Popular Religious Belief in Wales at the End of the Middle Ages

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This was originally delivered as the Dr Williams Lecture at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, on 26 March 1987. The author wishes warmly to thank the Dr Williams Trust for the honour of inviting him to be its Lecturer in Wales for 1987.

ABOUT THE YEAR 1490 one of the most celebrated poets of Wales, Guto'r Glyn, was old, ill, blind, and at times deeply depressed. In his closing years he had found a haven within the walls of Valle Crucis Abbey, which was then ruled over by his long-time friend and valued patron, the Abbot Dafydd ab Iorwerth. As was natural, perhaps, in those sacred surroundings, fears of his impending death regularly assailed Guto. Much more terrifying than death itself was the fearful prospect of the Judgement that would follow. He called loud and long on his Creator in the lonely watches of the night and wept bitterly:

Ar y Creawdr y criaf
Wylo'r nos lawer a wnaf
('On my Creator I call, and weep long and bitter at night.')

But still the horrors of eternal punishment haunted his anxious imagination:

Mae corn y frawd i'm cern fry
A'm geilw yma o'm gwely.
('The trump of judgement sounds in my head and drags me uneasy from my bed.')

There may have been much in Guto's earlier life for him to brood guiltily about as he now recalled it. He had had a very long and full life by medieval standards. In another of his poems he asks plaintively:

Mae'r henwyr? Ai meirw'r rheini?
Hynaf oll heno wyf fi.
('Where are the old men? All dead? I am the oldest left tonight.')

In the course of that long span he had known a colourful existence; one filled with incident and adventure. Much of it had been spent in warfare and campaigning, in France and back home again in England and Wales. No doubt it had been accompanied by the less than disciplined enjoyments which usually filled the soldier's leisure hours — drinking, roistering, gambling, and wenching. For years, too, he had lived the life of a drover, wandering far and wide through fairs, markets, and taverns in the Midlands and the North of England on his employers' behalf. That, again, was far from being one of the more sedate, orderly, and respectable of occupations. So, as he looked back over those

exciting and turbulent years, he may have had good cause to shudder apprehensively at what he had done and to fear that it might have been enough to rule out his reward from the record kept in Heaven:

Am a wneuthum y noethir
Fy nhâl o'r ysgrifen hir.
('For what I have done my reward may be deleted from the heavenly record.')

There can be little doubt that there was a good deal for Guto to repent and to cause him urgently to heed the request of his friend, the abbot, that he should turn his incomparable muse to themes religious and the praise of God rather than of man — 'Foliannu Duw o flaen dyn' ('praising God rather than man'). And yet, he could end his poem with a touching confession of faith in the powers of the Almighty to deliver him from the torments of eternal punishment and vouchsafe him a place among the blessed in Heaven:

F'un Ceidwad, fy Nuw cadarn,
Fy nawdd fydd yn nydd y Farn.
Fy noddfa, fy niweddfyd,
Fo nef a'i gartref i gyd.
('My one Saviour, my mighty God, my safeguard He will be on Judgement Day.
May Heaven be my refuge, my resting-place, and my long home.')

Guto'r Glyn is not usually thought of as a religious poet. Nor, indeed, is there any reason why he should be, since he excelled above all else in the *genre* of *moliant mab* ('praise poetry'). Indeed, it is because he is not normally thought of as a religious poet that I singled out his experience as my introduction to the subject. Because I think that he may be more typical of the average man in his reactions — the man in the street, so to speak — except that he had an infinitely greater gift for expressing his emotions in words than the average individual. And that was the second reason why I turned to him — because he is such a fine poet. For me, he is the most appealing of all Welsh medieval poets after Dafydd ap Gwilym. So good that he is able to offer lines and images that furnish us with a more concrete, more compelling, and more memorable impression of how religion tended to loom in medieval men's minds and imaginations.

There are, of course, other poets who give us almost equally graphic insights. Siôn Cent, no doubt, will at once come to the minds of many in this context. Some may perhaps think of him as the medieval religious poet *par excellence*; the one who has crystallized for us in Wales with frightening power so much of the thoughts and feelings of the fifteenth century about contemporary devotion. No one gave more forceful expression to the concept of the brevity of life and the certainty of death than he did:

Pob un o hyn, rhwymyn rhod,
A dderfydd yn ddiarfod
('Everyone, by the destiny of his existence, comes to his end defenceless.')

Nor did anyone expose the horrors of the grave more remorselessly or more revoltingly than he:

Ac ado'r corff heb orffen
A'i bwys o bridd, a'i bais bren;
A thrychant, meddant i mi,
O bryfed yn ei brofi.
('Leaving the body without end with its load of earth and its wooden shift;
and three hundred worms, they tell me, gnawing away at it.')

