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When Was Anti-Catholicism? A Response

by TRYSTAN OWAIN HUGHES

In his critique of my article Paul O'Leary brings his expertise on nineteenth-century Wales to bear on issues I raise. In doing so, he consolidates and complements certain areas of my original thesis. My aim was, after all, to highlight anti-Catholicism in twentieth-century Wales, rather than dismiss hostility a century earlier. In other areas, however, he misinterprets or misrepresents my article, largely because he fails to recognise the subtleties in the character and nature of Welsh anti-Catholicism over the two centuries. During the nineteenth century, there was undoubtedly a deep-seated hatred and fear of Roman Catholicism in Wales. Protestant dissent was, by its very nature and disposition, hostile to Rome. Anti-Catholicism was, therefore, endemic to Wales during this time and my work has never suggested otherwise.[1] However, it is essential that the nuances in the different types of hostility, already touched upon in my initial article,[2] be identified. The clear diversity between the form that anti-Catholicism took in the nineteenth century and the character it took a century later can then be compared and assessed.

As O'Leary observes, there is certainly 'no simple correlation' between the number of Catholics in Welsh towns and villages and the incidence of anti-Catholicism in the nineteenth century. However, he fails to discern a correlation between the number of Catholics and the form that anti-Catholicism took. The anti-Catholicism of the larger, industrial towns of south-east Wales was very much rooted in the experience of Irish immigration, while in the rural communities the fear of an unknown, foreign force was far more potent. In both areas, however, nineteenth-century anti-Catholic hostility was largely reactive to specific events, such as Emancipation in 1829 and Papal

[1] Trystan Owain Hughes, *Winds of change: the Roman Catholic Church and society in Wales, 1916–62*, Cardiff 1999, 1–2, and 'Anti-Catholicism in Wales, 1900–1960', this JOURNAL liii (2002), 320. [2] Idem, 'Anti-Catholicism in Wales', 315.

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Aggression in 1850. It was only natural that such events, reported widely in the national press, would cause widespread apprehension in 'Nonconformist Wales'. Furthermore, when anti-Catholic hostility did come to the fore, it was caustic and vituperative and was steeped in violent and sexual connotation. It was also a populist hostility, with lay people participating alongside clergy, ministers and deacons in anti-Catholic demonstrations and petitions.[3]

It is also significant that the evidence of nineteenth-century Welsh anti-Catholicism provided by O'Leary largely stems from the Church of England or from a Nonconformity that was reacting, albeit often indirectly, to the advance of Anglo-Catholicism. The Church of England, not disestablished in Wales until 1920, was naturally reflecting the attitude of the national Church, while Nonconformists were reacting to what was a direct threat to them – the growing Puseyite nature of Anglicanism.[4] It is rare to find Welsh Nonconformist anti-Catholicism that had no hidden anti-Puseyite agenda and was aimed specifically and exclusively at Roman Catholics. When there is an exception to this rule, it is usually a comment on Catholic issues on the continent or is a direct reaction to the Irish communities in the larger, industrial towns. On the whole, however, nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism in Wales was sporadic and unstructured and the patent lack of militant Protestant organisations in Wales lends credence to this.[5] There was, after all, no need for a highly-organised, systematic anti-Catholic drive. The number of Catholics in the majority of Welsh counties was minuscule,[6] while Nonconformity was at the zenith of its influence and power.

A century later, however, anti-Catholicism in Wales was to take on a different form. It was not now rooted in specific events, but was continuous from the early years of the century until the 1960s. Whilst still tending towards sensationalism, hostility had become more outwardly 'respectable' and pseudo-intellectual and rarely descended into biblical condemnations of 'the Beast', 'the AntiChrist' or 'the Whore of Babylon'. Nor was it populist. Hostility at Guy Fawkes celebrations, for example, was seldom witnessed.[7] The principal twentieth-century accusations against Catholicism were two-fold. First, Rome was accused of indoctrination and of curbing individual freedom of thought. An atheist, wrote Mathonwy Hughes in *Y Cymro* in 1933,

[3] See, for example, *Cambrian*, 13 Feb., 20 Dec. 1850.

