

The Welsh Religious Tradition ²⁶⁵

by D. J. Mullins

Towards the end of the sixth century, the invading pagans were pushing their way northwards along the eastern coast of Britain. At this period too, Aneirin the poet was singing his verses in the court of Mynyddawg Mwynfawr at Edinburgh. He was to sing the lament at the death of the brave three hundred who lost their lives in the desperate attempt to retake Catterick, and so halt the pagan advance. Farther to the west, about his time too, Taliesin was celebrating the victories of Urien Rheged and of his son Owain. He also sang their elegies. These two are the earliest Welsh poets of whom we can say with reasonable certainty that we have some of their authentic work. Both of them can use the word *bedydd* (baptism) to mean the world. To them, the only world they knew was the baptised world. All outside that was darkness and barbarism.

In 1823, at meetings at Aberystwyth and Bala, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists met and agreed on the forty four articles of their *Cyffes Ffydd*, their confession of Faith. It was published in book form in the following year, and literate Wales could read and learn by rote the restrained and powerful language, the finest prose of the nineteenth century written to give glory to God and to instruct His people.

It is a long cry from the sixth to the nineteenth century. The earliest Welsh literature was written in Southern Scotland, before Wales as an entity had come into existence. That entity was to be forged in the succeeding years of defeat by the pagan invaders. In those early days, the language of poetry was the language of praise. The men who died at Catraeth had visited churches to do penance before going into battle. They died and they were remembered in praise. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wales was going through a period of great religious revival. It had begun in the previous century. The picture of the religious state of the country in the previous centuries, and especially in the period immediately preceding this great revival has been blurred by the writings of those who helped to bring that revival into being. To them, all that went before was darkness and superstition. But to them, as to the early poets, Welsh was the language of praise. Their best poetry is in their hymns, their finest prose is a Confession of Faith.

In the fourteenth century, Einion Offeiriad wrote his treatise on the craft of poetry. The key section of his book, the key to the whole

of Welsh literature, is that which tells how all things are to be praised – ‘a spiritual thing, such as God and the saints, a corporal thing such as man or animal or place.’ Here is a masterly defence of the craft of literature, written in answer to the attacks on poetry by the popular preachers of the time; in answer to *The Elucidarium* which roundly declared that poets had no hope of salvation because they served the devil with all their strength.¹ Einion’s answer is that of Christian theology and in the manner of the great Schoolmen. He distinguishes various kinds of poetry. That which he is concerned with is the poetry of praise, the praise of God and of all His creatures. Here we have a concrete and precise application of the doctrine of the Analogy of Being; here we have expressed the central theme of all Welsh literature and culture, of Welsh life almost to our own day.

These three dates are convenient landmarks, one might well say watersheds in the development of this people and of its distinctive culture. By the end of the sixth century, the Welsh language had developed from the ruins of the ancient language of the Britons. We first find it as the language of song in the court of a Christian prince. No doubt, this was a tradition which passed over from the parent language to the new. Gildas could castigate Maelgwn Gwynedd for listening to the flattery and lies of the poets who daily sang his praises in worthless songs. Whether they sang in Welsh or the parent British does not matter here. Gildas, no doubt from a safe distance, was attacking a Christian prince for his sins, and calling on him to reform lest the judgement of God should be visited on him and on his people. The picture that Gildas gives is one of corruption and sinfulness. He was a reforming preacher writing a tract for the times, and in a tradition that still survives. One would be unwise to take his account as a sober representation of the reality of things. The Gododdin with its casual references to the heroes going to churches before going into battle helps to balance the picture. No doubt Gildas would retort that the judgement of God had by this time been visited on the people and that accounted for their being more ready to turn to prayer.