Beyond that appalling vista of decomposition and decay came the still more frightening vision of the agonies of eternal punishment:

Yn Uffern a'i ffwrn affwys,
Sine ffine, heb ffinio,
Heb dranc, heb orffen, heb dro.

('In Hell, with its bottomless pit, without limit, without end, without death, unceasing and undeviating.')

It can still be a chilling and nerve-racking experience to read Siôn Cent's repeated hammer-blow lines, riddled as they are with images of decomposing corpses, macabre skeletons, and sadistic fiends. But perhaps he is a little too harsh, too unrelenting, to be truly representative. He is also rather too near the official line of the austere puritanical wing of the medieval Church and its hell-fire preaching. There may be not enough of the more consoling and comforting elements of the popular religion in his verse.

It may be that we get the most unequivocal glimpses of the attitude of ordinary people towards religion from the four religious plays which have survived in the Welsh language. These were not polished, up-market, literary creations but were composed in colloquial style and homely vocabulary. They were evidently meant to be performed in public and we know them to have been widely popular. They can therefore have been expected to give expression to those themes that were likely to have been in line with popular tastes and sympathies. Two of the surviving four deal with the circumstances of the birth and passion of Jesus Christ — a subject of intense interest and concern to fifteenth-century people as we shall see later. In the play on the Passion there is a long sequence on the Harrowing of Hell. This occurrence was not taken from the Scriptures at all but from apocryphal literature; but it was immensely popular for all that. This may have been because it seemed to offer the most dramatic proof of Jesus's power to save souls from Hell. The third play is a dialogue between body and soul, with which there is merged a highly dramatic and significant scene at the Last Judgement, where the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Michael plead with the Divine Judge to redeem the soul of the dead man. The fourth play also centred very largely again on death and judgement. A character who represented all that was greedy and materialistic — he could have walked straight out of one of Siôn Cent's poems — was being argued with by a priest, who tried to convince him of the worthlessness of material possessions. The materialist falls ill and pleads to God for mercy, with the priest praying urgently for his soul.

These three quick representative snapshots from Guto'r Glyn, Siôn Cent, and the plays have been put forward because they seem to me to give, in their various ways, some vivid insights into the kinds of religious issues with which the late-medieval mind was preoccupied.

After that introduction, we may perhaps begin by asking the first question: 'What do we understand by popular religion in this context?' Obviously not the official teaching of the Church concerning religious belief and conduct, as expounded by learned and subtle theorists and doctors, of whom there were many; but rather, the beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, and practices of the mass

of the people. It is, however, dangerous to make sweeping generalizations about the nature of religious beliefs. Many were then, and for that matter are still, singularly inarticulate and confused about their beliefs. Possibly that was all the more true at a time when there was such a high degree of illiteracy, when at least nine out of ten could not read or write. That means that most of them could not give much expression which has survived of what they believed. It means, moreover, that we have to infer a great deal about what they may have thought from the surviving evidence — and it need hardly be emphasized how risky inferences can be.

That brings us at once to our second question: 'What sort of evidence has survived from the late medieval period?' Broadly speaking there are two kinds of evidence: written testimony and material remains. There is a surprising amount of evidence of the kind most familiar to and most often used by historians — written sources of different sorts. Many of them are in Latin. These will be ignored because most ordinary people had no knowledge of Latin and, if they were to be reached at all, had to be communicated with in the vernacular. Much does in fact survive in the mother tongue: religious literature in prose and poetry of a broadly popular kind. There were saints' lives (they were among the most popular); religious poetry to saints and holy places; literature relating to pilgrimages and shrines; devotional literature of various kinds — prayers, hymns, visions of Heaven and Hell, scriptural translations, apocryphal works, didactic tracts, religious plays, and the like. Then there are other miscellaneous sources like wills and testaments, which often shed considerable light on people's beliefs. Wills were ordinarily drawn up at a time when the testator felt himself obliged to think very seriously about the state of his health and the fate of his soul. The dispositions he then made normally had an important bearing on what he believed to be the effective ways of safeguarding his eternal destiny.

There are serious limitations to the value of some of this evidence. Much of the literature was designed in the first instance for those who were not only pious but literate; and they constituted only a small minority of the total population. It is not always easy to tell how representative their views were of those of the majority. Nevertheless, it ought to be remembered that the culture of the age was in large measure an oral one. People were accustomed to absorb instruction given by word of mouth, and there may well have been a wider oral diffusion of the contents of surviving texts and manuscripts than we always remember. Wills, again, were drawn up only by the substantial and well-to-do strata of society. The information they contain, therefore, may not be typical of the population at large. It also has to be borne in mind that most of them would have been drawn up by the clergy or at least in their presence. The latter were in a strong position to bring pressure to bear on the sick and dying to remember their obligations to the Church and religion at this time and rarely seemed to have missed the opportunity of doing so.

