Tydfil, had used biblical language and a religiously-inspired idealism in order to convince Welsh chapelgoers of Socialism's compatibility with their faith. For Hardie Socialism was Christianity at work, the practical application of the Sermon on the Mount in order to usher in God's Kingdom on earth. It was above else a moral code rather than an economic dogma, and was commended as such not least by Rev. T. E. Nicholas of Glais in the Swansea Valley ('Niclas o'r Glais'), the ILP's most effective propagandist among the workers of south Wales before the Great War. If Nicholas, a neo-Marxist poet-preacher in the romantic style, was a skilled populist, there were other young nonconformist leaders like the Baptist Rev. Herbert Morgan and the Presbyterian Rev. Silyn Roberts whose apologia for the Socialist creed was much more intellectually astute. James Griffiths, leader of the west Wales anthracite miners, later MP for Llanelli and a minister in successive Labour governments, recalled Silyn's immense influence on young men who were keen to reconcile nonconformity with Socialism during the early years of the century.

> He preached God and Evolution. He was a minister and a Socialist ... he became our inspirer and our justification. We could tell our parents, who feared this new gospel we talked of, 'but Silyn Roberts believes as we do'. How many devout but dubious fathers became reconciled to Socialist sons by that assurance? He linked the South Wales of Evan Roberts [the religious revivalist] to the South Wales of Keir Hardie.[14]

Even into the 1920s there were Welshmen and their families whose national identity was bound as closely with nonconformist Christianity as with the Socialism of the Labour movement. 'It is rather late in he day to utter this nonsense [concerning the incompatibility of Labour with the chapels]' wrote one observer in 1923, 'for there are thousands of Welshmen today who can find no inconsistency in singing *Diolch iddo* and *Ar ei ben bo'r goron* with the Welsh *hwyl* at one meeting, and then pro-

ceeding to another meeting to sing *The Red Flag* with the same enthusiasm.'[15] Late in the day or not, by then the problems implicit in this assumed reconciliation had come well to the fore. Those who were keenest to forge the combination tended to see Christianity in terms of Socialist ideology or a humanitarian faith. T. E. Nicholas, for instance, had claimed that 'true Christianity recognises the divinity of man ... not as a fallen being but one who is continually advancing to higher levels and who is endowed with unlimited possibilities'.[16] Even less radical nonconformist Socialists sat very loosely to orthodox formulations of the creed. Whereas the outward trappings of chapel culture were being preserved in the guise of attendance at worship, hymn singing and often an appreciation of a well-delivered sermon, specifically religious convictions were weakening daily. Basic theological truths concerning the holiness of God, the reality of human sinfulness, the deity of Christ and the unique nature of his birth, death and resurrection were being refashioned according to the canons of humanitarian Socialism. Rather than devising a doctrinally robust Christian Socialism which was faithful to the gospel, the tendency in Wales was to spiritualise a basically materialist ideology according to non-conformist *mores*.[17] In every compromise it was traditional Christianity and not the Labour movement which lost out.

Even more threatening to the link between religion and national identity was the fact that chapel-going itself was in decline. Chapel statistics reached their high point in 1926 when the four major nonconformist denominations recorded a joint membership of 536,000.[18] Yet this still huge number representing baptised communicants masked the fact that the previously extensive class of 'listeners' and, even more ominously, many children formerly present in Sunday Schools, were no longer attending. There was a growing conviction that Protestant dissent was losing its grip on the hearts, minds and imagination of the people.[19] During each succeeding year the chapels would lose more members than they would gain and for every Welsh worker who succeeded in combining a Christian commitment with Labour politics there was another for whom religion and Socialism were wholly inimical and still more who simply drifted away. Despite the earlier attempt to yoke the Labour movement to Welsh language and nonconformist culture, Socialism came to be associated increasingly with progress and the English language whilst Welsh, especially in the valleys of the industrial south, became identified with puritanism and the Liberal past. For proponents of the class struggle, of course, the perpetuation of national identity was detrimental to the solidarity of the workers' international for which English was deemed to be a much more appropriate means of expression. By the 1930s Welsh identity was perhaps more popularly represented not by the moderate chapel-going James Griffiths, the Llanelli MP, but by Aneurin Bevan, the openly atheistic, non-Welsh-speaking Member for Ebbw Vale.[20] Welshness, the language and religious affiliation were going their separate ways.

