

WALES: CATHOLIC AND NONCONFORMIST

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THERE seems to be no doubt that the Church, as a visible society of baptized persons, was fully established and functioning in Wales by 200 A.D.¹ Her influence is to be discerned in our earliest vocabulary, e.g. the word for 'universe' in Welsh is 'bedyssawd', the Latin 'baptizati', an assembly of baptized persons. By the sixth century Welsh epic poetry was being written in the context of a Christian culture. Taliesin, the poet, describing the court of Urien Prince of Rheged in Southern Scotland, which formed part of Roman Britain, describes a Catholic family life as lived in the court of his exalted patron. By 314, when the Council of Arles met, Bishops from the whole of Christendom attended and 'lesser clergy' from Spain, Italy, Gaul, and Britain. The three orders of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons were present. We have every reason to deduce that the Catholic Church in Wales was well established, vigorous and in full cognizance of its sister assemblies on the Continent. We hear of British representatives at all the subsequent councils except that of Nicaea. When in 383 Magnus Maximus was proclaimed Emperor by the British Legions before he left for the Continent to defend the fortunes of Rome, he was baptized as an orthodox believer and won the approval of St Martin of Tours, St Ambrose of Milan, and Pope Siricius for his faithfulness in belief.

There is no need to stress this aspect of Welsh history to a Catholic audience. It was part of the general picture of the Europe of that day. What is perhaps not so generally realized amongst Catholics is that Wales in those days was part and parcel of the Roman Empire, under the direct rule of Roman Emperors, for all of three centuries. After an initial period of resistance to Roman arms our forbears seem to have attained a *modus vivendi* and to have co-operated with their rulers and actually to have enjoyed a long period of tranquillity. The Welsh language

¹ For this and subsequent information dealing with the Roman period of Welsh history, see Wade-Evans: *Welsh Christian Origins*.

arrived at a point of stability and, immeasurably enriched by the acquisition of hundreds of Latin terms, assumed its final form in the fifth century to emerge as a fine tool of literary expression in the sixth century. Numerous proper names were assimilated into Welsh: Ambrosius became Emrys; Constantinus—Custennin, Eugenius—Owen. The men of Wales prided themselves on their Roman citizenship granted them by the Emperor Caracalla (211-17). By this edict we became Romans as well as Welsh; our earliest history forms part and parcel of the history of the far-flung empire of Rome. Our early literature is imbued with that ethos which David Jones, that great contemporary Welshman, has described as *Romanitas*. We Welsh have in our very substance the living consciousness of our Romano-British origins. When the Emperor Maximus (Maxen) left Britain with the British legions to defend the fortunes of Rome in the days of her waning power, so many men of Britain left too that we were left exposed and defenceless to the onrush of pagan invaders. It is necessary to point out that on every plane, religious, social, and political, we Welsh regarded ourselves as peculiarly the protégés of Rome. We were so regarded by the oncoming Teutonic invaders who dubbed us Welsh=Roman. Our very name 'Welsh' comes from the old English 'Wealas'=Roman. German immigrants, forbears of the English, arriving in these islands, applied the term 'Welsh' (Roman) to all whom they found living here under Roman jurisdiction.

I have gone into this aspect of our early history at some length because I wish to stress at the outset how deeply instinctive is the feeling we Welsh have for Rome, our spiritual patrimony. For nearly fifteen hundred years it was Rome that nourished and protected us, first while we grew to nationhood, and later when her influence was confined to the spiritual order. Under her tutelage we grew to nationhood. From her vision of order is derived the ordered character of Welsh prosody and the strict classical metres; from this same feeling for order grew the Welsh sense of order in the whole realm of being. Welsh society, before its disruption, was constituted of a hierarchy of minutely graded functions. Strangely enough, this passion for order is the last attribute which the foreigner discovers in the modern Welsh heart. Yet no one can understand our literature nor our cosmic outlook without appreciating this underlying instinct which

made minute definition and classification of objects a necessity even of the poet's craft.