By the fourteenth century, Wales had undergone many changes. The death of Llywelyn the Last in 1282 brought the period of Welsh independence to an end. For another century, Welsh literary life and culture continued with the momentum derived from previous centuries. But that momentum was beginning to run out. Then appeared a new kind of poet, a new kind of patron, and from our point of view more important, a defender of the art of poetry; a man moulded in the tradition of the Schoolmen, writing in the terminology of the Schools, who by careful distinction, division and sub-division, put the Welsh literary tradition in its Christian setting. The Laws,

¹*Llyfyr Agkyr Llandeuivrevi*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1894, p. 40. One might interpret *y gler* in its narrow sense. Gruffudd Llwyd certainly understood the condemnation of the *Elucidarium* as a general one. (cf. *Iolo Goch ac Eraill*, Caerdydd, 1937, p. 119).

no doubt noting an established custom, had said that a *pencerdd* sang first of all, a song to God, and then one to the prince. Einion Offeiriad shows these two to be aspects of the same thing. Men are to be praised for the attributes and virtues proper to their state. To satirize, to blame, is no part of a poet's task. His duty is to portray men and things as they ought to be. The influence of the thought of St Augustine and of the earlier Medieval philosophical tradition is obvious. The different factors of a major poet, a different type of patron and an ecclesiastic's defence of poetry all combined to give new life to the Welsh tradition and to ensure its continuance.

The *Cyffes Ffydd* of 1823 provides the key to modern Welsh religious tradition. The classics of Welsh prose produced by Anglican writers in previous centuries had been important. More important still has been the translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1588; without this neither the religious history nor the religious writing of the last century would have been possible. But without the revival of Nonconformity, Welsh as a spoken language of a large section of the people would certainly have disappeared as a result of the Education Acts and Education Policy of the last century. Nonconformity moulded the whole of Welsh life in the nineteenth century and in large measure produced the Wales we live in today. It has been a tendency of Welshmen to see Welsh history as beginning with that revival. This is understandable, but it would be unforgivable in a Catholic were he even to seem to perpetuate this view. Nevertheless, a Catholic who wants to explain the Wales of today to his fellow-Catholics both within and outside Wales has a duty both in scholarship and honesty to try to understand, interpret and explain the growth and influence of Nonconformity. We are now sufficiently removed from the bitterness and hostility shown to Catholics – for various reasons, not all of them connected with differences of religion – to be able to attempt a just and enlightened assessment of the real and lasting contribution of Nonconformity. One should attempt to see it in its proper setting. Nonconformity could never have become the force it did in Wales were it not something which grew out of the permanent tradition of the country and of the people.

The important thing about the *Cyffes Ffydd* in this context is that it is a doctrinal document. It aims to set out the bases of the belief of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists and its content. Its first article on the Existence of God reads like a popular version of the Five Ways, for it was meant for quarrymen and miners, farmers and railway workers as well as for ministers. The document ranges over the whole field of God's dealing with man, and is firmly centred on the Person of Christ, the Redeemer. Welsh Christianity in all its long history is mirrored here. A deep and sincere personal love of Our Lord can be traced through all Welsh religious writing, from the tenth century englynion preserved in the Juvencus manuscript and the lovely poems in the Black Book of Carmarthen to the present

day. Christianity everywhere is, of course, Christ-centred, but the emphasis varies from place to place, and the literature of a country mirrors the popular devotion of the people. In Wales, as in Ireland, Christ on the Cross remains firmly the focal point of the piety of the people. During the early and late Middle Ages, one finds poems to Our Lady and the Saints, especially the native Welsh saints, and in the period of decay following the Black Death and the wars of the fifteenth century, the preoccupation with the shortness of life and the certainty of death is as pronounced in Welsh writing as in any other literature of the period. There are many examples of these types of religious poem in Modern Welsh literature. But the predominant motif remains always Christ stretched on the Cross for the salvation of the world. The emphasis is different in the period before the influence of St Bernard and the Cistercian monks made itself felt, but the motif remains the same. Here is a theme that could be developed into a lengthy thesis by some of our young Catholic scholars.