The Church in Wales, Catholicism and National Identity, 1920–39

However large the chapel loomed in the popular mind during the interwar years, Christianity in Wales was not commensurate with Protestant nonconformity. On 1 April 1920 the newly disestablished and autonomous Welsh Anglican Church, soon to be entitled the Church in Wales, became a fact. The mean-spirited political *imbroglio* which had been the disestablishment campaign had ended in 1914, but the creation of the new Church had to be postponed until after the war. Even before 1920 churchmen were coming to see their prospective situation more as a challenge than a

calamity. 'I hope ... that ... [many] will make an effort at this supreme juncture in its history to popularise, democratise and nationalise the old Church of our Fathers', wrote Rev. William Morgan, vicar of Bethesda in Gwynedd's Ogwen Valley in 1917, 'so that it may become as of old the spiritual home of the Welsh people.'[21] Having been cushioned from the worst effects of disendowment by the government's financial guarantee, Welsh Anglicans began to accustom themselves to their new status as an independent body free from the jurisdiction of Canterbury and liberated from all former links with the state. Though disestablished, the new Church was still hierarchical in nature, in many places gentrified and very ambivalent about its status. The old hostility to the Welsh language persisted; many of its senior clergy and middle-class laity despised Welsh as an uncouth throwback to the past, 'the last refuge of the uneducated' according to A. G. Edwards,[22] who had been unanimously elected its first archbishop. Yet confidence was steadily growing and churchmen began to appreciate, if not relish, their new-found independence. Wisely the church soon created two new dioceses, Monmouth from the populous south-eastern see of Llandaff in 1921, and Swansea and Brecon, formerly part of the vast St David's diocese, in 1923. If the senior clergy remained for the most part anglicised and still establishment-minded Tories, there were many among the parish ministers for whom Anglicanism was no bar to being wholly Welsh. Their cause was strengthened by two totally unexpected occurrences: the appointment in 1923 of Dr Maurice Jones as principal of St David's College, the Church's seminary-university at Lampeter, and the even more surprising election in 1931 of Fr Timothy Rees, a monk of the Community of the Resurrection at Mirfield, Yorkshire, as bishop of Llandaff. Jones, a native of rural Merionethshire and former military chaplain, was completely impervious to the social snobbery, the anti-Welsh bias and the anti-dissenting antipathy of the hierarchy. His influence on successive generations of prospective clergy throughout the interwar years did an enormous amount to restore respect for the Welsh-language culture of the common people within the Church in Wales.[23] Rees' career in England led his sponsors to think of him as an appropriate choice for a senior position in the Church in Wales. It became apparent from the outset, however, that this most unassuming of men was less a prelate and autocrat than an evangelist and pastor whose Anglo-Catholic social radicalism blended perfectly with an evangelical piety to which nonconformists warmed. He was, in fact, H. T. Edwards reincarnate, a keen Welsh-speaking patriot with a social conscience to boot.[24] His death at the age of 65 in 1939 deprived the bench of bishops of its most attractive personality, one who had made a specifically Welsh Anglican identity a possibility once more.

These years also witnessed the consolidation of Roman Catholicism within the principality. In 1916 Pope Benedict XV had announced that henceforth Wales' two dioceses of Cardiff and Menevia were to be afforded the status of a separate ecclesiastical province with its own archbishop. The appointment in 1921 of Francis Mostyn, bishop of Menevia and fourth son of Sir Piers Mostyn, baron of Talacre in Flint, as archbishop betokened the beginnings of a rapprochement between the see of Rome and the Welsh people. Bereft of any indigenous working-class tradition such as that of Lancashire and other parts of the north of England and possessing only a few landed recusant families (of which the Mostyns of Talacre was one), Catholicism was viewed in Wales with hostility and fear. Its *mores* were strange, its rituals mystifying and the presence among its faithful of thousands of virtually peasant Irishmen and their rough families put the Church well beyond the pale. For most Welsh Christians it was a foreign and vaguely sinister institution. Mostyn, however,