By the fifteenth century Wales displays all the usual characteristics of every other Catholic society in Europe. She is wholly Catholic. All the religious orders have found a foothold in her soil, notably the Cistercians. Education, the care of the sick and poor is the prerogative of the religious. Even the literary training of the bards has fallen under the aegis of the Cistercians in whose monasteries at Valle Crucis, Strata Florida, Cymmer, Tintern, the bards and minstrels find ready patrons.

In 1535 Henry VIII promulgated the edict by which Wales was politically joined to England. It is important that we should try to realize what this meant. Since the death of Llywellyn the Last Prince in 1282, Wales had had no ruling dynasty, but the social structure had not disintegrated. It retained its characteristics and stability under the patronage of the wealthy *pendefigion*, the landed gentry who in hundreds of cases traced their genealogy back to the sub-Roman period. They were the patrons of the arts, giving sustenance and shelter to the bards—the professional curators of family trees. They were European, journeying often to the Continent and participating in the full tide of European culture. On their hearths were debated fine points of philosophy; the great debates of the Aristotelians against the Platonists found echoes on many a Welsh hearth, and the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge were their points of contact with the life of the continental universities, especially Paris. Amongst this stratum of society there was current too the knowledge of the ancient prophecies, and one romantic theme in particular which recurs in the prophecies was the cause of a certain nostalgia amongst them. This was the prophecy that a Welsh king would some day re-occupy the ancient throne of Britain in London. One could not say that this accounted solely for the wholesale departure of the Welsh aristocracy to the Tudor court, but it is certain that this deep urge to reclaim a former privileged position did play a large part in the minds of the *pendefigion*. They took up what they regarded as their rightful prerogative, their positions as courtiers in the Welsh court, thus depriving Welsh society at one blow of its natural leaders and lords.

In 1536 Henry VIII completed this disruptive process by dissolving the monasteries, and the spiritual mentors followed

the political time-servers into oblivion. Within a generation the whole structure of Welsh society was pulverized. The loss of political independence moreover deprived Wales of all official representation at Rome; any aid which the counter-Reformation could have afforded us reached us at second hand, through the English mission. Nevertheless the obstinacy and tenacity of the Welsh amongst all classes and their faithfulness to Catholicism became a byword. It is good to remember that three of our martyrs, Blessed Richard Gwyn, Blessed John Roberts and Blessed Dafydd Lewis, traced their descent to the ancient kings of Wales, thus mingling royal blood with the precious blood of martyrdom.

Apart from the glad sacrifice of the martyrs, there was little enough to cheer the heart in the spectacle of sixteenth-century Wales. The country gradually sank into a state of social and moral disintegration. There is no time to attempt a description of this shattered society which, in the space of one man's lifetime, suffered so many baffling assaults. The hunted priests came and went and ministered as circumstances allowed. The state Church, relieved here and there by a few devout clergy, became known as 'Yr Hen Estrones' ('The old foreigner') and its religion as 'Crefydd y Sais' ('The Englishman's religion'). It had the utmost difficulty in getting incumbents for the impoverished Welsh parishes. Church services amounted to an empty formalism devoid of spiritual content.

By the middle of the seventeenth century Wales was beginning to be conscious of contemporary European religious movements. Those members of the aristocracy who had not been disaffected by the Londonwards trek of their forbears had by now been absorbed into the Welsh rural and small-town society and formed there a comparatively prosperous stratum of lesser gentry. The founding of the S.P.C.K. in 1699 in London attracted the attention of some of these public-spirited Welshmen, who, appalled by the general low level of the clergy's mental equipment, founded with the aid of the S.P.C.K. diocesan libraries in Bangor, St Asaph, Carmarthen and Cardiff. In addition ninety-five charity schools were founded in order that children, by being made literate, should have available the means of salvation, i.e. a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. The S.P.C.K. was never really popular in Wales. It did not scize upon the Welshman's

