

## RELIGION IN A WELSH BOOM TOWN

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HOW must those who preach the Gospel speak if they are to be listened to? For the sociology of religion this is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Here in Wales audibility seems to have varied over the years right up and down the scale. Two hundred years ago the chapels were unbuilt, the cathedral of the Archbishop of Wales was in ruins, and the Gospel message was heard hardly above a whisper. But come forward a century, to around 1850 or 1880, and the same message is heard so loudly as to drown everything else. The Church of England, presently to be the Church in Wales, is back on its feet. 'These eminent propagandists of the Faith, the Irish', as a contemporary priest at Maesteg called them, begin to pour in even before the Famine. Above all, the chapels are being built, literally in their hundreds. 'Sin and savagery' is how one historian describes the Glamorgan and Monmouth valleys in the early Industrial Revolution. Yet this chaotic, rootless proletariat was converted in a couple of generations into Christian communities, centred round the chapels, one of the greatest triumphs of evangelism in modern times. But come on yet another century, to the present day, and the picture changes again. The proportion of regular church- or chapel-goers to the population has in many places been halved, though still remaining far higher than in England. The influence of Christianity in work or leisure or politics is a mere shadow of what it was. The Free Churches can still stop the Cardiff Students' Union from having a bar. But they cannot stop the Sunday shifts which—with, admittedly, other things—have led two-thirds of Port Talbot people, in a recent questionnaire, to put down Sunday as 'just like any other day'. Whatever the conditions for hearing the message of Christianity may be, it is clear that they were not satisfied two hundred years ago, came to be satisfied in the nineteenth century, and have ceased to be so well satisfied now. The problem of course is whether they can ever be satisfied again.

But what are these conditions? What sort of language do people expect to hear from their pastors? In a recent study Mr P. Jackson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> P. Jackson, *Industry and Religion in Port Talbot 1750-1956*, M.A. thesis in the University of Wales, 1957.

put this question to a sample of people from Port Talbot, the boom town of South Wales, alongside the great Abbey works of the Steel Company of Wales. Port Talbot's proportion of church- and chapel-goers is probably rather below the average for Welsh Wales, but above that for many parts of Eastern South Wales. It is far above that for most parts of England. There is a great deal of goodwill towards religion even among those on whom the churches have lost their hold. And what people in this sort of environment expect of their priest or pastor would seem to be something as follows.

First, the message he brings should be universal. The minister or priest is not the agent of a party.

Secondly, it must be a message relevant to people's current lives. This does not at all mean that theology should be thrown out of the window and replaced with social reform. On the contrary: there is a great demand for the straight preaching of the Gospel. But if the Good News is to be listened to it must be, in the journalist's sense, genuinely news, presented in terms of people's own current thoughts and problems.

Thirdly, the message must be personal. If there is one thing on which Mr Jackson's informants agreed, it is the importance of personal visiting and other direct contacts by the clergy.

Now, it is easy to see how these conditions could be fulfilled in the nineteenth century in a town like Port Talbot, of which Mr Jackson has traced the history. Political and social issues in the Wales of those days were of a kind easy to present in universal terms. To build a working-class culture based on education, free from drink, and respectful of Sunday, or to fight for the rights of Nonconformists in the schools or on the local council, were matters on which a whole congregation could unite. Sometimes the identification of Nonconformity with one political party went rather far. Mr Phillips, an elder of Tabernacle chapel at Aberavon, got into serious trouble with his colleagues in 1884 for joining the Conservative Party. It was not exactly, his fellow-elders admitted, a moral delinquency, 'but you had no need to go with those old Tories'. But Mr Phillips kept his dignity. 'Very well', said he, 'now that I recognize fully that this sanctuary is maintained to serve political ends rather than its true purpose, I leave you. Farewell.' But the point of the story is precisely that, given the issues arising at that time, it came as naturally to

Nonconformists to identify their cause with Liberalism as to churchmen to identify theirs with the Conservatives. There are some interesting parallels here with the history of the Christian-label political and social movements on the Continent.

Social functions, also, were undifferentiated, and it was natural for the minister to be also a power in industrial relations—mediating in disputes in the absence of trade unions—as well as the organizer of education, entertainment, and social security. And desperate poverty forced people to constrict their lives into a narrow circle, of which the priest or minister, if he so chose, could easily become the centre. The Catholic Irish, who began coming to Port Talbot in numbers about the Famine time, had the heavy end of this, for they suffered as foreigners too, and as Romans to boot. Their religion was not quite as offensive as that of the Mormons, who came about the same time and were baptized by a local minister the ‘latter-day satans’, but it was offensive enough. Even two generations later, a local founder of the Independent Labour Party described Catholicism as the religion of ‘darkness, deceit, and prevarication’. There were also Irish politics to reckon with. After the Phoenix Park murders, in 1882, the parish priest at Port Talbot was manhandled by a mob. And above all Welsh people were scared, and remained so as long as the immigration continued, of what the Irish incomers would do to their jobs. An old railwayman told Mr Jackson how, at one time of troubles in the late nineteenth century, his father used to ‘sharpen his shovel in the morning to protect himself against the Welsh’, and how he himself as a child had been evacuated down the coast till one of these storms blew over. It has taken generations of intermarriage to turn the Port Talbot Irish into the good Welshmen that they are today, well integrated into their community; better integrated, I suspect, than their colleagues in larger and more self-contained Welsh-Irish communities like that in Cardiff.