was keen to convince his fellow-countrymen that far from being alien, Roman Christianity represented the continuation of the classic Welsh tradition which the poets of the princes and medieval noblemen and the Welsh Catholic humanists of the Renaissance had embodied with such distinction. This was part of the appeal which the Church had for a number of exceedingly gifted Welsh converts of whom Saunders Lewis was the most brilliant. In 1925 Lewis, the son and grandson of Calvinistic Methodist ministers of renown and fast gaining the reputation of being the *enfant terrible* of Welsh literature, helped form *Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru*, the Welsh Nationalist Party. Its political manifesto, which diverged radically from the *laissez-faire* individualism of contemporary Liberalism and what Lewis and his colleagues saw as the rootless collectivist materialism of the Socialist movement, reflected in part the social teaching of the Catholic Church.[25] Although small and unrepentantly elitist, the Nationalist Party had an influence well beyond its numbers especially in the flourishing intellectual life of interwar Wales. Accusations of (among other things) fascism, antisemitism and a blind subservience to ultramontanist Rome did nothing to prevent the stimulation which its ideals provided for the younger Welsh-speaking generation at least. Whereas Labour-dominated industrial Wales was being progressively anglicised and the still predominantly Liberal rural areas were stagnating, nationalism presented some with a radical political alternative. For many young members of the *Plaid Genedlaethol* the renewal of Christianity, often in a fairly dogmatic and catholicised form, would be essential if Welsh identity were to survive.

Nonconformity and the Crisis of Identity, 1920–62

Despite its Romanist hue, the Nationalist party attracted many more nonconformists and even Welsh churchmen than Catholics. If nonconformity, whose institutional presence was still hugely influential in interwar Wales, was in decline, there were nevertheless signs that its theological base was being strengthened. The doctrinal liberalism which had become almost a prerequisite for denominational leadership after the war, especially but by no means exclusively among the Congregationalists, was being challenged by a renewal of confessional orthodoxy inspired chiefly by the thought of Karl Barth. By the 1930s more and more nonconformist ministers were rejecting the theology of morals and experience for that of revelation and the Word of God and emphasising such long-neglected truths as God's transcendent holiness, human sinfulness and the redemption wrought by the unique sacrifice of Christ, the Son of God, on the cross. Preaching began to be thought of again more in terms of proclamation and not moral uplift, while a new urgency gripped Welsh evangelical dissent generally.[26] For Welsh Christians who had long accepted the mutual interpenetration of faith and national identity there was much in this confessional renaissance which could be condoned. In the light of the extreme hardship and deprivation which was currently being experienced, especially in the industrial south, the need for national renewal was patent. Despite everything neither political nor religious idealism had been extinguished, and it was equally apposite for the Welsh to see their dilemma in religio-national terms as in socio-economic ones. For liberal-minded, Labour-supporting nonconformist clergy such as Morgan Watcyn-Williams, an English-speaking Presbyterian, in Merthyr Tydfil and the Barthian Baptist Lewis Valentine, a Welsh-speaking leader of the Nationalist Party, in the north, the redemption of the Welsh nation would come about only on the basis of a shared commitment to the Christian faith.[27] It was left to J. E. Daniel, a leading nationalist and professor

of Christian doctrine at the Congregationalist College at Bala-Bangor, to provide a specifically Barthian combination of revelational theology and Christian nationalism. His highly perceptive wartime essays, including 'The secular idea of man' and the influential 'Gwaed y teulu' ('The family's blood'), constitute a sturdy and original contribution to our understanding of the nature of the relationship between Christianity and national identity in twentieth-century Wales.[28]