[4] Cf. Hughes, 'Anti-Catholicism in Wales', 320.

[5] Ibid. 314; cf. D. G. Paz, *Popular anti-Catholicism in mid-Victorian England*, Stanford 1992, 28; John Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade, 1829–1860*, Oxford 1991, 151ff.

[6] John A. Jackson, *The Irish in Britain*, London 1963, 12. In 1850, for example, there were fewer than 20 Catholic churches in the whole of Wales: John Williams, *Digest of Welsh historical statistics*, i, Cardiff 1985.

[7] The fact that the occasional extreme letter implored ministers to expound the meaning of Guy Fawkes from their pulpits or encouraged demonstrations on the night reveals that, by the inter-war years, the practice was redundant in Wales. See, for example, *The Tablet*, 6 Nov. 1926, 600.

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is one whose mind is alive, and who is enquiring and unprejudiced. There is hope for such a person. That is not true of a Catholic. A spirit of enquiry has no place in Catholicism. The wages of that, of course, is death.[8]

Second, the Roman Catholic Church was seen as a foreign entity, comprising immigrant adherents whose loyalties were to Rome, a foreign power. Up to the 1960s, the influx from Ireland, England and the continent continued unabated.[9] O'Leary's 'scepticism' of my figures for Irish immigration is unfounded. Qualitative evidence starkly reveals that it was not 'north-east Wales alone' that was affected by this new wave of Irish immigration. In fact, the statistics are striking: nine of the thirteen Welsh counties registered a higher percentage of Irish-born immigrants in 1951 than at any time in the nineteenth century.[10] This was, claims Denis Gwynn, 'a new Irish invasion'.[11]

There was, certainly, slow integration in those towns and cities where immigration had been heavy a century earlier. However, contrary to O'Leary's claim, parish magazines reveal that during the inter-war years these Irish communities continued to cling to their own specific identity and displayed only a marginal interest in their host society.[12] In 1920 the Irish community of Greenhill, Swansea (or 'Little Ireland', as it was known locally), riled the local press by parading the Irish republican banner, described as 'an alien flag', through the city.[13] Likewise, two years later, *St Peter's Magazine* was still referring to Gaelic as 'our mother tongue' and was encouraging the Catholic community in Cardiff to preserve Irish culture and thus 'retain our individuality'.[14] In the south Wales industrial towns, the Irish certainly lived in close-knit communities and remained highly conscious of their identity, as displayed in the St Patrick's Day celebrations. Some immigrants even went so far as to suggest that Catholics outside the Irish communities should not be allowed to participate in these celebrations.[15] In 1932 an Irish-born correspondent in the *Welsh Catholic Times* pleaded for a movement away from such insular communities in the larger Welsh towns. 'Why do we persist in remaining apart?', he asked.[16] There was certainly a gradual integration during the first half of the century, as evidenced by the increasing number of Catholics taking roles in civil life. Even then, however, parish magazines

[8] *Y Cymro*, 24 June 1933, 7; cf. Hughes, *Winds of change*, 100–3.

[9] Cf. Trystan Owain Hughes, '"A new Irish invasion"?: twentieth-century immigration and the growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Wales', *The Green Dragon: The Irish in Wales*, Spring 1999, 26–30, and *Winds of change*, 16–21.

[10] Jackson, *Irish in Britain*, 12.

[11] Denis Gwynn, 'Great Britain: England and Wales', in Patrick Corish (ed.), *A history of Irish Catholicism*, vi, Dublin 1968, 52; cf. Hughes, *Winds of change*, 16–18.

[12] See, for example, *St Peter's Magazine*, Cardiff, and *Newport Catholic Magazine*; cf. Hughes, *Winds of change*, 179–81.

[13] *Welsh Catholic Herald*, 15 May 1920, 12.

[14] *St Peter's Magazine*, 2/4 (1922), p. xv.

[15] *Welsh Catholic Times*, 15 Apr. 1932, p. i.

[16] Ibid. 15 Jan. 1932, p. i.

