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# Notes on the Historical and Sociological Reasons for the Decline in Nonconformity in England and Wales

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by D. Ben Rees

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*Mr. Rees, who is a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Wales in Liverpool, has devoted special attention to industrial and sociological factors in the changing patterns of church life in England and (more especially) Wales during the past century. His major work in this field, *Chapels in the Valley* (1975), presented a study in the sociology of Welsh nonconformity which he undertook during a seven years ministry in the Aberdare Valley, Mid Glamorgan.*

NONCONFORMITY as a coherent, unified movement today is nearly non-existent, but as a fact in the religious life of England and Wales it stares at us in all those Churches which dissented from Anglicanism. There is a great deal of ignorance among Civic Authorities as to who constitutes Nonconformity, and often one has to spell it out; the mainstream Nonconformity consists of the Baptists, the United Reformed Church, the Methodists, and the Welsh-speaking denominations; the independent groups include the Society of Friends, the Churches of Christ, Congregationalists, Independent Methodists and the Salvation Army, and we have the radicals in the form of Unitarians.

The need to look at Nonconformity from the standpoint of sociology is an urgent field of research which is largely neglected. Sociology can be a pastoral tool, and E. R. Wickham has given a valuable introduction to this aspect in his book, *Encounter with Modern Society*, published in 1964. That is why I hope that my book, published in December 1975, entitled *Chapels in a Valley: a sociology of Welsh Nonconformity*, has highlighted the need for a more systematic study of Nonconformity as a whole. My territory was confined to one mining valley in South Wales, but one can offer tentatively a few sociological notes on the apparent decline of Nonconformity in England and Wales.

The fact of the decline can be proved statistically by looking at any of the Nonconformists' *Year books*. Nonconformity reached the peak of its strength and influence in the period 1870 to 1910 and it was typified by what was called the "Nonconformist Con-

science". The culmination was the shortlived but tremendous victory of the Liberals in the General Election of 1906, when, for a few months, the Government of the Nation was in the hands of the Party so intimately associated with the Chapel way of life. The leaders of the Liberal Party were the products of the Chapel culture, and it was the horrors of the First World War that brought to an end the disillusionment of the Liberal Party and Nonconformity. The writing was on the wall, and one can trace the slow decline in the number of new Chapels built between 1900 and 1930, and in the subsequent loss of the adherents. It was the adherents who had blown Nonconformity into a fat balloon. They were to all purposes practical sympathizers with the ethos of Nonconformity and attended the evening services for the friendship offered, inspired preaching and the lusty congregational singing. Adherents were not paid-up members of the congregation and came on their own terms. They played no part in the organization of the Chapel, but voted the Nonconformist way at General Elections. Often in industrial areas they were immigrants from rural areas, and the Chapel was one of the few institutions that reminded them of their roots in the countryside. An example will suffice. At Hermon Presbyterian Church of Wales in the Aberdare Valley the adherent was a large part of the congregation well into the 30's. In 1931 there were 186 members and 61 adherents. It was the Depression of the 30's which thinned the ranks of the adherents in the mining valleys of South Wales. By 1950 there was only one adherent left in Hermon and he died in 1962, and with him disappeared a unique class in the history of Nonconformity. The adherent had been lost to the Chapels.

The Welsh sociologist, Alwyn D. Rees, has argued that by its very nature the Society created by Nonconformity will become redundant or moribund more rapidly than one where tradition and authority play a larger part, because its perpetuation depends not only on the transmission of a teaching and a moral code, but upon a recurrence of the actual direct religious experience, the unifying factor of this type of religion.<sup>1</sup> His thesis is true of a number of Nonconformist denominations with the exception of the Quakers and the Unitarians, who have never depended on revivals to swell their ranks.