From the standpoint of the Christian faith the postwar era was at best mixed. The 1939–45 conflict was much less traumatic than the Great War had been, and consequently there was less idealism about the need or the ability to build 'a land fit for heroes to live in'. Having been disappointed once, both Christian and secular confidence was much more chastened than it had been a quarter of a century before. Following the austerity of the late 1940s, the 1950s was a period of social and economic stability and growing affluence. Having long been restored, the traditional heavy industries of south Wales were by now working to full capacity, unemployment was exceedingly low and social dislocation seemed to have been checked. A healthy economy allowed people to purchase luxuries which soon became essentials for modern life: washing machines, televisions and increasingly frequently their own small family cars. Huge local council projects provided postwar Wales with cheap but adequate rented housing while the extension of mortgage facilities allowed more and more families to purchase their own homes. The standard of public health improved dramatically, especially following the establishment of the National Health Service in 1945, while by 1947 the popular measures to nationalise coalmining and steel manufacture allowed the people what they believed to be a stake in their own future. Though weaker than of old, institutional Christianity still played a significant role in Welsh national life. In 1955, for instance, the chief nonconformist denominations could still boast a joint membership of 370,000 baptised communicants, representing as many as one in seven of the total Welsh population.[29] In some areas, especially those in which the Welsh language was the general means of expression (throughout most of north and west Wales as well as parts of Denbighshire and West Glamorgan), chapel culture was still strong, while even in the more anglicised districts to the east, the rural Marches, and the valleys of mid and east Glamorgan and Gwent as well as urban centres such as Wrexham in the north and Cardiff and Newport in the south, Protestant dissent was still a living force. As part of the Festival of Britain activities of 1951 Professor W. J. Gruffydd could still state with little incongruity that 'By the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, Wales had become what it substantially is today, a nation of Evangelical Christians.'[30]

Yet all was not well within this purported nation of believers. Anglicisation and secularisation were marching apace. The census returns for 1951 noted the sharp downward trend in the people's ability to speak Welsh. In the short span of ten years the total number of Welsh speakers had declined by nearly 100,000 to 715,000. Native speakers tended to be in the older age group while there was little vision as to how the 'language question' might be addressed. The received wisdom was that Welsh could be preserved on the hearth rather than by any official or political measures. Inevitably, appeals to preserve the language were often thoroughly pessimistic and forlorn. It would not be until after 1962 with Saunders Lewis' famous radio broadcast 'The Fate of the Language' and the opening of the first Welsh-medium secondary school in southeastern Wales that radical measures for linguistic renewal would begin to be implemented and made effective. Before then there was a feeling of inevitability about the demise of Welsh and the chapel culture and the nonconformist value system which it was perceived to embody.[31] The

tercentenary of the ejection of the Puritan ministers from the established Church in 1662 which had created Protestant Nonconformity was celebrated in Wales not with jubilation but with a sense of foreboding. Postwar dissent saw itself to be in a state of perpetual 'crisis'[32] and denominational leaders felt that there was little they could do to allay its effects. In what was the most perceptive analysis of contemporary chapel life published at the time, R. Ifor Parry showed how nonconformity was suffering due to its cultural captivity to 'the Welsh way of life' which was currently in decline, that it was bound to 'the nonconformist conscience' the puritanism of which was everywhere regarded as being antiquated and hypocritical, that the plainness of its worship had bred a manichean negativity towards beauty and the senses, and that growing economic affluence had led to a materialism which dissolved the moral seriousness on which dissenting conviction was built: 'This is the atmosphere in which Nonconformity is having to exist and today it is fighting for its very life.'[33]

Christianity and the Renewal of National Identity, 1950–79

The gloominess which characterised Welsh nonconformity stood in stark contrast to the sense of rejuvenation which permeated Welsh Anglicism during these years. After having experienced its first quarter-century of disestablished independence the Church in Wales was, on the whole, at ease with itself and quietly confident about its future; it was certainly not being wracked by the pessimism and self-doubt of the chapel folk. By the 1950s a world-affirming catholicism, wholly in tune with the tenor of the times, had come to represent 'central' Welsh churchmanship, while the Church was becoming increasingly sensitive to the national aspirations of the Welsh people. Whereas chapel religion was seen to be oppressive and puritanical, Anglicanism, with its Prayer Book liturgy, sacramentalism and rounded doctrines of creation and incarnation, provided a very appealing version of Christian faith. Unencumbered by the negativities of sabbatarianism and teetotalism, it presented a viable spiritual alternative for those who were offended by nonconformity but chose not to succumb to secularism and irreligion. Not a few of its most distinguished lay members and senior clerics were former nonconformists. Yet perhaps the most interesting contemporary development involved the change of attitude within the Church to Welsh nationality and identity.

