

The Religious Landscape In Present Day Wales: Some Thoughts.

Let me begin with a tribute and a disclaimer.

First the tribute. I'm delighted to be here, and to be here at the invitation of an old friend. Archbishop George and I have worked together in one way or another for twenty years – so it's with great pleasure that I honour his friendship and look forward to enjoying his hospitality.

As for the disclaimer – it's quickly made. I don't address the huge subject before us as one having authority. An ineradicable affection for my motherland, unending questions about Welsh identity and an insatiable curiosity about Welsh culture – these I have in abundance. And I'm more than happy to offer my thoughts about present-day Wales. But everyone here will know exactly how to discount some of the opinions of a Welshman who's spent most of his life out of the Principality. If what I say arouses some interest, if it generates some discussion, then I shall have done my bit and will be happy enough to take matters from there.

For all that, the observations I want to make will be offered with some passion. I care deeply about Wales and about the place of religion in Wales and it's my perception that faith finds itself just now at a crossroads (or is it a cul de sac?). Dover Beach is as far from St. David's Head as it's possible to be; yet Matthew Arnold's words seem poignantly appropriate:

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

I've just completed a second reading of a book called "In the Shadow of the Pulpit" by Professor M. Wynn Thomas. It's the story of the rise and fall of Welsh non-conformity – as seen through the eyes of writers, poets and novelists in the main. What a tale he tells! And how brilliantly he tells it. I can only hint at a small number of the peaks and troughs of a

religious juggernaut that has rolled through Wales over the last two centuries.

It was a religion of the word and produced some of the finest oratory imaginable – preachers able to reduce their congregations to awe, hold them in fear and trembling, whisk them into the antechambers of heaven. And yet it was an eloquence that could so easily petrify, taking grace and turning it into law, drifting into literary brilliance for its own sake, indulging in the manipulation of those listening. Many a preacher won bardic crowns or chairs, many moved their hearers to remorse or rapture. There were giants in the land.

Or “big guns” as Kenneth Morgan describes them. Some were no doubt guilty, as he suggests, of gaining “their mass appeal not from the theological or the literary content of their fiery sermons but from the populist impact of their own personalities”. Some but by no means all. How many improvements in education, public service, community development and cultural life can be put down to these larger-than-life personalities?

Ann Griffiths is described by A.M.Allchin as “giving voice to the experience of a multitude of hidden men and women to the shared assumptions and atmosphere of (her) time (in her writing) one is constantly haunted by a background of so many unknown eyes and faces”. At their best, those non-conformist preachers knew the minds of the rude forefathers of the communities they live in, their homely joys, and destiny obscure. They articulated and engaged with the short and simple annals of the poor. Without their efforts, full many a flower was born to blush unseen and waste its fragrance on the desert air.

And yet, for all the nobility of their work, it contained the seeds of its own demise. The plight of Meilyn Lewis in Richard Llewellyn’s “How Green Was My Valley”, consigned to outer darkness by the chapel deacons meeting in consistory. Her sexual encounter and consequent pregnancy out of wedlock provoke Mr. Parry into a paroxysm of moralistic rage. Professor Wynn Thomas tells how the great hymn writer Gwilym Hiraethog (William Rees) left the “cold embrace of Calvinism” when one of his friends was expelled from their Chapel, peremptorily and without appeal, for the grave sin of walking home on a Sunday to visit his wife who was dangerously ill. Such accounts are legion and only too true.

Chapel fought chapel, chapel fought church, Christians vied with each other to make a bigger splash than their competitors. The poets and

novelists had plenty to work with and they poured their bile on the puritanical, pleasure-hating, teetotal and judgemental world of non-conformity.

Wynn Thomas sees all this whilst resolutely refusing to sign all of it away to religious zeal of the tendency of those preachers to “belittle God with their own littleness”. He salutes Emyr Humphreys and Roland Mathias who, without wanting a return to the halcyon days of the “big guns”, refuse to allow a total dismissiveness of non-conformity – that would be to lose a sense of our own history, Mathias is quoted as saying.

Those hymns too, need holding on to. “Dyma gariad fel y moroedd, Tosturiaethau fel y lli” – the ocean swell of God’s love, full of mercy and compassion, with “A chyfiawnder pur a heddwch Yn cusanu euog fyd” – “the treacherous embrace of Judas reversed as pure justice and peace fuse in a rapturous kissing of a guilty world.” – the epithalamium of a salvatory marriage indeed. A hymn to die for, it is also a hymn to live by.

The melancholy, long, withdrawing roar of the non-conformist tide is in full retreat and we are left scratching our heads about what happens next.

Since the Reformation, Roman Catholicism has played only a marginal part in the life of Wales. It was banned for so long and, during those years of exile, did not enjoy an ongoing recusant presence as was the case in England. The re-appearance of Roman Catholics after 1829, pitched those carrying its banners into a veritable mission field. The altars were well and truly stripped in Wales and the 19th century story was of a church ministering to Irish navvies and miners who were fleeing from the depredations of their home land in search of work and survival. The novels of Anthony Cordell are full of colourful Irish labourers at work on the railway lines or in the coalfields of South Wales. In my youth, Roman Catholics felt foreign, though I’ll never forget the visit of two Irish nuns one foul evening. They were collecting money to build a new church in Burry Port. They spoke with thick accents and we understood almost nothing of what they said. They still got half a crown from my mother which is as good an illustration of grace as I know.