But these were problems special to the Irish immigrants. What on the other hand they had in common with their Welsh neighbours was poverty. The Irish arrived ‘tattered and torn, as if they were refugees from a war-stricken land’. They had the worst and least organized jobs. *The Tablet* of October 18, 1862, recorded their troubles with unemployment, wage cuts (20 per cent that year), and the truck-shop. But their neighbours were often little

better off, and as insecure. The story of how Catholics and Nonconformists built churches and chapels in those years is truly heroic. The Catholics, for many years, could afford no building at all. Mass was held in skittle alleys and public houses, and the names of those baptized in the bar were—so the parish history says—long remembered. The annals of Nonconformity abound with references to the ‘cobbler’s house’ or the ‘tailor’s house’ where the first groups met. The people of the Rock chapel, having set up their building largely with their own hands, were worshipping in it before they could provide floor or pews. In chapel after chapel we hear of setbacks, debts, and congregations lost through unemployment. In conditions like these the poor necessarily moved in a narrow circle, and it was not too difficult for the chapel or parish to become its centre.

There is no question, at any rate, that minister and priest did find themselves in those days at the centre of their people’s interests, sometimes to the neglect of their more spiritual duties. I cannot resist reproducing, after Mr Jackson, the sample week’s diary prepared in 1888 by the Reverend Waldo James, of Ebenezer Baptist Chapel in Aberavon, after spending some time as a minister in America:

#### IN WALES

##### *Monday*

Write letters. Make engagements. Study Owen’s Education Acts. Manual No., light from the law. Write seven letters to seven M.P.s. Arrange a meeting of the leading Non-Con’s to receive the reply of the managers of the N.S. [National School]. Opening the kennels of the dogs of war. Committee meeting from 9 to 10.50.

##### *Tuesday*

Went with the deputation to the Proprietors of Works. Slain and made alive the same day. Formulate Statistical Tables, and take same to printer. Closeted for two hours with M. — in the — Office. Attend the minister’s social tea. Submit draft of a memorial to a sub-committee.

#### IN AMERICA

##### *Monday*

Made a list of the sick, spent the day visiting, but attended the missionary meeting in the evening.

##### *Tuesday*

Select texts for Sunday. Read everything bearing upon them. Spent an hour in the ladies’ aid. Attended prayer meeting.

## IN WALES

*Wednesday*

Write 'Notice of Burial' in the case of the child of —. Notice returned as being illegal. Wire to London for Counsel's opinion. See the Vicar of that parish. Got permission at last, but not without crouching before the mortal. Study the New Code. Correct proof of Statistical Tables.

*Thursday*

Ascertain the number of children in attendance at the Elementary Schools. Write the Inspector for recognized capacity. Go to Swansea to see Mr —, barrister.

*Friday*

Bolstering up a minister who has no backbone, and he is, moreover, weak-kneed. Write Clerks of School Boards for percentages. Attend funeral. Scene at entrance to Church, because we were a little late. A written apology demanded by the clergyman. Told him I would, but did not give date, as I did not know when would God make apology to Satan. The demon of intolerance is awfully punctual. After attending chapel, went to the solemn conclave of sober and dignified Non-conformity.

*Saturday*

Copy memorial to the Education Department. Write H. R. Write the third letter to the paper. Began to prepare for Sunday, but interrupted by visitors.

*Sunday*

In the morning preached upon 'Lot's choice'. Good sermon enough, but was relished better when first served hot and fresh about two years ago. Lost school to prepare for night. Many hungry souls present, but had nothing but unstewed bones to give them. Retired feverish and miserable.

## IN AMERICA

*Wednesday*

Read Dr Gloag's. Attended children's meeting.

*Thursday*

Prepare for Sunday in the morning. Visiting in the afternoon, and attend Society in the evening.

*Friday*

Prepare for Sunday. Attend Bible Class.

*Saturday*

Save five backsliders. They pledge themselves to return tomorrow night.

*Sunday*

Subjects: Morning, 'Spirits in Prison'. Evening, 'A bonfire of books'. Had good times in my class and in the five o'clock prayer meeting. Two prodigals returned, and one sinner professed repentance. God be praised.

