

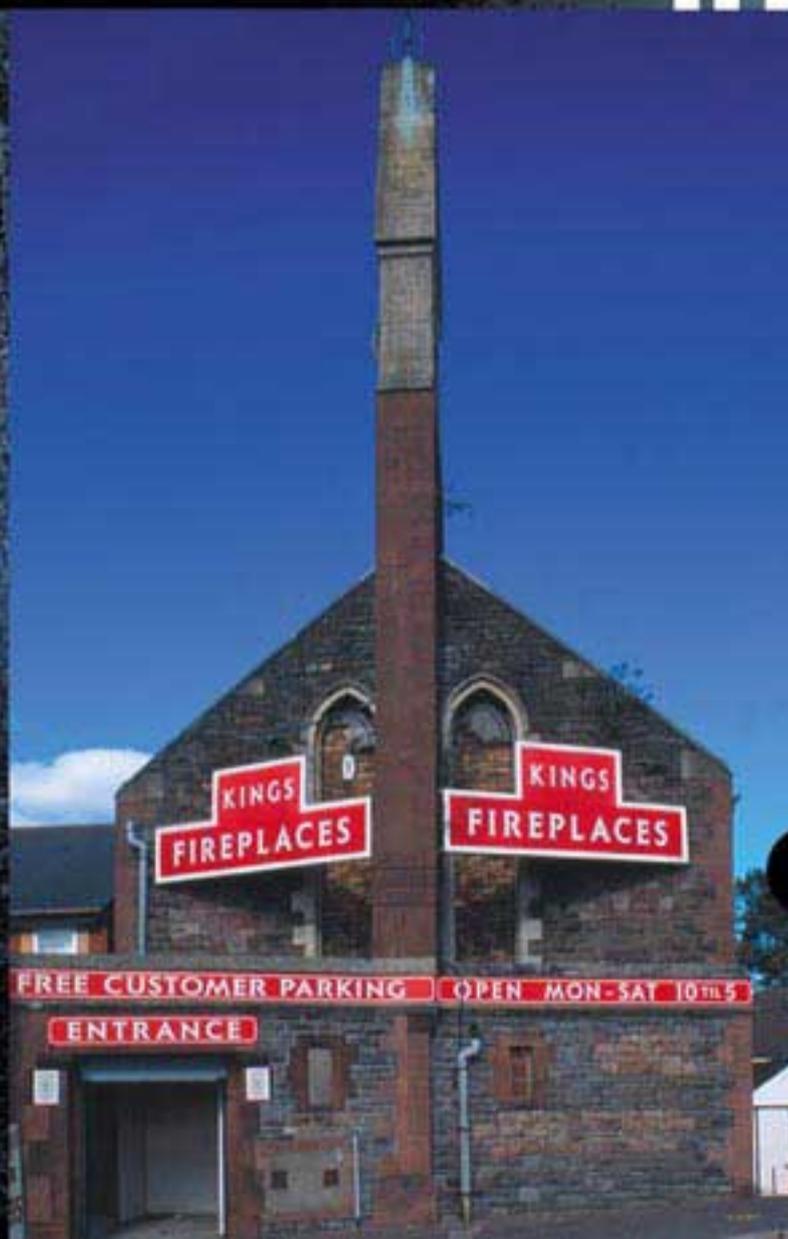
POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN WALES



eligion, secularization & social change in Wales

Congregational
Studies in a
Post-Christian
Society

Paul Chambers



POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN WALES

Religion, Secularization and Social Change in Wales

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POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN WALES

*Religion, Secularization and
Social Change in Wales*

CONGREGATIONAL STUDIES IN A
POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

By

PAUL CHAMBERS

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Foreword

It is always a pleasure to see a doctoral thesis turn into a book, the more so when the task of external examiner has been a particularly rewarding one. Such is the case with Paul Chambers's careful analysis of *Religion, Secularization and Social Change in Wales* – a study which brings to life the ongoing process of religious change in Swansea.

