Christianity and Welsh Politics
How has Christianity influenced the political landscape of Wales?

Christianity has had a profound impact on much of Welsh culture, and this includes how it has influenced the political landscape of Wales. In this article, we look at the relationship between Christianity and the four main political ideologies in Wales – the Left, Nationalism, Liberalism, and the Right – before looking at a Biblical model of public leadership and how this applies to Wales in the 21st Century.

Christianity and the Left
Socialism arrived relatively late in Wales, but when it did, it found Christian support and was helped and influenced by prominent Christians.

Keir Hardie, the Scottish socialist who became the first Labour MP, was also an Evangelical lay preacher and did much to establish socialist ideas in Wales. He became the junior MP for Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales in 1900 and from this position encouraged the spread of socialism, often using the church to help, deliberately showing that he was in an amicable relationship with the Merthyr chapels. He recognised that Wales had an integral place within the wider socialist movement in the UK, demonstrated in 1904 when the Independent Labour Party (ILP) held its annual conference in Cardiff. For Hardie, his socialism was closely connected to his Christian faith, arguing from the emphasis Jesus placed on preaching good news to the poor.¹

Whilst some churches were wary of socialism, viewing it as anti-Christian and anti-Welsh, many others provided platforms for socialist speakers, such as Congregationalist T.E. Nicholas. Church leaders themselves also helped to spread socialism. The Reverend Richard Roberts instigated a “van tour” of the Socialist newspaper, Clarion, in the 1890s, and the Congregationalist minister D.D. Walters spoke publicly about socialism and sought to integrate it into Welsh culture. Such figures were also instrumental in building up the ILP in North Wales.

From these beginnings, the Labour Party in Wales has enjoyed the support of Christians who believe that the emphasis on helping the poor and marginalised in society and levelling the economic playing field can find resonances in the Bible. Recently, the Labour Party has performed well in Wales, and it is currently the largest party in the Assembly, with 30 Assembly Members.

Christianity and Nationalism
Welsh Nationalism and Christianity have long been intertwined, and much of current thought on the subject has been influenced by Christians prominent in the movement before and after the creation of Plaid Cymru in 1925.

The discourse on Welsh Nationalism in the 18th and 19th Centuries was largely shaped by the belief of ministers such as the Methodist Fathers Gruffydd Jones and Hywel Harris that the Welsh were created by God to be a nation and so should adhere to the identity that God had created for them. Whilst some Welsh Congregationalists took the view that church and state should be separate and thus the church should not seek to meddle in public life, other Nonconformists such as Gwilym Hiraethog argued that the Bible contained much evidence for Christian political engagement.²

The Welsh Nationalist Party, Plaid Cymru, has been influenced by Christian thought from the outset. The first President, Lewis Valentine, was a Baptist Preacher and the second, Saunders Lewis, was a devout Roman Catholic. One of the biggest influences on the ideology of Plaid Cymru in the 20th Century was R. Tudur Jones, a Calvinist and prominent church leader, who argued in his 1979 paper Christian Nationalism that while nations were man-made, nation-building was a divinely-given task and such cultural ingenuity could be traced back to God.³ The first Plaid Cymru MP, Gwynfor Evans, was a staunch Congregationalist, and many of the leaders of Plaid Cymru have been active Christians.

Christians have also been able to have a positive influence on the Welsh Nationalist movement, through opposition towards violent forms of protest. Instead, they promoted nonviolent means such as refusing to pay taxes issued on English-only forms and removing English-only road signs.⁴

Nowadays, many Christians support Plaid Cymru, believing that its core values of the importance of community and helping the disadvantaged can be traced back to the Bible. For many, Welsh nationalism is seen as a means to an end – they support Welsh self-governance not because of patriotism, but because they

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see this as the best way to achieve social justice in Wales. Currently, Plaid Cymru has 11 Assembly Members in the Assembly.

Christianity and Liberalism

Liberalism has traditionally found rich support in Wales, and this is not unconnected from the role Christianity has played in Welsh politics. It was William Gladstone, an evangelical Christian, as leader of the Liberal Party and Prime Minister, who was the first to recognise that Wales was a separate political entity to England.

The 1880s saw a surge of support for the Liberals in Wales, which helped Gladstone maintain office, and was set to last until the 1920s. This was largely a result of the connection between Liberalism and the Nonconformist churches, which were particularly strong in Wales. Nonconformist preachers regularly called for Christian involvement in public life, and were thus able to have an influence on the Liberal Party. Social reform, education policy and temperance were all adopted by the Liberal Party.

With the strong support of the Nonconformists, the Liberal Party also campaigned for the Disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales, motivated by the belief that the institutions of the established church and the state should not be so interconnected, and that other church movements should be recognised. For many at the time, Liberalism and Nonconformism in Wales were virtually synonymous, and it was this relationship that allowed for a large Christian influence over the Liberal Party.

In more recent times, Christians in Wales have supported and have been involved in the Liberal Democrats, believing that their values of the freedom of the individual and a vision for a fairer society to be rooted in Biblical principles. They have a small representation in the Assembly, with 5 Assembly Members.

Christianity and the Right

The Conservative Party has traditionally found it hard to establish a stronghold in Wales, but this does not mean that it has failed to attract Christian support and influence. While the late 19th Century saw many Nonconformist churches backing the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party received the support of many Anglican clergy who opposed the Disestablishment of the Church of England which the Liberal Party was proposing. Many of these Anglicans believed the Church of England to be deeply established in Wales, and saw their involvement in the Conservative Party as a way to support this. These Anglican clergymen campaigned for education reform that was needed in Wales, which ultimately culminated in a Conservative Bill to place education under the care of local authorities, whilst retaining the Church of England’s control over religious education.