Nonconformity has also been badly hit by the mobility of population. In rural areas, rural depopulation has meant that many, especially the young, have left the land and migrated to urban areas to find employment. The respect for education stressed by Nonconformity has also had a rebounding effect, with the most able leaving

<sup>1</sup> Alwyn D. Rees, *Life in a Welsh Countryside* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1950), p. 120.

to attend Colleges of Higher Education and denuding those areas of their natural leaders. In urban areas, slum clearance is destroying old closely knit communities with devastating results. Rosser and Harris found in Swansea that the dispersal of young families to post-war Council housing estates had a detrimental effect.<sup>2</sup> Geographical mobility is a sociological reason for the decline of Nonconformist Chapels because on moving to a new area individuals are often very reluctant to join another Chapel. A characteristic predominant among Nonconformists is a feeling that they belong to their particular Chapel and not to the denomination to which it belongs. Even the Anglican Churches and Roman Catholic Churches know of this emotional, psychological blinker, but not to the same extent as the Nonconformist denominations. The phrase coined by Fogarty for the Anglican and Catholic Churches of "filling station religion" is a very apt one, but it cannot be applied to Nonconformity. A Chapel member is so often tied to his particular Chapel by sentiment—the Chapel is embedded in the locality, and its severely localized membership means that it flourishes in areas of strong residential stability but cannot retain its hold on a physically mobile population.<sup>3</sup> These people who have been uprooted from closely-knit communities are not only lost to Nonconformity but are also "an alienated group in modern society" as Daniel Jenkins puts it.<sup>4</sup> Nonconformity which once "rooted" them is unable so often to provide them with an "anchor" in a highly industrialized mobile society. It is these who are the real "lonely crowd" and the evidence is not all that encouraging. Daniel Jenkins cites the cases of Welsh families who had moved to the Midlands in the early 60's. Around 60 per cent of them had had some church connections in their Welsh home, but only 3 per cent had joined Welsh speaking Churches in their new environment.<sup>5</sup> One must immediately insert a footnote and say that many of these people will have settled too far in the suburbs to attend a Welsh Chapel in the centre of Birmingham, or Wolverhampton, Coventry or Rugby, while others will have joined the nearest Church to them; but even when that is allowed for, it illustrates the extent to which old loyalties are broken and the difficulty of ensuring the participation of Nonconformists in the new environment into which they have moved. This again is intensified by the fact that modern migrations compared with the nineteenth century are more individualistic in character. When a large community moves it can take its institutions with it, and the first

<sup>2</sup> C. Rosser and C. Harris, *The Family and Social Change* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Jenkins, *The Educated Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

generation of migrants participate fully as those who migrated to the U.S.A. successfully did. It is a question that has not been answered: does the "lapsed" and "lost" Nonconformist lead a fuller and richer life in his new environment? Is he able to change his loyalties? It happens to a few, the "migratory élite" as they have been called, but one has to admit that in so many instances these people make the audience of "gapers and gawpers" for the television screen.<sup>6</sup> "What nice people and what dull lives they lead" is a true description of whole generations of Nonconformists that have been lost in the anonymous urbanized environment.

Nonconformity has also to a large extent lost the ordinary manual working class. A debate has been going on for over a decade among sociologists as to the extent the Church had an appeal to the masses. Bishop Winnington-Ingram wrote in 1896 about England, "It isn't that the Church of God has lost the great towns, it has never had them"; and E. R. Wickham's monumental study of Sheffield, *Church and People in an Industrial City* (London, 1957), substantiates the Bishop's generalization. There are other similar findings not only in England but also in countries like France. R. M. Goodridge has looked upon Bristol and Marseilles in the mid-nineteenth century. He comes to the conclusion that there was a decline in the influence of religion, and in both cities there was a massive abstention from worship among the labouring classes.<sup>7</sup> But Goodridge does admit that the Methodists were partially successful in their evangelism in Bristol among the immigrants and the working class.<sup>8</sup> Methodism was helped by the inadequacy of the Anglican parochial system and its inability to adapt itself to the changing conditions and the booming townships that arose throughout England and Wales. B. Greaves has suggested that there is a direct (although not a complete) relationship between the success of Methodism and the inadequacy of Church accommodation provided by the Church of England in the West Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>9</sup> The initial response of the Anglican Church in the West Riding as in South Wales was to ignore the problem. The Nonconformist's organization was most suitable. It placed the emphasis on a group rather than on a location. Chapels grew out of social groupings, of the gathering together of people in industry and in locality. They built in response to a demand and this flexibility is the key to unlock the success story of Nonconfor-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup> R. Martin Goodridge, "Nineteenth-century Urbanization and Religion: Bristol and Marseilles 1830-1880", in *Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain 2*, ed. David Martin (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969), p. 134.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> B. Greaves, *An Analysis of the Spread of Methodism in Yorkshire during the 18th century and early 19th century, with Special Reference to the Environment of this movement*, M.A. Thesis, Leeds, 1960-61.

mity. Towns such as Halifax and Leeds became strongholds of Methodism.