imagination, and, as its direction lay in English hands, it never really *belonged* to Wales: the movement had no spontaneous impetus at home. It was the reaction to the Charity Schools which provoked Griffith Jones, vicar of Llanddowror in South-West Wales, to propose in 1731 to the S.P.C.K. the foundation of a different type of school. This man of great vision was at this time aged forty-eight. His zeal and conviction in preaching had brought him into conflict with his fellow Anglican clergymen who scoffed at his simplicity and forthrightness. In 1731 he obtained from the S.P.C.K. a supply of Bibles with which to instruct people during an epidemic. This was the beginning of a native movement, the circulating schools, which multiplied and spread throughout Wales. Griffith Jones employed itinerant teachers who stayed in various places for three months. Old, middle-aged and young were initiated into the mysteries of the written word and thousands became literate. It is impossible to estimate the total consequence of this development. For it was from this same concern for men's souls that sprang the beginnings of the Methodist Reform in Wales. Hywel Harris was converted by a sermon at Talgarth (Breconshire) on Palm Sunday in 1735. In the same year Daniel Rowland was converted by a sermon of Griffith Jones. Already converts were beginning to group themselves into societies, and the *Seiat*,² later to be used by Williams Pantycelyn as an occasion for the weekly examination of conscience and public confession of sins, was already in existence. Although these organizations ran parallel to Church organizations they were already in their inception tending towards a separate existence. In 1738 a third great leader, William Williams, of Pantycelyn, a young medical student, was converted by a sermon of Hywel Harris in Talgarth churchyard. All these men had much contact with Griffith Jones who being thirty years their senior influenced them deeply. Many of their followers assisted at the schools. Griffith Jones remained a constitutionalist to the end, disliking the evolution of lay preachers and holding that ordination was essential for the ministry of the Word.

Welsh Methodism was a spontaneous reaction against a formalism in religion devoid of content. That content now began

² 'Seiat' derives from the English 'society', and was originally a meeting of the local society of Nonconformists. For our authoritative treatment of its subsequent development see Saunders Lewis: *Williams Pantycelyn*.

to be subjectively realized in the personal experience of thousands. By the middle of the eighteenth century there was an exchange of views and personnel between Welsh and English denominations. John Wesley, who was converted in 1738, paid in all forty-six visits to Wales, but finally abandoned Welsh Wales to his friend Harris 'because of the accursed confusion of tongues'. (This co-operation between them was possible because both remained within the Church of England.)

In Wales the nation became alive; we have already seen that Catholicism in its inception gathered to itself a whole national ethos—that *Romanitas* of which we have spoken. No less did Nonconformity. It created for itself a *new* national ethos, whose central theme is—emancipation; emancipation from the bonds of empty forms: the freedom of the individual and his own personal autonomy with its correlative—the release from subjection to an authority which is an empty legalism. This central core of Nonconformity informs other planes of existence. The long-forgotten treachery of the Welsh aristocracy emerges from the Welsh unconscious as the vindication of the Welsh *gwerin* ('folk'). The Nonconformist ethos is radical, non-authoritarian. By today its slow transference to the secular plane tends to produce a vaguely humanitarian outlook and an instinctive sympathy with the have-nots and the under-privileged in all categories, social, political and religious. The dichotomy which inhabits the soul of the modern Welshman lies here. Modern Welsh scholarship in the literary and historical and archaeological fields is bringing more and more to light the Catholic and Roman origin of the Welsh. But the modern Welshman, being the creature of his age, is a product of those psychological pressures which have their origin in the total rejection of the Catholic ethos. To solve this contradiction in the Welsh soul is the task of the Church in Wales today.

Welsh Nonconformity is Protestant in origin and in practice. In common with all its sister movements in Europe it participated in the general urge to set right in God's Church that which had gone so sadly wrong. Bouyer in his great book, *Du Protestantisme à l'Église*,³ has shown that the essentials of Protestantism lie not

3 See Louis Bouyer: *Du Protestantisme à l'Église*, chapters V and VI. This book has been translated into English by A. V. Littledale, under the title *The Spirit and Forms of Protestantism* (Harvill Press).