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would celebrate the civil successes of 'our own boys' by expressing the hope that this would bring a greater recognition of the separateness of their communities.[17] 'We should be grateful to any Catholic, no matter what his politics, that enters public life', noted the *Newport Catholic Magazine* in 1929, 'for they can do much for their own people.'[18] Bishop Edwin Regan of Wrexham recalls that, as late as the 1950s, Catholic communities in south Wales continued to cling rigidly to their Irish identity. 'It was only when I went to seminary at Waterford, Ireland', he noted, recalling his own upbringing in Bridgend, 'that I realised that I was not Irish at all!'[19]

That the chapels were prominent in advancing anti-Catholicism in the twentieth century is indisputable. For O'Leary, however, the influence of Nonconformity on Welsh people is the point of contention. Undoubtedly, Nonconformity was rapidly losing numbers of adherents from the early twentieth century. It would be unwise, however, to disparage the continuing influence of the chapels up to, and well beyond, the Second World War. In the early years of the century, while there may have been many who did not have a formal link with religion, the statistical evidence of the 1910 Royal Commission shows that the level of religious affiliation in Wales was exceptionally high, and far higher than in England.[20] Densil Morgan has shown that, up to the 1960s, religion in Wales was almost taken for granted and a nominal connection with the denominations was standard.[21] Indeed, it was only from the 1960s that the consensus spectacularly collapsed. 'Notwithstanding the despondency which characterized much chapel life after 1945', writes Morgan, 'Nonconformity retained a more than residual hold on the Welsh population as a whole.'[22] O'Leary, then, seems to be interpreting a later secularism into these decades, rather than accepting the religiosity, albeit often nominal, that the evidence suggests.

The pressure Nonconformity was able to exert on the local education authorities reveals the power they continued to exercise in matters secular. Their numbers may have been diminishing, but they still wielded sufficient influence to block the building of Catholic schools across Wales. This hostility against Catholic schools might not have been 'a product' of the twentieth century, but it certainly proliferated to include areas across Wales between the 1920s and the 1950s. It was also, in its intensity and fervency, unique to Wales. Such anti-Catholic pressure was largely due to the continuing influence of ministers and deacons. Anti-Catholicism in twentieth-century

[17] Cf. Hughes, *Winds of change*, 158–60.
[18] *Newport Catholic Magazine*, 2/11 (1929), 346.
[19] Interview with Bishop Edwin Regan, August 1999.
[20] *The report of the Royal Commission on the Church of England and other religious bodies in Wales and Monmouthshire*, London 1910; cf. R. Tudur Jones, *Ffydd ac Argyfwng Cenedl: Cristnogaeth a Diwylliant yng Nghymru, 1890–1914*, Swansea 1981, 1982.
[21] Cf. D. Densil Morgan, *The span of the cross: Christian religion and society in Wales, 1914–2000*, Cardiff 1999.
[22] Ibid. 206.

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Wales was no lay-centred movement, but a movement that was, by and large, driven by chapel leaders.[23] These leaders continued to be the dominant force in those areas where the Welsh language was strong, and they even held an influence in more anglicised areas.[24]

Most revealing, however, is that a Nonconformist upbringing still exerted a great influence on many who had long abandoned their childhood faith. Catholics themselves were quick to highlight the fact that all Welsh people, not merely those who still attended chapel, had been brought up on 'anti-Catholic legends and garbled versions of Welsh history'.[25] This was even true of those who had turned to the Communist party or the Labour movement. Contrary to O'Leary's contention, Hywel Francis gives ample evidence for us to conclude that anti-Catholicism almost certainly influenced Welsh support for the Spanish Republic, even if the supporters themselves might have denied the suggestion. Most miners, in the south and the north, would have had a Dissenting background and Francis has no doubt that Nonconformity 'continued as a moral and social force' on those who had long rejected chapel.[26] Their response to the Spanish situation may well have been political rather than religious, but this should not obscure the fact that their upbringing was a formative influence on them. The 'received religious discipline and the received Christian morality' had a great significance on their outlook.[27] Even pamphlets distributed in the populous south Wales coalfield were imbued with anti-Catholic sentiment[28] and similar associations were made in the Welsh press. In 1937, for example, *Heddiw* printed a cartoon of Spanish Catholics at worship, with a stained glass window depicting 'St Adolf', 'St Benito' and 'St Franco' in the background.[29]