Chambers works at two levels. First, he maps the religious scene in Swansea. Secondly, he looks in detail at four different case studies (bearing in mind that one of these is a composite story) in order to understand the precise mechanisms that take place in the lives of churches as they grow and decline. Both the initial mapping and the case studies themselves are set against the wider economic and social changes occurring in south Wales, a part of the world in which industrialization and urbanization led initially to religious growth as both the free church traditions and Catholicism catered – in many ways very effectively – for a newly urbanized population. The south Wales story is distinctive, a history that Chambers knows from the inside and understands well.

Secularization may have come late to south Wales, but it came fast. Post-industrialization has not been kind to the free churches in Swansea. As the communities, of which the chapels were a part, have collapsed, so too have the chapels themselves – as indeed have the associated political and industrial institutions that were part of the same evolution. A whole way of life has come to an end, leaving its last survivors bewildered and bereft. Parish-based churches have withstood the shock a little better, but many of these are communities of the old rather than the young, posing inevitable questions about the future.

This is not the whole story however. Life, including church life, goes on, but in different ways. In my own work, I have become increasingly aware of a shift taking place in the churches of northern Europe, right across the denominations. This is a shift from a culture of obligation in the religious field to one of choice or consumption. No church or chapel that relies on a sense of duty to bring people to church is likely to prosper in the new millennium; such an approach no longer resonates. Conversely, if a church or

chapel can make it worthwhile for people to come, as a matter of choice or conviction rather than duty or obligation, that congregation can flourish. One of the most interesting aspects of Chambers's work is explaining in some detail how this is done.

Modern Europeans are increasingly opting into their churches instead of opting out. The fact that this shift has taken place unusually fast in south Wales, including Swansea, is one of the reasons that makes this case study, or more precisely, this set of case studies, particularly fascinating. Swansea becomes a laboratory in which we see a speeded-up version of the shifts taking place in a late modern European society. On one hand, Chambers documents a process of relentless and rapid decline; on the other, he shows how particular congregations can, despite everything, move forwards and the factors that must be taken into account if this is to happen.

With this in mind, I commend this book warmly both to academics who are interested in the field, but also to those whose responsibility it is to plan carefully for the future of the churches in this part of Wales. Both groups will benefit from a careful reading of Chambers's exemplary text.

Grace Davie
August 2004

Series Editor's Foreword

We are extremely fortunate that Professor Grace Davie has agreed to write the foreword to this new volume in the Politics and Society in Wales series. Grace is the foremost sociologist of religion in the UK and is a past president of the Association for the Sociology of Religion. One aspect of her work that has attracted a great deal of attention throughout the world is her idea that, when it comes to religion, Europe is exceptional. She argues, for example, that the low religiosity of Europe is actually a part of being European. From this point of view, finding out what kind of religion, if any, can survive in the relatively hostile European environment becomes a particularly interesting, and indeed vital, question. This new book by Paul Chambers helps to give us some answers to this question.

There is no need for me to say more about the latest addition to the Politics and Society in Wales series except, briefly, to make some general remarks about the place of books like this one in the series. As Grace Davie notes, this book began life as a Ph.D. thesis. It has always been one of the objectives of the series to publish the very best doctoral research in social science in Wales. In sociology, at least, there is a long and glorious history of turning Ph.D.s into books; some of the most enduring texts in the discipline began life in this way.

While this tradition carries on (in the US as well as in the UK), publishers do not always look as favourably on this enterprise as they once did. This is a matter of profound regret because brilliant Ph.D.s are potentially a much more promising source of academic books than many of the proposals that publishers and authors pitch to each other. Work that is produced in this way tends to be more detailed and, perhaps, has stronger foundations and a greater respect for the accurate representation of its subject matter. In other words, Ph.D.s are made to last.

Good Ph.D.s are written with great care and a rare kind of commitment but working fulltime on a Ph.D. is a singular opportunity to take some time to think according to your own lights. At no other time in an academic writer's career can the main items on their agenda be set solely by their imagination and conscience. In more normal times they may well find that

their minds are tamed and constrained by the agencies that fund research, publishers (or series editors) and the demands of the academic job market.