Cardinal Basil Hume brought Roman Catholicism into the mainstream of English life. Is it time now for the Roman Catholic Church, free of much of the baggage being carried by other traditions, to play a bigger part in

shaping the present and the future of Wales? Not a centralising, heavily hierarchical Roman Catholic Church, but one true to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. What better time to look for such a contribution than the fiftieth anniversary of the calling of the Council. It would be so good if my friend the archbishop and his colleagues not only talked about Catholic Social Teaching, with its emphasis on Solidarity and Subsidiarity, but actually got on with it.

As for the Church of England, as it was for the 400 years after the Reformation – after a dull period during the 16th and 17th centuries, it was soon contending with the rise of evangelical religion that came with the great revivals of the 18th century. By the time of the 1851 census, 80% of those at worship were in non-conformist chapels. The Church of England in Wales had undertaken a programme of church building in the mid 19th century, the Welsh Bible had appeared in 1588, a Welsh-speaking Welshman was appointed bishop of St. Asaph in 1870 (the first since the reign of Queen Anne). But theirs was a minority church and its disestablishment became inevitable. Less well known is that it was disendowed – many of its assets went into the newly created University of Wales. The 1,000 listed buildings belonging to the Church in Wales today need £60 million spending on them in the next five years – currently about £1m is available for this work. Manpower and finance present their own difficulties. But the Church of Wales has contributed magnificently to the spiritual and worshipping life of Wales through the production (and use) of its bi-lingual worship book – a serious resource that rings so many bells for me.

This scamper through history has, of course, neglected to say a single word about pre-Reformation Wales. All our traditions, knowingly or not, drive their tap roots down deep into the subsoil provided by our saints of old. But we must beware of the lure of nostalgia – the Celtic spirituality industry has already created its own distortions. And yet, for all such caution, we do ourselves no favours if we airbrush our common heritage out of the narratives we fashion for our separate histories.

The present is heavy with the past and suffused with the future – so said the German philosopher Leibniz. So how do we identify the best moments in our past and take them forward into our future. Let me attempt to identify what seem to me to be key characteristics of any such effort.

1. It's God's work we're doing, his kingdom we're building – an order where fairness, decency and respect for all are to be found, where we fashion a community marked by mercy, pity, peace, and love. Out of the wreckage of the present moment we must build back better. No longer the fatalism, the pessimism, the poetic melancholy or the stern law that has undergirded too much of what our churches have done in years gone by. The Kingdom of God is a realm which gives everyone room to breathe, a fair chance to get on with his life, and a community spirit based on a common perception of the way we want to travel. The Archbishop of Wales, in his Christmas message, declared that Christians must get their hands dirty to do God's work. And so we must.
2. Religion in Wales (or anywhere else) was always at its most powerful when its practitioners and devotees were most in tune with the real agenda – the questions, the hopes, the fears, the worries – that were being faced by ordinary people everywhere. If the Church sets itself an agenda, addresses questions, which are at odds with issues being dealt with in society at large, then we'll have contributed generously to our own marginalisation. We need to listen carefully to the sighs and the longings, the troubles and the fears of people – that is, we must put ourselves back into a pastoral relationship with the society around us and give people the sense that we are standing with them in their struggles and with their anxieties. Trust is at such a premium in all quarters these days. It is our task to rebuild trust by becoming once again the champions of ordinary people in their daily lives. Trust must be earned.
3. At some stage, we've got to wake up to the fact that our disunity is a stumbling block, a scandal. How can we address the brokenness we see on all hands while seeming to be unable to deal with our own fragmentation and divisions.
4. The Church will be at the forefront if efforts to harness the energies and talents of all those who hold the well-being of Wales to heart - the Welsh-speaking and the non-Welsh speaking too (whether ethnically Welsh or not). Ways must be found to cherish and nurture our language and culture without turning it into the equivalent of 19th century non-conformity's obsession with

Temperance – an unquestionable, rigidified, absolutised field of endeavour which establishes the norm against which everyone is measured.

5. Our religion needs to be gentle, winsome, attractive. It should be seen able to turn rough old people into good-hearted, not-always-perfect, but public-spirited men and women. The Rev'd. Eli Jenkins in "Under Milkwood" had a soft spot for Polly Garter. And he believed in a God who sees our best side, not our worst.

This kind of cocktail of attitudes, approaches, aptitudes, might go some way towards re-investing Wales's "myth-symbol complex" with a nexus of ideas capable once again of playing "a crucial part in the maintenance of the Welsh as a single 'people' in the face of the tumultuous, turbulent changes that lie ahead. Communities are strong when their history is 'full'; that is when their history is converted into a persuasive, potent myth-symbol complex. They are weak, and correspondingly vulnerable, when their history becomes 'drained'."

This is surely a moment for taking this examination forward and, through thoughtful and sacrificial commitment, contribute once again, all of us together, to the regeneration of the land we love.