Nonconformity's continuing influence did not, however, reflect a burgeoning vitality.[30] Social and moral vigour could not disguise a rapid loss of religious strength. While still wielding a definite influence among those within and outside the chapel doors, Nonconformists were patently aware of their rapidly diminishing numbers and their gradual loss of credibility. This made their leaders all the more forthright in advancing their views and all the more fervent in their anti-Catholic hyperbole. With the number of their

[23] Up until the 1960s, rural areas did see a local, lay hostility, but this was, on the whole, low key, undramatic, and soon overcome when the 'fear of the unknown' subsided: Hughes, *Winds of change*, 85–8.

[24] Morgan, *Span of the cross*, 206.

[25] David Crowley in *Welsh Catholic Times*, 8 Jan 1932, p. ii.

[26] Hywel Francis, *Miners against Fascism: Wales and the Spanish Civil War*, London 1984, 186.

[27] Ibid. 188; Rob Stradling also acknowledges the continuing anti-Catholicism of Welsh people 'who themselves had often disavowed the Nonconformist beliefs on which they were suckled': *Cardiff and the Spanish Civil War*, Cardiff 1996, 48.

[28] Numerous examples of these pamphlets are now housed at the South Wales Miners Library in Swansea.

[29] *Heddiw*, May 1937.

[30] Contrary to O'Leary's claim, my work has never implied this; cf. Hughes, 'Anti-Catholicism in Wales', 319, and *Winds of change*, 50ff.

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adherents falling and that of the Catholics growing, the 'papist threat' in twentieth-century Wales was as real as it had ever been. Instead of recognising the real crux of the decline, which was the escalation of socialism and secularism, the chapels attacked the only Church that was showing considerable growth at this time. In this sense, but only in this sense, can O'Leary's poetic description of anti-Catholicism in twentieth-century Wales as 'a howl of rage against the dying of Nonconformity's light' be regarded as valid.

Finally, O'Leary warns of the danger of generalisation concerning England and Wales and also concerning regions within Wales. This is undeniable, and my initial article singled out the larger, industrial centres of 'the south-east corner' as having a very different experience from much of Wales, because of the intensity of nineteenth-century immigration.[31] Still, it is important to recognise that Wales did have a specific identity, bound up in background, language and religion, which was distinct from England. Even in those larger towns and cities of south Wales, there were thriving communities where reaction to twentieth-century Catholic growth can be seen to be closer to reactions in rural Wales, than to that in any part of England. Such communities were usually, though not exclusively, Welsh in language and were Nonconformist, in either practice or upbringing. Contrary to what O'Leary intimates, Catholics in the more populated towns in Wales continued to report a uniquely Welsh hostility right up to the Second World War. 'At all times ever since I have worked on the Docks', wrote one Irish Catholic in Cardiff in 1936, 'we have had to fight the anti-Catholic element.'[32] Likewise, the hostility to Spanish Catholics in industrial south Wales, again led by the chapel hierarchy, reveals this continuing opposition.[33] Unlike Irish immigrants, however, many Spanish Catholics assimilated into Welsh society by forsaking their faith. There are numerous examples of Spanish Catholics attending local Welsh schools, embracing socialism and marrying outside the immigrant communities. A considerable minority even converted to Pentecostal Churches.[34]

Even in the more heavily populated areas of Wales, then, a specifically Welsh anti-Catholicism was present. In 1932 the *Welsh Catholic Times* described 'an effective barrier of prejudice' in Wales and foresaw a unique 'pitched battle' between Catholics and Nonconformists in Wales.[35] In that

[31] Idem, 'Anti-Catholicism in Wales', 314, 320–1.

[32] *Welsh Catholic Times*, 2 Oct. 1936.

[33] Cf. interview with Dai Dan Evans, *South Wales Evening Post*, 24 Nov. 1982.

[34] J. Macho, 'The immigration of Spanish migrants to industrial Wales in the early twentieth century and their subsequent assimilation into the society', unpubl. diss. 1989. See also interviews with Spanish immigrants kept at South Wales Miners Library, for example AUD/439 (Maria Fernandez), AUD/251 (Leandro Macho).