With the appointments of J. C. Jones, formerly vicar of Llanelli and a missionary to Uganda, to Bangor in 1949, of Glyn Simon, the Anglo-Catholic dean of Llandaff, to Swansea and Brecon in 1953 and thence to Llandaff four years later, and of Gwilym O. Williams as J. C. Jones' successor in 1957, much of the ambiguity which had coloured the bishops' attitude to Welshness was repudiated. If Jones was a popular and warm-hearted patriot (whose untimely death at the age of 52 in 1956 was felt keenly by all[34]) and Williams, an exceedingly able former warden of Llandovery College, was virtually a Welsh nationalist, the most unexpectedly zealous advocate of a pro-Welsh policy was Glyn Simon. A cradle churchman (unlike the other two who had been brought up as Calvinistic Methodists) whose first language was English, Simon made his patriotic credentials plain in 1957 by sharply criticising the election of Edwin Morris, an Englishman who had served the Church in Wales as bishop of Monmouth, as archbishop. 'The recent elections', he claimed, 'have revealed an anti-Welsh and pro-English trend, and in some cases a bigotry as narrow ... as any to be found in the tightest and most remote of Welsh communities.'[35] Given the historical ambivalence which the Church expressed towards its own Welshness, the continued existence of a pro-English trend was hardly exceptional. What was

extraordinary was the virulent and public way in which a senior member of the hierarchy chose to express his disapproval of the *status quo*. Simon's own tenure as archbishop between 1968 and 1971 coincided with a renewed sense of national consciousness throughout Wales. Cardiff had been proclaimed the Welsh capital in 1958 and the central government's Welsh Office had been established in the capital in 1964, while the campaign to prevent the Tryweryn valley from being drowned to provide water for the English midlands had been fought throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1966 Gwynfor Evans was returned as Plaid Cymru's first MP, for Carmarthen (the same year in which 116 children and 28 adults had been killed when a coal-tip engulfed the primary school in Aberfan near Merthyr Tydfil, creating a disaster which would have momentous implications for religion as well as society in Wales), and the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarfon Castle in July 1969 provided a focus for significant antiestablishment dissension. When Dafydd Iwan, president of the radical Welsh Language Society, was imprisoned for the non-payment of fines imposed for his part in campaigning for bilingual road signs, Simon ruffled not a few establishment feathers by visiting him in prison: 'There is nothing unscriptural or un-Christian in nationalism as such', he claimed.[36] Simon's policies were continued by his successor, Gwilym O. Williams, and by the 1970s the perception of the Church in Wales as being an alien body had changed dramatically. The old dichotomy between an anglicised Church and a thoroughly Welsh nonconformity was ringing increasingly untrue. In the popular mind the contention that 'the Anglican church is the proper spiritual home for a patriotic Welshman'[37] had much to commend it.

The theological ferment which affected Western Christianity generally during the 1960s did not bypass the Welsh churches. The Second Vatican Council, John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), the 'Death of God' movement and various secular theologies had their devotees within the principality. A particularly vigorous theological discussion took place in the influential monthly *Barn* (*Opinion*) between J. R. Jones, a Calvinist Methodist layman and professor of philosophy at the University of Wales, Swansea, and H. D. Lewis, also a Calvinistic Methodist and professor of the philosophy of religion at King's College, London. Heavily influenced by Tillich's 'Protestant principle' and some of the most enigmatic sections of Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Jones championed a highly idiosyncratic existential humanism which was openly antagonistic to Christian orthodoxy. As well as reflecting faithfully each of the religious predilections of the 'secular sixties', this altercation was intensified by being linked to the concurrent crisis of nationhood and that within Welsh dissent.[38] Despite its apparent malaise, nonconformity was sufficiently healthy to fuel such an intellectually distinguished discussion and to provide work for renewal movements of both evangelical and ecumenical hues. It was still common for Welsh nonconformists to link the renewal of nationhood with spiritual revival and a rediscovery of Christian faith. The most weighty contributions to a Christian theology of nationhood during these years were produced not by churchmen but by nonconformist scholars of the calibre of Pennar Davies, R. M. (Bobi) Jones and most notably R. Tudur Jones.[39]