So, Ph.D.s ought to be about obsessions and passions – indeed why else would men and women devote so many years of their lives to them? They really have to care about getting their subject exactly right and this care is evident in every page of this welcome addition to our series. We hope to feature more books that share this heritage in the years to come.

Introduction

St Helens Road lies in the centre of the city of Swansea. For the casual observer, its nondescript mixture of takeaway food shops, restaurants, charity shops, mosques and churches, with many of the latter abandoned and derelict, is an unremarkable vista. Built in the nineteenth century, a product of the evolution of an urban and industrial landscape and sharing many of the characteristics of industrial communities in south-west Wales, it represents a microcosm of the social, cultural and economic changes that have swept Wales in the twentieth century. In a space of 1,000 metres, the sheer number of buildings that are or have been devoted to religious purposes attests to both the rich religious heritage of Wales and the effects of social and cultural change on institutional religion. Each building has a different story to tell, some are now occupied by non-Christian faith groups, others are devoted to secular uses and a few still house small and dwindling congregations. Most are merely abandoned and derelict, mute monuments to the secularization of Welsh society.

This book seeks to address one of the most significant recent transformations in Welsh society, the dislocation of its people from their religious institutions and the struggle of those institutions to retain any continuing relevance in contemporary Welsh society. Wales is a singular country. Situated on the western margins of Europe, it is a region that is both economically deprived and politically subservient to England, and that also retains a distinctive culture, originally demarcated by language. Historically, the Welsh language has always served to differentiate Wales from her neighbours and the same can be said for religion (G. H. Jenkins, 1978; P. Jenkins, 1992, G. A. Williams, 1985). Religion has, in the past, functioned as a key carrier of Welsh social, cultural and 'national' identity (Davie, 1994) and traditionally the Welsh have been characterized as a 'religion shaped people'. This picture of Welsh religiosity is largely derived from the nineteenth-century triumph of Nonconformism and its hangover into the early twentieth century, a time period marked by intense religious enthusiasm and rigid public morality. While this picture was never entirely accurate (G. A. Williams, 1985; R. Davies, 1996) we can say with rather more certainty that the pervasive

influence of institutional religion on Welsh society is now a thing of the past. Organized religion is declining there at a faster rate than anywhere else in the United Kingdom (Bible Society, 1997) and this represents a crucial change in the life of a people who, not so long ago, could properly be described as 'wedded to the chapel'.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RELIGION IN WALES

In order to understand the place of religion in contemporary Wales, we must know something of its past and how it came to be such a significant source of Welsh identity. Identity, and a sense of identity, is not an arbitrary phenomenon but draws its strength from and is characterized by the multiplicity of experiences and the sense of continuity which inform the self-definitions of populations. People, places, events, situations and institutions, filtered through the prism of social interaction, all form the basic building blocks of identities. Identity is also both a species of categorization and the product of meanings applied to categories, whether they be categories of status, class, gender, ethnicity, language, 'nationality' or even religion. These meanings, and their production and reproduction, shift with time and context, and are constantly being reformulated and developed, or even abandoned in the light of new experiences. In the brief discussion that follows,¹ the question of identity, specifically the story of how the Welsh came to have such a close identification with religion and then came to lose it will be central.

This Welsh reputation for piety has been something of a movable feast and owes much to the age of religious revivals spanning the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prior to this the Welsh were generally seen by their contemporaries as an irreligious people, addicted to superstition and magic, and of questionable moral fibre (Thomas, 1971; G. H. Jenkins, 1978; G. Williams, 1994). In terms of institutional religion, the period spanning the Anglo-Norman conquest of Wales and the Tudor settlement saw the imposition of new ecclesiastical structures and the progressive marginalization of vernacular religious practices. The Reformation in Wales was merely a continuation of this process, marking the replacement of one alien liturgical language, Latin, with another, English (Harris, 1990). Unsurprisingly, the religious reforms stemming from the Tudor settlement were met with general indifference among the majority of the Welsh population. This indifference persisted throughout the Tudor and Stuart periods and it was the perceived irreligiosity of the Welsh that provided the impetus for a period of concerted activity by reformers in Wales that laid the foundations for the re-emergence of a truly vernacular form of religion.