The Primitive Methodists, who constituted a large grouping within Methodism, were even more successful than anyone among the working class. From their original home in Staffordshire they spread along the line of the lower Trent Valley and encountered their greatest success in the East Riding. Moving out again from the East Riding they evangelized their way northwards into Durham and southwards through Lincolnshire into Norfolk. It is through their activities that there is an element of truth in Morgan Phillips' much quoted phrase that "the Labour Party owes more to Methodism than to Marx." As many a Marxist historian has rightly pointed out, there is not enough evidence to justify the viewpoint of the late General Secretary of the Labour Party.

But I believe on the other hand that the Nonconformist democratic form of Government, with its emphasis on equality of opportunity, paved the way for the participation in Trade Union affairs of the emergent Labour Movement. An historian has pointed out how Unitarianism played an important role in the awakening of radicalism in Merthyr Tydfil in the 1830's. It was these Unitarians who were the midwives of the working class movement in East Glamorgan-shire, according to Professor Gwyn A. Williams.<sup>10</sup>

I have put forward the thesis that the decline in Nonconformist Chapels in running areas can also be attributed to industrial factors.<sup>11</sup> The old method of mining by hand at the coalface was founded on a small team of miners, which was not only conducive to the maintenance of a community-based Nonconformity but also exhibited similar characteristics; the responsible autonomy of the miner being reflected in the role of the elder or deacon. However, the advent of mechanization meant the disappearance of this method of mining, so conducive to the structure of Welsh Nonconformity.

A small team in a single tradition could maintain a Chapel culture intact and in isolation from others within a particular community setting. A minister who had been a miner remarked to me that one good Chapel man in a "team" meant that the team would be kept discussing religion and Chapel all day. This organization offered itself in the Evan Roberts Revival of 1904-5, when prayer meetings were held underground at Cwmdare and Abercynon. When the "small team" lost its supporting base, it was more difficult for one

<sup>10</sup> Gwyn A. Williams, "The Merthyr of Dic Penderyn," *Merthyr Politics: the Making of a Working-Class Tradition*, ed. Glanmor Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1966), pp. 13-15.

<sup>11</sup> D. Ben Rees, *Industrial and Social Reasons for the decline of Welsh Nonconformity with particular reference to the Aberdare Valley*, M. Sc. (Econ.) Thesis, University of Wales, 1972.

person to influence the attitude of the larger, more disintegrated unit. The "small team" was swept away with the coming of mechanization, and is unheard of in the factory set-up.

The change of the industrial base from heavy to lighter industries has also an effect. Mass production, and also new methods, mean that men have to work on Sundays and cannot attend their place of worship. The increase of working wives means that they often find themselves doing household chores on Sundays. The increase in motor cars and the popularity of television have meant a shifting of interests and allegiance. Affluence of the post-war period brought its own problems. A prophetic writer of the Edwardian period, J. N. Figgis, was not far off in his diagnosis that it was not poverty but affluence which was the real danger.

Nonconformist Chapels have been largely unable to meet the more affluent worker and to accommodate him in his need for comfort, recreation and fellowship. It is an entirely different proposition if this is what the role of the Chapel should be, but one cannot ignore the fact that Nonconformity in the past did specialize in what one could call "secular-religious" activities. Organizations sprang up to cater for the leisure of the members of the Chapels. There would be a devotional part or an epilogue but the activities ranged from the semi-peasant cultural activities of *eisteddfodau* in Welsh Nonconformity to playing football and listening to lectures in English Nonconformity. Anniversaries were accompanied by lectures with such titles as: "A Peep in my Album—or Portraits of real life" (1868) to "Love, Courtship and Marriage"—humorous rather than serious (1902).<sup>12</sup> There were literary societies and the Wesleyan Methodists introduced what they called a Mutual Improvement Society for social and religious purposes which included musical items, stories and talks. The Pleasant Sunday Afternoon classes attempted to attract working-class men by offering entertainment mingled with religion, and to a large extent provided a valuable form of entertainment till it disappeared shortly after the First World War.<sup>13</sup> It was a mission to educate and entertain, an attempt to win the allegiance of the whole society. "Socio-religious activities," as William Pickering puts it, "in which the religious pill was covered with a coating of social sugar became one obvious method."<sup>14</sup> But the venture had no hope of success when other alternatives came along with more financial resources to maintain the entertainment. Pickering concludes: "Secular leisure-time pursuits became