in its negations, but in certain great and positive affirmations of Christianity. In stressing the need first for a *personal* response to God's word Continental Protestantism took the obvious course of reaction to a Christianity which had hopelessly involved itself in the fate of a decadent civilization. (In Wales this reaction took place at second hand, so to speak, against the empty formalisms of the Church of England.) The second great tenet of the Protestant reform was its insistence on the authority of the Bible, which is to the Protestant not an abstract theory but a vital intuition. The affirmation of these two principles is nothing less than the affirmation of two vital essentials of Catholic teaching. Bouyer says, 'One can say that Catholic asceticism has never had as its basis anything other than the necessity for every particular person to engage in a personal effort from which no one can dispense him, to make his own the spiritual objective riches of the Faith and the Sacraments. All teaching, the whole point of the spiritual exhortations of spiritual men and saints, are in this: to persuade us anew without ceasing that neither cleaving to the Faith of the Church nor the frequenting of her rites and sacraments avail anything without that effort which nothing else can achieve for us, the effort to place the faith in our life, to fructify our lives with sacramental grace. Without this interior response, without its strictly personal authenticity, all Catholic tradition avails nought but to tell us that the most scrupulous practice of external religion and the most minute profession of faith in terms of the Church not only serves no purpose, but will moreover serve for our own condemnation.'

The insistence on the sovereign authority of the Bible followed the truly orthodox discovery that God has spoken to man, to *every* man in particular more distinctly than any human voice in the promise of the Gospel, in the good news of salvation in Christ offered to all who believe in him. This is the religion of the Living Word, of the God who speaks. St Jerome summed up the neglect of this aspect of Christian spirituality in one phrase: 'Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.'

How did this essentially Protestant position work itself out in Wales? In a truly dramatic fashion. The Word of God was preached up and down the country in season and out; in tiny chapels and in large ones; in towns, villages and in fields—and all of it in Welsh. A nation which had been spiritually starved

came to life, demanding food for its soul. They could not have enough of it. Vocations to preach God's word came in hundreds. Thousands of Welsh families produced two or three sons for the ministry. This preaching was no ephemeral oratory. It dealt with the mighty themes of God made Man, of sin, the necessity for Redemption; its achievement through Christ; the death on the Cross; the end of man. Through consideration of these fundamental doctrines of Christianity, multitudes were moved, receiving light for the understanding and strength for the will. All the Celtic eloquence and dramatic talent of the preachers were taken up into this task of depicting the themes of salvation. One hour, two hours, sometimes three hours went by as minutes, while great congregations listened entranced to the words of life. Those of us who are Welsh may read biographies of the great preachers, e.g. John Jones of Talsarn, and the accounts of meetings to which people travelled a whole day's journey to hear this 'angelic' preacher and many others like him. Hundreds of these biographies were written to commemorate such giants of Nonconformity. The very total of the miles they travelled in itself is fantastic.

On the crest of this resurgence came the poets—the hymn writers. The study of Welsh hymnology is in itself a major task. The hymn performs for the Nonconformist in the psychological realm the function which liturgical prayer fulfils for the Catholic. (I am not by any means saying that they are the same thing—that is a very different matter.) Releasing the believer from the tendency to exclusive inwardness and subjectivity, the hymn became a paean of praise and a restatement of doctrine. Many of the hymn writers penetrated sublime heights of knowledge of the person of Christ through their poetic intuition, a perfectly valid and fundamental knowledge granted to the intuitive powers of the soul. The conjunction of these inspired hymns with the gift of song and harmony which is a natural Welsh endowment very often threw whole congregations into a state of exaltation bordering on ecstasy. An experience of this intensity, commonly shared, bound the nation together in a religious unity which, combining spiritual and sensuous factors, created a solidarity as real to the Welsh as it is inexplicable to the outsider who sees only the external manifestations of ugly chapels; but an aspect of Nonconformity which is fundamental to it is its

contempt for external forms. In fact, so total is this rejection, that the very existence of the external form is often assumed to be the negation of its essence. Nonconformist preaching and teaching is at its best preoccupied with the necessity for cleaving to the substance of things. Its prayer is the continually reiterated longing to know experimentally the saving truths of God—‘give us to know’, ‘give us to experience—*profi*’. ‘Allow us to see.’