Initially, reforming energies were directed towards creating a vernacular religious literature, culminating in the translation of the Bible into the Welsh language and its publication in 1588. While this event had profound implications for the future development of the language, the Protestant reformers found Wales to be stony ground in terms of the propagation of the Christian gospel. The Propagation Act of 1650 sought to redress this situation by organizing evangelism on a national scale, but the effects were muted. Received with indifference by the indigenous population and using as its vehicle an impoverished and moribund established church that represented little more than the dominance of the landowning gentry, it manifestly did not lead to the type of social and moral revolution that the puritan reformers envisaged. What it did do, however, was to establish the impassioned preaching of the gospel in the vernacular language of the people as a crucial medium of salvation (G. H. Jenkins, 1978).

Language and in particular the written word was to prove a crucial element in the formulation of what would in time become a distinctive national identification with religion. After 1588, Protestant reformers sponsored a steady stream of printed religious texts in the Welsh language, mainly translations of European works. This publishing activity was primarily a short-term expedient aimed at revitalizing religious life and incorporating the Welsh into the Protestant community, although it was also to have some unforeseen consequences. What the reformers bequeathed to the Welsh people was a body of printed texts in a uniform fixed version of their vernacular language, something which Benedict Anderson (1991) has identified as a prerequisite for the emergence of collective identification, first as a reading public and eventually at the level of national identity. Initially, this reading public was largely restricted to that interstitial section of the population, lesser gentry, yeomen, tradesmen and craftsmen and their families, who were later to become the bedrock of religious dissent. In later years, the peasantry would be added to this readership who, in Gwyn Alf Williams's words, 'learned to read in terms of the Bible and Protestant sectarianism' (1988: 121). In doing so this readership became a new form of imagined community, where literary consciousness, religious consciousness and 'national' consciousness became fused together.

If Puritanism in Wales was at the time a largely failed experiment, its methods – the propagation of the gospel through the written word and preaching – established the template for future religious activity. The period following the Restoration in 1660 saw the gradual establishment of dissenting congregations in parts of Wales. This was to have far-reaching ramifications for the future development of a truly indigenous form of religion. As Wales emerged into the eighteenth century, a new generation of dissenters built upon these foundations. In geographical terms, the spread of dissent had

been patchy. Largely restricted to the rural upland areas, it thrived best in local conditions where the established Church was stretched for resources and weak. All this was to change with the arrival of Methodism in Wales. What Methodism initially brought was something that had been signally lacking before, namely mass enthusiasm for religion and, from this, Non-conformist Wales was to emerge (G. H. Jenkins, 1988).

From the lofty vantage point of the late nineteenth century, this period was viewed by contemporary religious commentators as a 'Great Awakening', the beginning of the age of revivals and proof positive of Methodism's impact on the Welsh psyche. In this narrative, charismatic young preachers emerged, passionate in their desire to spread the gospel. New congregations were established, dissenting academies created and the gospel was preached with powerful force to eager listeners. However, the new enthusiasm had not emerged from a vacuum. Immediately prior to the arrival of Methodism, a network of circulating schools had been established providing both basic literacy and religious instruction for the common people, and in consequence furnishing fertile ground for the labours of evangelists. Methodism also owed much to the former labours of dissenting preachers and writers and able Anglican clerics. Indeed, at the height of the Great Awakening, only a minority of Welsh men and women heeded the siren call of Methodism. Its greatest successes were in south Wales, under leaders such as Howell Harris. In the north, popular allegiance to Anglicanism, despite its perceived shortcomings, remained strong and the older dissenting traditions had won a new lease of life. Nevertheless, Methodism laid down a social and moral foundation that was to bear its fruit in due time.