The parish priests of those days also took part in public affairs, making heard the robust voice of common sense. In 1882 we find Fr McClement speaking up for the right of the working man to knowledge.

‘Workmen have been led too long, and a great many things thrust down their throats. He had been looked on as a sort of animal, to work, to eat, and sleep. A workman was far more than an animal. He was a very respectable man indeed. . . .

Who produced the wealth of the country? It was the workman without doubt, and he should know how this wealth was spent. He should have a voice in it. . . .’

And, to boot, he should have the right to fetch his knowledge from the Mechanics’ Institute (whose founding was the occasion for this speech) even on Sundays. ‘The working man, more than the rest of them, did not care about praying all day, and by improving his mind with literature he would at the same time be strengthening his body.’ Ten years later we find Fr Hallahan defending the right of the workers to visit the ‘penny gaffs’ or portable theatres, so long as they did so in moderation.

‘But to expect the mind of those who attended them frequently to remain wholesome and robust, is as unreasonable as for a man to expect to avoid dyspepsia, who lives solely on barley sugar.’

One feels that Fr Hallahan would have made a good job of T.V. Fr McClement, had he been parish priest of Fribourg instead of Abcravon, might have gone down to history as a forerunner of *Rerum Novarum*.

But the conditions of the nineteenth century were something of a fluke. I do not mean to depreciate the work of those, be they parish priests or chapel ministers, who took advantage of the relative ease of communication between themselves and their people in those days to evangelize the industrial proletariat of South Wales. I have deliberately used the word ‘heroic’ to describe the efforts they and their people had to put out amid the ‘sin and savagery’ of the iron towns and the mining camps. And we have seen often enough in other places, then and later, how similar opportunities to speak to a new industrial population could be offered to both Catholic and Protestant evangelists, and missed. But the fact remains that the universalistic political and social issues, the undifferentiated social structure, and the con-

stricting poverty created an opportunity for contact between priest and people which today has gone. The problems were tremendous. But the conditions for church leadership in working through these problems were more favourable then than now.

Port Talbot today is a boom town, with wages in its chief industry well above the level of British industry as a whole. People watch T.V., go on holiday, and generally move more freely and are less confined to one narrow, local circle. They speak less Welsh, and are incorporated more and more into Anglo-American culture patterns. This may or may not be a gain; Port Talbot people are divided on this. But certainly it means a loosening of traditional local ties. In general, people live in a more middle-class way, and are less identified with a particular local community. And one sphere of life after another has been specialized and therefore secularized. There is nothing particularly sinister about this. Football is not a form of Catholic Action, nor are politics or trade unions, and the rule that priests should not spend their time serving tables applies to ping-pong tables as well. It is entirely natural and right that, as lay leaders emerge in each of these fields, they should claim their proper autonomy. A Christian in a union or sports club is bound by the general rules and doctrines of his faith, but is in no way bound to make his union or sporting activity a branch of parish or chapel life. But each time a union, or club, or adult education class claims this due and proper autonomy, one more of the traditional strings connecting pastor and people is cut.

Political issues, also, have come in the last fifty years to cut much more sharply across lines of religious belief, and so are less easy to identify with simple moral or theological issues. If the chapels failed, as they often did, to speak clearly on the political issues of the years between the wars, it was not from lack of good will. It was because, if they had taken sides on issues on which their congregations were sharply and legitimately divided, they would have defrauded them of something to which they attached even greater importance: namely, the right to have the Christian message presented in universal terms, and not as a party programme.

It is easy to see why the opportunities for contact between clergy and people that existed in the nineteenth century have gone, or are going. But can we replace them? Can the genera-

conditions on which the Church will get a hearing be fulfilled in an environment like that of Port Talbot today? Mr Jackson does not provide all the answers. But he does certainly provide much food for thought.

First, it is clear than any continuing progress must depend on study; much more study than there has been up to now. One cannot see clearly how the Gospel message is relevant to the changing conditions of modern social, industrial, and political life without deliberate and organized study of how people are living, and what each aspect of their lives means or could mean to them. I gather, since Mr Jackson's thesis was written, that the Church in Wales has made some start with this. I doubt whether the same could be said of any other Welsh religious body.

Secondly, at a time when political and social issues cut across denominational lines, no church can expect to speak clearly or get a serious hearing unless it has a clear, explicit doctrine of political, social and working life, defining what Christians as such are committed to and setting a limit to dissensions. One more reason why the chapels were ineffective in the thirties was that, when disputes about the right response to current problems arose, there was no court of appeal, no common body of doctrine to supply a frame in which to work. It is only through such a doctrine that what is universal in the Church's message can be kept distinct from what is temporary and controversial—as Port Talbot people very properly want—and affirmed with full force.