A Pluralist Religious Identity, 1979 to the present

The confidence which accompanied the renewal of national consciousness during the 1960s and 1970s and which led to the establishment of an effective system of Welsh-medium primary, secondary and higher education, a much higher public profile for

the language and eventually a Welsh-language television channel in S4C, evaporated somewhat with the rejection of the Labour Party's plans for devolution in the 1979 referendum and the advent of Thatcherism soon after. Yet even under a Tory regime it was obvious that at least some of the previous gains were being consolidated rather than lost. The cultural pessimism which had characterised the 1950s was not repeated and an undercurrent of hope was still perceptible in Welsh life despite the wholesale transformation which the nation was forced to face. The most obvious change was in the principality's industrial base. By the mid-1980s the heavy industries of coal and steel which had fuelled Welsh life for a century and a half had been dismantled. The formerly bustling steel centres of Port Talbot and Shotton became strangely silent while, following the defeat of the miners after the stoppage of 1983–84, production ceased in virtually every Welsh pit. The Rhondda valleys would soon return to their preindustrial shades of green. Religiously it was completely obvious that traditional Christianity, whatever its complexion, was losing ground and that Anglicanism as well as nonconformity was in decline. Roman Catholicism, though, while not advancing, was holding its own.[40] The anxiety, gloom and dejection felt by some denominational leaders was replicated even among some historians. 'Humanly speaking, at this rate of decline ... it seems as if the end of distinctively Welsh expressions of Christianity may be in sight', wrote Glanmor Williams, 'as those religious values dearest to earlier generations are being more and more abandoned in a lingering but painfully inexorable process.'[41] Yet if mainstream, denominational Christianity was declining as a social force, even in postindustrial and postmodern Wales other forms of Christianity, religion and religiosity were flourishing: pentecostalism, house fellowships (in the larger towns and cities), evangelical groups of different types and worship styles as well as some individual congregations in each of the older Churches. However bad the situation seemed all round, shafts of light were still visible through the gloom.

For individuals whose identity has been bound up with a peculiar version of religious observance and for a society whose culture has been moulded by the values and reality of Christian faith, rapid change can be traumatic and threatening in the extreme. For good or ill secularisation has been part of the experience of European Christendom for centuries.[42] What makes the Welsh case seem particularly parlous is the apparent rapidity with which the process has been accomplished. Mass communication and greatly increased mobility have opened Wales up within a shorter timespan than usual, while the general destabilisation of late twentieth-century society has registered all the more obviously. With the demise of the traditional heavy industries and the advent of tourism and widespread immigration into what used to be the Welsh and Welsh-speaking heartland, Welshness itself has been under threat. With only 20 per cent of the population speaking the language the essence of Welshness has become increasingly difficult to define. This is a problem not only for Wales, however: with Macdonalds, Coca-Cola and Levis in Moscow and the Spice Girls being sung in Mongolia or Beijing, the whole question of identity has become perplexing in the extreme. Not only centralisation but globalisation and multinationalism have to be taken into account. All this has taken its toll on religion as a social phenomenon. The truth claims of Christianity, in the nature of things, are, however, independent of considerations such as these.[43] In the plethora of exoticisms including syncretism, Rastafarianism, Krishnaism, Hinduism and Sikhism and more obviously Islam which are to be found in a by now culturally pluralistic contemporary Wales,[44] Christian conviction has not vanished, nor has the Churches' witness ceased. It may be true that 'For the first time since the sixth or seventh centuries AD,

when the Welsh could be said to have come into existence as a separate people, being Christian is not, for the majority of them, an essential part of being Welsh',[45] nevertheless Wales still exists as do the verities of the Christian faith. For those whose identity still revolves around both poles there remains adequate hope, as the recently published words of D. P. Davies bear eloquent witness:

> At this juncture in our national history and in the history of Christianity in our land what is required of Christians in Wales is the boldness and courage to be truly radical – to go back to our roots, not only to our roots in the Celtic Church, but to our original roots in the small communities of enthusiastic and committed Christians who first responded to the call of the gospel in countries around the Mediterranean Sea. If we can recover these roots and draw on the strength and inspiration they give we can face the new millennium not with despair, but in hope, the hope that we shall be worthy servants of society in this dear land of Wales.[46]

Notes and References

[1] I would like to thank my colleague Dr W. P. Griffith of the School of History and Welsh History, University of Wales, Bangor, for valuable comments on the initial draft of this paper.

[2] Glanmor Williams, *The Welsh and Their Religion* (University of Wales Press (UWP), Cardiff, 1991), p. 14; cf. *id., Religion, Language and Nationality in Wales* (UWP, Cardiff, 1979); and W. T. Pennar Davies, 'The fire in the thatch: religion in Wales', in R. Brinley Jones (ed.), *Anatomy of Wales* (Gwerin Publications, Peterson-super-Ely, 1972), pp. 105–16.

[3] R. Tudur Jones, *Ffydd ac Argyfwng Cenedl: Hanes Crefydd yng Nghymru 1890–1914*, vol. 1 (John Penry Press, Swansea, 1981), p. 15.

[4] David Powell, *Y Greal*, July 1900, p. 170.

[5] There were some 90,000 Welsh Roman Catholic communicants at the time while the smaller Protestant bodies had a membership of some 20,000.

[6] *Report of the Royal Commission on the Church of England and other Religious Bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire*, vol. 1 (HMSO, London, 1910), p. 19.

[7] H. T. Edwards, *Wales and the Welsh Church* (Rivington's, London, 1889), pp. 318–19.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 162.

[9] For these and others mentioned in this paper, see J. E. Lloyd and R. T. Jenkins (eds), *The Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (Cymrodorion Society, London, 1959).

[10] George Lerry, *Alfred George Edwards: Archbishop of Wales* (Woodall's, Oswestry, nd), p. 54.

[11] See Roger L. Brown, 'Traitors and compromisers: the shadow side of the Church's fight against disestablishment', *The Journal of Welsh Religious History*, no. 3, 1995, pp. 34–53.

[12] See D. Densil Morgan, 'Christ and the War: aspects of the Welsh experience, 1914–18', *The Journal of Welsh Religious History*, no. 5, 1997, pp. 20–38.

[13] Idris Davies, *Gwalia Deserta*, in Dafydd Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Idris Davies* (UWP, Cardiff, 1994), p. 6.

[14] Quoted in David Thomas, *Silyn (Roberts Silyn Roberts), 1871–1930* (Hugh Evans, Liverpool, 1957), p. 77.

[15] *The Labour Voice*, 14 April 1923.

[16] Quoted in David Howell, *Nicholas of Glais: the People's Champion* (Clydach, 1991), p. 29.

[17] See Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem: Nonconformity and the Social Problem in Wales, 1906–39* (UWP, Cardiff, 1997), *passim.*

[18] John Williams, *Digest of Welsh Statistics*, vol. 2 (UWP, Cardiff, 1985).

[19] See R. Tudur Jones, *Hanes Annibynwyr Cymru* (John Penry Press, Swansea, 1966), pp. 278–95.

[20] Kenneth O. Morgan, '"The Red Dragon and the Red Flag": the cases of James Griffiths and Aneurin Bevan', in *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (UWP, Cardiff, 1995), pp. 443–53.

[21] National Library of Wales, MS 10938C.

[22] Quoted in Owain W. Jones, *Glyn Simon, his Life and Opinions* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1981), p. 55.

[23] See William Price, *A History of St David's University College, Lampeter*, vol. 2 (UWP, Cardiff, 1990), pp. 68–104.

[24] See J. Lambert Rees, *Timothy Rees of Mirfield and Llandaff: a Biography* (Mowbray's, London, 1945) and J. G. James, 'From the Restoration to disestablishment', in E. T. Davies (ed.), *The Story of the Church in Glamorgan 560–1960* (SPCK, London, 1962), pp. 94–99.