Let us then humbly regard Ann Griffiths,⁴ wrapt in ecstasy for hours after receiving the commemorative bread and wine at the hands of the local clergy; lost to all practical considerations of living as, intoxicated with divine truths, she goes about her daily tasks unseeing and unhearing, lost in contemplation. What of Pantycelyn and his minute and scientific (he was trained in medicine) divination of the problems of the interior life with which he wrestles in his soul’s epic—*Theomemphus*, the story of a soul? What of Hywel Harris’s vision of God’s glory after which he shut himself away from worldly contacts for ten years to ponder its meaning? What are we in honesty to think of these manifestations? Is it not possible—and here again I speak with the utmost caution and reserve—that here is a vast unstudied field of Christian experience which, until we have, in the light of Catholic spirituality, elucidated it, and recognized it for what it is, will remain for us a neglected dispensation of that ever watchful providence which spends itself daily, hourly, in a bounty which exceeds our farthest imaginings?

At this point I think it is well to consider one fact of overwhelming importance. It is a fact that Nonconformity administers the Sacrament of Baptism, and one can argue that all the obvious manifestations of grace which are recognizable in Welsh Nonconformity provide us with a rich harvest of data, which simply throw into dramatic relief the attributes of this tremendous Sacrament. Modern depth psychology is assisting us more and more to see this Sacrament of Baptism for what it pre-eminently is—the Sacrament of the unconscious. Now, if we regard Nonconformity in an over-simplified way as being a strange aberration from Truth on the part of an excitable and imaginative people given over to a kind of mass hysteria, the genesis of that part of Nonconformity which so often accords with orthodox

⁴ Mystic and poet. Her songs to her divine spouse are among the classics of Welsh lyrical poetry.

Catholic thought and teaching is quite incomprehensible. But, if we hold in mind the nature of the Sacrament of Baptism and what it effects in the soul, baptizing us into membership of Christ's Body and imparting his sacred character to us, then the puzzling phenomena of Nonconformity fall into their due proportions, and moreover, we begin to comprehend that to study Welsh Nonconformity from this approach is to reveal a completely new facet of the ministrations of the Church herself and to plumb hitherto unsuspected depths of grace. Here, I believe, is the real line of approach to our brethren in Christ in Wales. Where Baptism is, there somehow is sanctifying grace; if we faithfully respond to and use this grace, our salvation will be wrought. This is far more than enough to account for the undoubted evidences of holiness and deep piety which has characterized so much of Nonconformity. Our only hope of avoiding a sectarian judgment of Nonconformity is to recognize, for what they are, those elements within it which mysteriously derive from that same blessed source as that complete Body of Truth which it is our undeserved privilege to adore in all its fullness, elements which inevitably must of their nature tend towards the whole Church just as the compass needle continually seeks the north. This is to be true to our Catholic stature. For its own fulfilment Nonconformity needs *now* the presence in Wales of an informed, Welsh Catholicism.

I have stressed the fact that the Nonconformist approach to Christ is a personal one. Of its nature, Nonconformity could have no explicit teaching concerning the Church as a visible society here on earth. It had no conception of a supernatural Society of believers who, when baptized into Christ, are also resurrected in him on earth by his conquest of sin and death, and who are therefore filled with joy.

The Welsh Nonconformist is a lonely pilgrim. The place of joyous meeting is always ahead of him. He is a pilgrim in a waste land, journeying to a place where life will be renewed. This accounts for the nostalgic quality of so many Welsh hymns, and for the yearning sadness of so much of Welsh religious music.

The Welsh mind is crying out for this resurrection in Christ. For it is at this point that the Church will be made manifest to it. Catholicism too in Wales needs for its enrichment these very qualities which Nonconformity has developed to a fine degree—

that personal response to grace; that great sincerity of conscience which cannot profess what it has not been given; that active, responsible lay outlook and that amazing generosity and sense of loyalty to the clergy; a reverent appreciation of those whom God has called to dispense his grace.

Where will this sacred introduction be effected? It will come about in the Mass. The long Passion Week of Welsh Nonconformity will culminate in the joyous Easter of Christ's Resurrection when Wales will find truly present on the altars of the Church the incarnate presence, the Body of that Lord to whom for so long the Welsh have borne testimony in the preaching of the Word and in their songs of praise.