In principle this requirement presents no difficulty for Catholics, nor—at least as regards a common doctrine as apart from a court of appeal—for Anglicans. I wonder if the same is true of the chapels? It is certain that they have had a social doctrine, and one very powerful and influential in matters of temperance, Sunday observance, and the rest. It is also certain that this doctrine, which was drafted in response to the social conditions of the past, has not been sufficiently re-drafted, whether explicitly or implicitly, to answer the questions raised by social conditions today. But is it legitimate to re-draft it, in the light of Free Church theology? This theology is highly suspicious, as experience at the World Council of Churches has shown, of organized bodies of social doctrine. I am not at all convinced, looking at it from the Free Churchman's own angle, that there ever was a theological basis for the traditional Nonconformist social doctrine,



let alone for any that might be drafted in future. But perhaps I am asking for too much consistency here. The Dutch Reformed Churches abound both in theologians who cast doubt on the idea of a Christian social doctrine and in laymen who, in the Protestant labour, farmers', and other social movements have worked out such a doctrine more fully than anywhere else in the Protestant world.

Indeed, the chapels might do worse than to begin by borrowing some ideas from their fellow-Calvinists in Holland. For even if the difficulty of principle can be overcome, there remains the practical question of what the future social doctrine is to be, and how it is to be worked out. This question arises for Catholics (and Anglicans) as well as for Nonconformists. For our social doctrine too was drafted largely (I put it crudely) in answer to the problems of an underfed proletariat in an age of unemployment. It tells one far too little about the problems of an increasingly middle-class population in a boom town with every prospect of continuing prosperity. American Catholics, I suspect, are several steps ahead of European on this; but that is another story.

Thirdly, of course, if the Church's message is to be as personal and as relevant to current affairs as people rightly expect, it is necessary to develop a lay apostolate, specialized and secular enough to enter into the problems of each group in a community, yet able to keep that delicate balance between apostolic activity and party politics of whose difficulty the recent upheavals in the French Catholic youth movements have reminded us. I say 'of course'; but though some Port Talbot churches, and again notably the Church in Wales, are feeling after what is needed here, I see no evidence in Mr Jackson's survey that any, including the Catholic Church, has actually found it. What Port Talbot experience does show is something negative, namely the impossibility of getting by in the modern world without the lay apostolate. An industrial chaplaincy scheme was tried in the main local works, with great goodwill all round, and full support from all the churches, including the Catholic. It has been an almost complete failure; the clergy, unaided, simply could not make the right number of the right kinds of contact. They have not been conspicuously more successful in influencing family life, or politics, or the use of leisure. It is not, to go back to the point

raised earlier, that Port Talbot people expect the churches to solve their housing or trade union problems for them. They do not want—at least, that is my impression of Mr Jackson's questionnaires—the Vatican's design for a housing scheme or formula for settling the wages structure in steel. For such purposes there exist perfectly proper and competent secular movements. What they want is much more an understanding of the theology behind these technical details of day-to-day living; guidance on how, from and through these technologies, people can raise their hearts to God. And yes, also, of course, guidance as to how the requirement that people raise their hearts to God should in turn modify the technical details of day-to-day living.

The three requirements of study, an organized body of social doctrine, and the lay apostolate hold together. The Church's social doctrine is blind and its development stunted without organized study and research, and without finding its outlet in lay action. Study in its turn is academic except in so far as it adds to and is guided by an organized body of social doctrine and by the experience of lay pioneers. And the lay pioneer cannot expect to keep the right balance of aims and methods, or a clear and long view, without the guidance of the Church and the social scientist.

And that brings me to my last point. Mine, not Mr Jackson's, because though he comes up to the edge of this he does not go right over. What the Port Talbot survey suggests to me is that the time is long overdue for social secretariats (which are not at all the same thing as a priest in charge of social action), on the model long tried out in France, to bring together the three sorts of experience: the practitioner, the scientist, and the moral philosopher and theologian. Such centres are likely to be useful only if properly equipped and financed, and with at least a small full-time staff; at any rate a secretary, a research and information officer, and a typist. And it must be clear, as I think it is in France, that their business is not to run social action for their region or town, but to do for it what the National Council of Social Service does for the voluntary social service organizations: to advise, inform, start new projects—but in any case to assist, not dictate, and to avoid wasting people's time. Local action in a place the size of Port Talbot must continue to be taken by local people, voluntary and unpaid. I am suggesting a social secretariat for, as it might be, Eastern South Wales, not for Port Talbot

alone. But local action needs to be stimulated, advised, and guided from close at hand, that is, from the district or regional level. And I suspect that the agencies for doing this are the missing king-pins of much of the apostolate today. Could the Catholic Social Guild, working perhaps with the Demographic Survey Committee at Portman Square, muster enough finance to get going at any rate one experimental centre of this kind? Or what of some similar action on the national level, learning from the experience of the German 'Academies'?