By the nineteenth century, the social and moral revolution that the Puritans had dreamed of and which the new enthusiasts had proclaimed with such passion and power had largely come to pass. The impetus for this revolution came from another revolution, industrial in character and accompanied by the mass movement of people within Wales. In much the same way as contemporary globalization has facilitated the growth of religion in the late modern world, this mass movement of people saw the emergence of a genuinely new social movement, working-class Nonconformity (Lambert, 1988). Dominated by the Presbyterians in the north and Congregationalists and Baptists in the south, the Welsh could now properly be called 'the people of the Book' (G. A. Williams, 1985: 131). The Roman Catholic Church, which had been almost extinct prior to industrialization, also benefited from successive waves of immigrants from Catholic Ireland to industrial south Wales. Clearly, while industrialization was to carry the seeds that would eventually challenge and undermine the position of religion in Welsh life, in the short term it did much to promote the cause of religion

in Wales (R. Davies, 1996). The 1851 religious census appeared to confirm this picture. On the Sunday that the census took place, over half the population of Wales were recorded as present in the pews, and two out of three were Nonconformists. Even when taking into account the possible inflation of figures (Gill, 1992), it is evident that a major cultural shift had accompanied equally major social and economic changes.

Working-class Nonconformity, transplanted to and rooted in the new industrial communities, touched the lives of everyone in those communities. Even those who chose not to attend a place of worship were nonetheless constrained under the heavy hand of Nonconformist values and attitudes (Lambert, 1988; R. Davies, 1996). From the perspective of the nineteenth century, a new self-understanding was proclaimed from the pulpit and in the press and numerous books. This new understanding characterized the Welsh as a fervently religious people and asserted an unambiguous link between Nonconformity and Welsh identity. This portrait of a people united in their religious faith was true, but only up to a point. Welsh Nonconformity was also characterized by dissension within its ranks, voluntary introversion, schismatic tendencies and organizational problems, not least the inability of national leaderships to impose their will on the largely independent local congregations of the south. Competition between congregations was fierce, although this was less a question of theological distinctions and more a by-product of the massive over-provision of places of worship (Gill, 1993). Building bigger, better, ever grander chapels, with little regard for either local demand or the crippling debts passed on to future generations, was just one symptom of the underlying problems besetting Welsh Nonconformity.

At the national level, the picture looked somewhat rosier. Nonconformity had replaced the established church as the main religious, social and cultural force, and increasingly Nonconformity was also becoming a political force. Nonconformity was deeply implicated in rural politics, in the Chartist movement and the struggle for greater suffrage, and in moves towards the disestablishment of the Anglican Church. After 1867 and the passing of the Second Reform Bill, which extended the vote to working-class males, the fortunes of Welsh Nonconformity and the new Liberal Party became increasingly interdependent. The first fruits of this combination of influence became visible with the passing of the first legislative Act specific to Wales, the 1891 Sunday Closing Act. Not only was this a triumph for the forces of temperance, it also announced the arrival of Nonconformity as a political force in Wales. The 1906 electoral landslide, which returned 377 Liberal members of parliament to Westminster, also saw the rise of the leading Welsh Nonconformist politician of his day, David Lloyd George, first as President of the Board of Trade, then as Chancellor of the Exchequer

and ultimately, in 1916–22, as Prime Minister. However, this Liberal–Nonconformist hegemony was to be short-lived.