It would be foolish to imply that one could properly analyse the contents and the significance of the *Cyffes Ffydd* in a few paragraphs. To do so adequately would require several long articles. The important point here is that such articles would be very doctrinal and would concern themselves only marginally with matters arising from specifically Calvinistic theology. The last century was to see many discussions and divisions on points of doctrine. The *Cyffes Ffydd* is on the whole outside and above these sectarian differences. As Nonconformity today relaxes its hold on the doctrinal content of Christianity, it is becoming increasingly necessary that Catholics in Wales respond to the appeal made by Mr Saunders Lewis over thirty years ago. Seeing the imprint of its Catholic formation on the whole of Welsh history and Welsh culture, Mr Lewis asked Catholics to enable this land to repossess its genuine traditions. The response to such an appeal is more of a practical possibility today. For many years, it was a very rare thing indeed to find a Catholic student studying in the Welsh Departments of the University of Wales. In the past few years, that position has changed entirely. Catholic young men and women are now reading for an honours degree in Welsh language and literature, and it is no longer a matter for special comment. One hopes that this is something which will continue and grow.

All the emphasis in this article has been on the testimony of Welsh literature. This is inevitable. Were the Welsh language to disappear tomorrow, something which is not at all likely to happen, it would still be necessary to turn to the indigenous literature of this people, not only to understand its past but also its present. Those of us in Wales who have had the opportunity and the privilege of getting to know the language and the literature of Wales have a task to perform. It is no use our saying that the Church should do this or that in Wales, for that is only to make excuses for not doing anything ourselves. The Welsh-speaking Catholic must try to make

the country in which he lives intelligible to his fellow-Catholics. Some of them will have recently come here; many more will be the descendants of the immigrants from Ireland or Italy. This second group will have heard their parents and grandparents talk of the difficulties and the opposition that they met with here; the older ones will remember something of it themselves. To many of them, Wales seems a land hostile to Catholicism, and talk of Catholic intolerance will be a cruel and bitter joke. That some of the younger generation of these people should now be studying Welsh at University level is a sign of the change of atmosphere. The Welsh-speaking Catholic can accelerate that change. In Wales, we are the inheritors of a culture that is Catholic and Roman in a sense that no other is in Europe. Whatever the vicissitudes of the centuries may have been, that living link with its origins has never been broken. Before Catholics can enter into this inheritance, its existence and its nature must be explained to them. Who will do this if not those who have some knowledge of it?

The lack of a sacramental theology in recent times has made Welsh culture, which is a religious culture, and its expression in Welsh literature inward-looking. The Catholic contribution in the future will surely be here. To attempt to return to the philosophy of literature that produced the golden age of Welsh writing would be to attempt the impossible and to ignore the intervening centuries. But the Catholic with his world outlook and his view of the totality of the Redemption can add a dimension, or rather restore it to Welsh literature. This is to presume that Welsh literature as a specifically Christian literature will survive. If it does not, Welsh literature will disappear altogether.

As an appendix to this article, I offer a translation of a poem from *The Black Book of Carmarthen*. As far as I know, it has not previously been translated into English.

In the name of the Lord, He is mine to praise, great is His praise.
I praise the Lord, great is His blessing in His mercy.
God has defended us, God has made us, God has delivered us;
God is our hope, worthy, perfect, fair is His pure blessing;
God has right over us, God who is yonder, King, Trinity;
God who was proved, of his free choice, in His suffering;
God came to be imprisoned in His humility.
Wise Lord, He will make us free by Judgement Day.
May He bring us to the feast, in spite of His anger and His holiness,
May He welcome us purely to Paradise in spite of the weight of sin;
May He give us health because of His suffering and His five blows;
In terrible pain, God defended us when He took on flesh.
Man would be lost had he not been redeemed by faultless rite;
From the bloody cross, Redemption came to the world;
Christ the strong shepherd, unfailing in His merits.