[25] See especially Dafydd Glyn Jones in Gwyn Thomas and Alun Jones (eds), *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (UWP, Cardiff, 1973), pp. 23–78.

[26] See Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: the First Forty Years, 1899–1939* (The Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 57–225.

[27] Morgan Watcyn-Williams, *From Khaki to Cloth: the Autobiography of Morgan Watcyn-Williams MC* (Presbyterian Bookroom, Caernarvon, 1949); John Emyr (ed.), *Lewis Valentine Dyddiadur Milwr a Gweithiau Eraill* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1988).

[28] See D. Densil Morgan, Introduction to *Torri'r Seiliau Sicr: Detholiad o Ysgrifau J. E. Daniel* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1993) and 'Basel, Bangor a Dyffryn Clwyd: mater y genedl yng ngwaith Karl Barth ac eraill', in Gareth Lloyd Jones (ed.), *Cenadwri a Chyfamod: Cyfrol Deyrnged i Gwilym H. Jones* (Gwasg Gee, Dinbych, 1995), pp. 149–72.

[29] Williams, *Digest of Welsh Statistics*, vols 1 and 2.

[30] 'A portrait of South Wales', in Geoffrey Grigson (ed.), *South Wales and the Marches* (Festival of Britain Office, London, 1951), p. 57.

[31] See D. Densil Morgan, *Y Weledigaeth Hon: a History of the Baptist Cause in Morriston, 1845–1995* (Morriston, 1995), pp. 39, 91–92.

[32] See Ambrose Bebb, *Yr Argyfwng* (Llyfrau'r Dryw, Llandybie, 1955).

[33] R. Ifor Parry, *Ymneilltuaeth* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1962), p. 175.

[34] See Edward Lewis, *John Bangor: the People's Bishop* (SPCK, London, 1962).

[35] *Llandaff Diocesan Leaflet*, January 1958, quoted in John S. Peart-Binns, *Edwin Morris: Archbishop of Wales* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1990), p. 119.

[36] Jones, *Glyn Simon* ..., p. 124.

[37] John Davies, *A History of Wales* (Penguin, London, 1993), p. 539.

[38] See Dewi Z. Phillips, *J. R. Jones* (*'Writers of Wales'* series) (UWP, Cardiff, 1995), *passim.*

[39] W. T. Pennar Davies, 'Y genedl yn y Testament Newydd', in Dewi Eirug Davies (ed.), *Gwinllan a Roddwyd* (Llyfrau'r Dryw, Llandybie, 1972), and 'Towards a theology of language', in Paul Ballard and D. Huw Jones (eds), *This Land and People* (Collegiate Centre of Theology, Cardiff, 1979); Bobi Jones, *Crist a Chenedlaetholdeb* (Gwasg Bryntirion, Bridgend, 1994); R. Tudur Jones, *The Desire of Nations* (Christopher Davies, Llandybie, 1974), 'Crist: gobaith cenedl', in Davies, *Gwinllan*... and 'Christian nationalism', in Ballard and Jones, *This Land and People.*

[40] Statistics for church membership and attendance in each of the denominations were collated in a Bible Society survey and published in Peter Brierly and Byron Evans (eds), *Prospects for Wales* (MARC Europe, London, 1983).

[41] Williams, *The Welsh and their Religion*, p. 72.

[42] See Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (CUP, Cambridge, 1975); David Edwards, *The Futures of Christianity* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1987), pp. 285–386.

[43] See Alan D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: a History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (Longman, London, 1980), *passim*, and the many more recent works of Lesslie Newbigin.

[44] D. P. Davies, 'A time of paradox among the faiths', in David Cole (ed.), *The New Wales* (UWP, Cardiff, 1990), pp. 206–18.

[45] Williams, *The Welsh and their Religion*, p. 69.

[46] D. P. Davies, *Against the Tide: Christianity in Wales on the Threshold of a New Millennium* (Gomer Press, Llandysul, 1995), p. 43.