In 1915, when the journalist and short-story writer Caradog Evans published *My People* (reprinted, 1987), his scathing portrayal of the widespread venality and hypocrisy underpinning the supposed Nonconformist idyll, he was relentlessly attacked by the Liberal–Nonconformist elite in Wales. Branded a traitor to his people (and worse), Evans’s unflattering portrayal merely reflected growing tensions within Welsh society (R. Davies, 1996). The momentum of Nonconformity had only been maintained by periodic religious revivals and, by the turn of the century, in the increasingly anglicized industrial areas, the competing claims of socialism and secularism were already making themselves heard. The last great Welsh Revival of 1904 merely highlighted these tensions and effectively drew a line under the self-understanding of the Welsh people as fervently religious. The disestablishment of the Welsh Church in 1920 proved to be a hollow victory for a Welsh Nonconformity that was becoming increasingly disengaged from the concerns of the people. The Anglicans consolidated their position numerically, as did a Roman Catholic Church that continued to benefit from immigration from Catholic countries. Socialism, trade unionism and the Labour Party effectively replaced the Liberal–Nonconformist axis as the main vehicle for social concerns within the industrial areas. In the rural areas, change was slower and concerns centred more around the politics of culture, culminating in 1925 at the Maesgwyn Temperance Hall, Pwllheli, with the formation of Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru (the Welsh Nationalist Party), with the Reverend Lewis Valentine as its first president (McAllister, 2001).

If Nonconformist influence on the national stage was waning, the hegemonic status of religious institutions at the local level was to prove more resilient. The 1904 Revival had not led to the widespread re-evangelization of the Welsh people and indeed the numerical gains accompanying this movement had largely dissipated by the 1920s. Competing social and cultural attractions, most notably the cinema, and the rise of socialism and the Labour Party, all undermined the position of the chapels, but it was not until the Great Depression in the 1930s that fissures really began to be exposed. The widespread over-provision of places of worship came home to roost as increasingly impoverished congregations attempted to meet the costs of their mortgaged churches and chapels. For poorer families, the financial costs of church and chapel membership became more than they could bear. Numbers began to fall and while numbers rose again during the period of the 1939–45 war, for many younger worshippers called into war work or the armed services, the social and geographical dislocation loosened their ties with their home chapels. The 1950s constituted something of an Indian summer, with numbers up on the inter-war years and many flourishing and vibrant chapels.

Nevertheless, cracks were appearing. Greater social and geographic mobility took many younger members out of the orbit of their home chapels. Congregations were increasingly coming to be numerically dominated by females and there were fewer candidates for the ministry. The progressive erosion of the Welsh language in areas where it had previously been strong led to marked decline in that sector of the religious economy, and almost everywhere the local influence of the chapels on morals and manners was declining. By the 1960s, the Indian summer had passed and winter beckoned. Numbers were falling significantly, many congregations were increasingly ageing and feminized, while ministers were increasingly stretched in their activities as they took on oversight of more and more congregations. From the 1970s onwards the rate of religious decline in Wales was, and continues to be, higher than anywhere else in the United Kingdom (Brierley and Wraight, 1995; Bible Society, 1997), although this process is uneven. Some congregations in urban areas remain fairly buoyant compared to their rural counterparts. Some types of congregation, most notably evangelical congregations, appear to have resisted decline more effectively than their non-evangelical counterparts and in some cases are growing. The Church in Wales and the Roman Catholic Church have not declined numerically to the same extent as the chapels. Moreover, the profile of other non-Christian faith groups, notably Islam, has grown with post-war in-migration and the major urban areas are now home to significant Muslim communities, although these remain a marginal force within the overall Welsh religious economy and represent a tiny proportion of the general population.² Nevertheless, despite the ebb and flow of the fortunes of disparate faith groups, it is now fairly obvious to all but the most optimistic observer that, in general, the Welsh are no longer 'a religion shaped people'.

SECULARIZATION AND WALES

Wales is not alone in its experience of rapid and deep secularization, a phenomenon which characterizes much of northern Europe, but this does not in itself tell us very much. While there is a huge sociological literature on secularization, it tends to be rather generalized and abstract. More importantly, general theories of secularization do not address the specific questions of how religion came to be such a socially significant factor in the creation of Welsh identity and why it has collapsed so quickly. Attempts to find answers to these questions have until now largely been the province of historians and rather less has been written about the ongoing processes of religious decline within contemporary Welsh society. Religion in Wales, if not entirely dead, is seen as terminally sick, subject to the secularizing

influences common throughout Europe. This picture is less than accurate on two counts.