The other category of evidence, that of a material kind, is to be found in the remains of medieval architecture and art that have come down to us. The churches themselves, and their contents and furnishings, tell us a great deal

about the nature of popular devotion. One of the features of the fifteenth century is the widespread rebuilding and extension of churches. This sprang to a large extent from the growth in the cult of the Blessed Virgin Mary and took the form of the building of many lady chapels of various kinds. Again, the very rapid spread of roodscreens and roodlofts in the fifteenth century points to the remarkable development of the popularity of the concept of the suffering Saviour. The proliferation of wall-paintings and stained glass at the same period is also indicative of the character of popular devotion. Much of this ecclesiastical art was intended to give visual illustration of biblical narratives and provide religious teaching for the illiterate — hence the widespread notion that these depictions constituted the "poor men's Bibles". Such features also tell us much about the sources of religious instruction, which obviously depended not only on the Bible but also on all kinds of apocryphal literature and tradition, and on sources like the lives of the saints. From them we can infer a great deal about the kind of religious teaching and indoctrination that was popular and deemed appropriate for purveying to the masses.

Here again, though, there are serious limitations to our evidence. In the first place, most of the religious art of the Middle Ages has disappeared and only a comparatively small proportion has survived. Moreover, while we know what these creations were intended to do, we cannot be nearly as sure how far they served their purpose. Thus, for instance, in the first Welsh printed books of the 1540s and 1550s there are strong suggestions that a mass of ignorance existed among the ordinary parishioners and that their clergy were less than adequate in dispelling it and in instructing their charges.

Even so, no matter what the limitations of the evidence may be, nor what the difficulties of interpreting it, we have to do the best we can with it and remind ourselves gratefully that there is good deal more surviving from the fifteenth century than any previous one in the history of Wales.

On the basis of the evidence we have at our disposal what can we say in answer to our third question: 'What did people seem to have perceived were their needs in relation to religion?'

In trying to answer this question there are three points which should be emphasized. The first is this: to underline how real were supernatural forces to men and women of the age. They had been conditioned from childhood, from what they had absorbed from their parents and others around them, including such instruction as they may have had from the clergy, that the life of human beings on earth was dominated by the supernatural forces of good and evil. On the one side were God, his angels and saints; on the other, the Devil and all his agents, spiritual and corporeal. These were not remote, impersonal forces; but were presented as real, live, quasi-human or at least anthropomorphic figures who could be envisaged very clearly. The increasing realism with which they were being depicted in literature, and especially in the visual arts, enabled people to conjure up these powers very concretely. Religious art had given an earthly, not to say earthy, shape and form to spiritual and supernatural powers. Life was a constant drama in which these two almost unimaginably powerful protagonists battled for human souls. The forces of evil were wily, insidious,

powerful, and unresting. The world, the flesh, and the Devil were the three cardinal enemies; and ordinary men and women were often reminded of their own strong and compulsive instincts and how easily they fell prey to temptation.

Secondly, there was the nature of earthly existence. Life was hard for most people. As often as not they were engaged in heavy, often exhausting, manual labour and were obliged to work long hours. The three greatest misfortunes from which they fervently prayed to be delivered were famine, plague, and war; but all three came to their lot with depressing frequency. They dreaded the onset of old age bringing with it the decay of their bodily strength and faculties. (It's worth remembering in this context how depressed Guto'r Glyn had become as the result of his own experience of old age.) They felt they had little protection against ill-health or injury. Nor, given the animist mentality of the age, did they accept that these things happened by accident. Many of their misfortunes were brought upon them either as a punishment for their sins by God, or else they were being molested by evil spirits or those in league with them. Not surprisingly, in the circumstances they were inclined to look to anyone or anything which might give them protection or redress. Certainly, they would look to the Church and its saints and ministers. But they might equally well look to the powers of beneficent magic. One gets the firm impression that they did not draw any sharp distinction in their own minds between one form of magic and another. The test was much more empirical — which was likely to work?