Many Christians today still support the Conservative Party in Wales, believing its values highlight the importance of community and the family and the choice of the individual to be rooted in Biblical principles. The Conservative Party are seeing a growth in their support in Wales, overtaking Plaid Cymru to be the second biggest party in the Assembly, with 14 Assembly Members.

Public Leadership

As has been demonstrated, Christians have been deeply involved in politics in Wales over the last couple of centuries, helping to shape many of the ideologies which have influenced the main political parties. These Christian public leaders have left a legacy which we need to continue to replicate, as we seek to engage with politics in Wales.

At the heart of this engagement with politics has been a recognition of Jesus’ call for us to be salt and light (Matthew 5:13-16). God places us in different spheres to live for Him, and thus to impact those spheres by shining His light into them. James Davison Hunter describes the model for public leadership as being “faithful presence”. In essence this means that Christians should be present in culture-influencing spheres, including politics and government, and that by living out God’s values, they are able to impact the culture. This does not mean that Christians should be trying to hijack the culture so it reflects their ideals, but their very presence and faith will nevertheless have an influence.
Thus, Christians should be seeking not only to be involved in public leadership, but to be distinctive in a way which honours God. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encourages us to “shine like stars” (Philippians 2:15). Politics often carries with it many negative connotations as a dirty and dark world, and it is in such a world that Christians are able to shine God’s light. Indeed, this mirrors how Christ was faithfully present to us, coming into our world and shining His light into the darkness (John 1).

The Bible offers us many examples of God’s people living this out. In the Old Testament, we see Daniel and his friends gaining prominence in the courts of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazaar and Darius. They rise to become administrators of the province of Babylon, where they are able to be faithfully present for God. Daniel was able to perform his job exceptionally, proving to be a good ruler, meaning that the King wished to entrust even more to him (Daniel 6:3). He was able to provide a faithful witness to God, leading Nebuchadnezzar to acknowledge God’s rule (Daniel 2:46-7). We do not see Daniel trying to mould the Babylonian culture into an Israelite one, but rather him shining a light into the culture he has found himself in, and seeking to bring glory to God through that.

Likewise, we see Esther using the high position she has found herself in as Xerxes’ queen to shine a light into a dark situation. Her cousin Mordecai recognises that God is able to use her high position, saying that she may have been brought to power for a purpose, in this case to save the Jewish people from genocide (Esther 4:14). Esther was thus able to step out in faith, even at the risk to her own life, in order to use her position for good. Her presence in the system meant that she was able to gain influence to make a difference.

Conclusion

The situation in Wales is undoubtedly very different to how it was at the turn of the 20th Century. Like most of the Western world, Wales is becoming an increasingly secular society which raises new challenges for how Christians should engage with a post-Christian culture. Increasingly there is a call to privatise faith and keep it out of public life, and politicians who do acknowledge their Christian faith often face criticism for letting this influence their actions and decision-making. But despite these challenges, there is still a need for the light of Christ to shine into all areas of life. Christians need to continue to engage in all spheres of society, and like Keir Hardie, T.E. Nicholas, Lewis Valentine, and so many others, to be influencers of political culture.

Further Reading:

● Those Who Show Up - Andy Flannagan

Notes

1 In his pamphlet “Can a man be a Christian on a pound a week?”, Hardie argued that the principles which Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount were inherent in the Labour movement, particularly the emphasis on not storing up property and treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19) which in turn allows one to not worry about tomorrow (Matthew 6:34). He also argued that there were repeated references in the New Testament to the evil of riches, for example when James tells rich people to “weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you” (James 5:1 [NIV]). He laid out as an example the model of Jesus who did not have anywhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20) and who sent his disciples out with no money (Matthew 10:9) to show that riches were not to be sought. His socialism was rooted in Jesus’ teaching that one cannot serve God and money (Matthew 6:24), as he believed that money sat enthroned in his culture.

2 Christian leaders such as Michael D. Jones used the line from the Lord’s Prayer “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 [NIV]) to show that Christianity was concerned not just with the next world, but also with the present world and its problems.

3 R. Tudur Jones argued that whilst God did not create nations, the creation of nations was a part of the Creation Mandate found in Genesis 1, as a way for humans to create culture and order in the world which God had created. He also argued from the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 that God’s plan for the world was unity in diversity, and so by rejecting their national identity, the Welsh people would be guilty of the same sin as those who joined together to build the Tower of Babel.


5 Passages such as Romans 13:1-7 which highlight the role of government and its authority under God as distinct from the role of the Church can be used to support the separation of Church and State.

6 Verses such as Galatians 5:1 (“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” [NIV]) are used to highlight how liberty is a good thing, and how God has granted us free-will. The importance of
individuals making choices with regards to being “born again” or proclaiming that “Jesus is Lord” (John 3:3; Romans 10:9) can be extrapolated as a model for the importance of the individual’s decision in all aspects of life.

7 The importance of the family as a unit can be seen from the creation account when the husband and wife become one flesh (Genesis 2:24), which is later endorsed by Jesus (Mark 10:6-9). They argue that the community and small institutions are better placed to help individuals based on the structures of Israelite society laid out in the Law in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and that thus there should be a small state whose responsibility is limited to upholding the law (Romans 13:4).

8 James Davison Hunter, To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World (Oxford University Press, 2010).