First, religion in Wales, while generally declining, has also become fragmented, with some growth in parts of the religious economy. The factors underlying this growth need to be explained if we are to understand better how and why religion is declining so rapidly in Wales and what the future of Welsh religion might look like. Secondly, the emergence of a distinctively 'Welsh' form of religion that pervaded all areas of Welsh life was the result of a nationally specific set of social, economic and cultural circumstances, operating mainly at a local community level. Its decline should be seen in the same context. In order to understand the nature of general religious decline in Wales, it is necessary to understand the nature of the changes that have affected local communities and the varied attempts of local churches and chapels to adapt to these changes.

Therefore the focus of this book is, by necessity, local, but this poses problems for any writer who seeks to investigate the general scope of religion in Wales. Wales, like any other country, is not a homogeneous whole and there are wide variations in local conditions and lived experience. South-west Wales has been chosen as the focus for this study for a number of reasons, not least because it encompasses many dimensions of Welsh community life. Situated on the edges of the anglicized south and the Welsh-speaking 'heartland' of west and mid-Wales, it has a unique heritage that is both industrial and agricultural, urban and rural, and in linguistic terms, encompasses Welsh- and English-speaking communities. As such it *approximates* the generalized experience of many varied communities in Wales in a way that other parts of Wales might not.

The methodological rationale of this book is grounded in the idea that the individual practice of the Christian religion is necessarily related to the idea of a community of believers and that this is best realized within the institutional framework of the local congregation. The focus, therefore, is largely ethnographic. This book aims to address issues surrounding contemporary Welsh religion through the examination of the experiences of a number of broadly representative congregations as they seek to come to terms with and adapt to an increasingly secularized environment.³ Within the narrative framework of these case studies, a number of recurrent issues raised by the secularization thesis and some commonly held assumptions about religion in modern societies will be addressed and in some cases either refuted or modified.

The first is the assumption that mainstream religious institutions must inevitably decline in the face of modernization. Clearly, this is not the case in all modern societies, which suggests that the relationship between modernity, secularization and religion is both complex and better explored

through the use of individual national cases (Casanova, 1994). Religion, in common with many other Welsh institutions, has both declined in social significance and become more anglicized. This suggests that what we are seeing is a major fragmentation of those traditional sources of Welsh identity of which religion is a part and concomitant changes within the religious sphere.

Secondly, to suggest that one lead process, secularization, is wholly responsible for the decline of religious institutions is to ignore a number of other possible and more immediate contributory factors. Religious institutions are also social institutions. While 'secularization' may constitute a structural constraint upon religious institutions, we cannot afford to ignore the changing nature of social relations in modern societies, particularly at the local level, and the ways in which these changes might promote as well as inhibit religious affiliations. Clearly, the idea that, in conditions of late modernity, mainstream religion is particularly susceptible to the effects of disembedding and detraditionalization has some salience here, but it is also true of all institutions and not just religion. Moreover, I shall argue that the key to understanding both religious decline and religious growth lies within the sphere of the self-understandings of religious groups as they seek to operate within these transformed social environments and not in terms of broad social processes.

A third commonly held assumption that crops up frequently, in both the literature relating to secularization and among religious professionals, is that sectarian groupings of an evangelical disposition are generally more resistant to processes of decline and more successful in their recruitment strategies among the general population. The evidence presented in this book will suggest that this view is at best over-simplistic and, in terms of successful recruitment among the general population, it is a myth.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VOLUME

This book is structured with three broad aims in mind: first, to address critically the debate concerning secularization in modern societies; secondly, to describe and account for the general religious situation in south-west Wales and to examine these issues in rather more depth through the medium of four case studies of Christian congregations operating in the city of Swansea; thirdly, to demonstrate how empirical data can aid our understanding of religious decline or growth by identifying those factors most likely to inhibit or promote congregational growth.

Chapter 2 will offer a brief examination of the empirical evidence relating to secularization in Britain and introduce the reader to the theoretical