[35] *Welsh Catholic Times*, 1 Jan. 1932, p. i.

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year, the Catholics of industrial Merthyr Tydfil even felt compelled to set up an association to 'combat anti-Catholicism in any form',[36] while at Newport a request for the inclusion of a Catholic newspaper at the town library was rejected as 'it might be a source of trouble'.[37] Further evidence of a unique and geographically broad-ranging anti-Catholicism in Wales can again be gleaned from the sphere of education.[38] Up until the early 1960s Welsh local education authorities incessantly, and often illegally, blocked the establishment of Catholic schools across Wales. During the nineteenth century, Welsh Nonconformist resistance to denominational schools was almost exclusively aimed at the Church of England. In the twentieth century, however, Catholic education became the principal target for hostility. Opposition to Catholic schools was fervent across Wales, both in rural areas and in more densely populated towns.[39] Wales was, indeed, the only area of Great Britain to witness such an intense and impassioned campaign. The resultant debates in parliament reveal the uniqueness of the Welsh situation,[40] as does the personal interest Cardinal Griffin took in the state of affairs, both with regard to the diocese of Menevia[41] and the more heavily populated archdiocese of Cardiff.[42] 'They are stopping at nothing', wrote Bishop Petit of Menevia to Griffin in 1951, 'lies, insults and general misrepresentation, threats and administrative devilment; they are diabolically clever at the game.'[43]

While O'Leary's article sheds some much-needed light on nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism, it ultimately fails to recognise some important issues with regard to the nature and character of Welsh anti-Catholicism. The nineteenth-century threat posed by Catholicism was very real, especially in the guise of Ritualism. Yet a specifically 'Roman' Catholic threat was, in most parts of Wales, hypothetical and indirect. This anti-Catholicism was, as O'Leary's evidence implies, the fear of the unknown. By the beginning of the twentieth century, with the Catholic Church growing in numbers in almost every part of Wales, the threat became direct and immediate.

[36] Ibid. 3 June 1932, p. ii.

[37] Ibid. 10 June 1932, p. i. The library was already receiving the numerous Nonconformist and Anglican newspapers.

[38] This cannot simply be sidelined as requiring further research. Evidence of this attitude has already been widely reported in numerous publications and is an integral issue in the question of a uniquely Welsh anti-Catholicism in the twentieth century: cf. Hughes, *Winds of change*, 131–57; Gareth Elwyn Jones, *Which nation's schools? Direction and devolution in Welsh education in the twentieth century*, Cardiff 1990; Edwin Jones, 'Roman Catholic education in Wales', *Welsh Journal of Education* v (1995), 112; Attracta Josephine Egan, 'The development of Catholic education in Gwent, 1840–1979', unpubl. MEd diss. University of Wales, Cardiff 1979; G. B. German, 'A history of the diocese of Menevia, 1898–1987', unpubl. MA diss. Liverpool 1991.

[39] Hughes, *Winds of change*, 131–57.

[40] These debates were reported in publications nationally. See, for example, *Education*, *The Schoolmaster and Woman Teacher's Chronicle*, *Times Educational Supplement*, *The Tablet*.

[41] Griffin papers, Westminster Diocesan Archives, box 2/44.

[42] Ibid. box 2/148.

[43] Ibid. box 2/44.

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Hostility, therefore, was rarely a fear of the unknown, but became a serious attempt by Nonconformists, or those influenced by their Dissenting background, to diminish, or sometimes to substantiate, the Catholic threat.[44] The twentieth century did not, then, see the genesis of an anti-Catholic sentiment in Wales. It did, however, see the genesis of a new form of anti-Catholicism in Wales. Yet it was the stimuli and rationale for this anti-Catholicism, rather than the form it took, which paralleled nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism in England. This included the phenomenal increase in the number of Catholics, the triumphalism of a burgeoning Catholic Church, the internal crisis faced by the majority religion and the widely-held belief that the Catholic Church was a direct threat to the national way of life. In this sense, a comparison between nineteenth-century England and twentieth-century Wales is certainly valid and a historical synchronicity between the two eras can be justly recognised.

[44] Hughes, *Winds of change*, 50–7.

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