<sup>12</sup> William Pickering, "Religion—a Leisure-time Pursuit," in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain*, ed. David Martin (London: S.C.M. Press, 1968), p. 89.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

a rival to religion as religion set itself up as a rival to leisure-time pursuits.”<sup>15</sup>

The Clubs arose not as competitors to Nonconformity but as part and parcel of it. The Working Men’s Clubs, which play such an important part in the industrial areas of England and Wales, were in the beginning a religious organization. The organizing spirit was Henry Solly, a Unitarian minister, and a former spokesman for the temperance movement. It was an attack on the intemperance, ignorance, improvidence and religious indifference of the working class, and aimed quite sharply to take working men out of the pub and into a club free of intoxicating drinks. The clubs were an answer to the cry: what are we to do with our reformed drunkard? But in time this was completely changed, and the clubs have taken over the respectability and status of the Nonconformist Chapels in most of our industrial conurbations. They imposed Nonconformist patterns of behaviour on their members, and people are barred from the clubs if they are “rowdy” and “awkward”. “They have their rules, and if someone behaves badly he is expelled.”<sup>16</sup>

Nonconformist Chapels can never hope to compete with the Working Men’s Club or the wealthy Social Clubs in entertainment and accommodation. Chapel vestries are bleak and bare, the seats are hard, and they are unable to match the comfort of the social clubs near them. The Social Clubs are able to attract professional singing groups, magicians, and all kinds of entertainers, while the Nonconformist Chapels have to depend on local talent, which is often unrehearsed and of an amateurish standard.

The semi-peasant culture of Nonconformity has also to a large extent depended on the charismatic influence of the minister of the Church. Charisma is a term introduced by Max Weber into the language of the sociologist to mean the power given to influence others. It denotes social authority that is not based on tradition or legality, but rather on the extraordinary impact of an individual leader. There is no doubt that charismatic ministers dominated Nonconformity in its heyday in the second half of the nineteenth century. An example will suffice to prove this point. Take the initiative shown by Nonconformist ministers in the life of nineteenth-century Birmingham. An urgency and a sense of responsibility was sounded with regard to local affairs, and a new phrase was coined, the “Civic Gospel”. Under the spell of three remarkable charismatic leaders, R. W. Dale at Carrs Lane Congregational Church, H. W. Crosskey at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah, and the Baptist minister

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Jackson, *Working Class Community: some general notions raised by a series of studies in northern England* (London: Penguin, 1972), p. 57.

George Dawson, the city of Birmingham became the great Mecca of Nonconformity.<sup>17</sup> All these men and many others possessed the drive, the ability, the enthusiasm, but in time the charisma of office took over from the personal charisma. But with the modern trend to specialization many an observer, like Paul Halmos, feels that the clergy and ministers have been made redundant by the social workers and others who have specialized in counselling. Are we therefore left with a situation in which charisma of today is not with ministers of religion but with the new counsellors?

What are the prospects for Nonconformity?

Nonconformity can offer itself again as an initiator of new ideas in a fluctuating situation. It must seize new opportunities that come its way as well as pioneering in new towns, housing estates, and amalgamating its resources so as to increase its influence on social, political and leisuretime activities of the community. John D. Gay saw the future for the English Free Churches in the prosperous and successful areas of suburban England where they are in a strong position to provide what is termed a "Community Church".<sup>18</sup> It will be non-denominational and its strength will be derived from its position in the community. Having to discard its 'puritanical' image the Community Church is already providing a need in a number of new areas, not only in the South-East of England, but also in the North-West, as for example in Skelmersdale New Town. But Nonconformity has also to face the issues which have already been discussed in the more traditional areas and become again 'open-ended,' concerned with young and old, and focal points for the village, town or neighbourhood. In some areas of England and Wales the danger is imminent for the disappearance of the whole witness of Nonconformity in the next decade. The process of secularization is removing from Welsh society, for example, one of its central supports, and the only solution is immediate action. This is why sociology must be taken seriously by the leaders of the Free Churches in England and Wales.

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<sup>17</sup> John D. Gay, *The Geography of Religion in England* (London: Duckworth, 1971), p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 115-116.