Thirdly, the gate between the two worlds — the supernatural world and the world on earth (*y byd bach:* 'the little world') — was death. Through that portal a human being passed from the insubstantial and fleeting world of earthly life into the real and everlasting world of eternity. That was why death loomed so large in literature and art. Yet they also knew that it was not death that was really important but what came after. The thing feared above all else was sudden death; what the poet Dafydd Nanmor called *dwys ofn angau disyfyd* ('the anguished fear of sudden death'). It's a phrase which always makes one shudder! That death which was unprepared for; death which took men and women in their sins, without having confessed and being absolved. It could condemn them to an eternity of unremitting punishment, whose terrors were very real, having been constantly described in literature and depicted in art in blood-curdling detail. The chancel wall of many a church had the scene of the Last Judgement painted over the arch and showed sinners being led away to everlasting perdition and torment. Even the terrors of Purgatory were hardly less vividly depicted.

One of the things that stands out most clearly about late medieval religion is to what an enormous extent people's concern about it turned on the four last things: death, judgement, Heaven, and Hell. Casting our minds back to the opening shots from the contemporary literature, we can hardly fail to remember how prominently they figured in the poems and the plays. That fear of death and the dread of judgement. The terror of being excluded from Heaven and being thrust for ever into hideous and endless tortures of Hell. They were some of the central features of the plays; poor Guto'r Glyn was hagridden by them; and they positively obsessed Siôn Cent and others like him. It is difficult to escape from the impression that they outweighed everything else about religion in most people's imaginations.

That brings us to the last of our four questions: 'To what did men and women look in the hope of finding some degree of assurance and security?' Overwhelmingly, they accepted the teaching of the Church that it had been established by God precisely to provide human beings with their hope of salvation. Within the Church and its teaching there were three sources to which they turned for hope and comfort: the Godhead; the saints; and the sacraments.

The Godhead was, of course, the ultimate source of all concern and all reassurance, It was God who had made man; it was He who was offended by man's sin; but it was He, also, who by sending His Son had made redemption possible. God the Father, however, seemed remote, alarmingly powerful and forbidding. The poetry of the Welsh court poets had portrayed him as omnipotent, majestic, and an inscrutable and implacable judge. It seemed almost impossible for mortal men to establish contact with so awe-inspiring and, in some respects, so stern and unapproachable a being. Increasingly during the later Middle Ages the emphasis had been on the Second Person in the Trinity and particularly on His humanity. Religion had become distinctly more Christo-centric. The sufferings of the stricken Saviour became increasingly central and were portrayed with intense realism: the broken and anguished body hanging limp and submissive on the cross; crowned with the cruel crown of thorns pressing deep into his flesh; the spear-thrust brutal and agonizing in his side; the blood flowing profusely from the nail-wounds. No one can fail to notice the intense and widespread emphasis on the crucifixion and its familiar emblems. Religious plays brought out strongly the brutality of the world's attitude at his birth and death — Herod's slaughter of the innocents and the cruelty of the crucifixion. The roodscreens, roodlofts, and the great rood (cross) itself came to dominate the appearance of many churches. The little Breconshire church of Llanfilo, with its sensitively reconstructed roodloft, even today gives a tremendously powerful impression of the kind of impact that must have been made on medieval worshippers. The emblems of the passion were everywhere carved in wood or stone — the cross, the ladder, the nails, the wounds, the sponge, the spear. Furthermore, men and women were constantly reminded that their own sins and misdeeds had the effect of reopening Christ's wounds and adding to His suffering. They were regularly exhorted to remember that only by submissive acceptance of God's will on their part and by identifying themselves with the willing acceptance of suffering could they be worthy of the agony undergone for their sakes. The roods, most of which were put up in the fifteenth century, became an increasingly important focus of devotion and pilgrimage. The risk was that so great was the veneration extended to the rood that it might become a wonder-working icon in its own right; that it might become the principal object of the pilgrims' devotion rather than the crucifixion of Christ, of which it was supposed to be the symbol. There was even some risk that Christ Himself might turn into something of a 'super-saint'.

That point just made may become clearer if something further is said about the veneration of the saints. The saints were holy men and women who had for many centuries been adored by the faithful. Though we know comparatively little about the nature of devotion in the era of the early Celtic Church, i.e., before the Norman Conquest, one of the things that is perfectly clear about it is that from its earliest stages the veneration of the saints, and particularly the

native saints of Wales, was one of the central characteristics of popular piety. The holiness of saints had always been regarded as having given them special and supernatural powers. Such powers, however, had not cut them off from ordinary human beings. On the contrary, much of the secret of their attraction lay precisely in the fact of their humanity; a humanity that was in its essence approachable and usable. (It may possibly be seen at this point why it was suggested earlier that there was a danger of Jesus Christ's being regarded as some kind of 'super-saint'.) The saint, therefore, was someone with power and, if he or she were approached with proper reverence and deference, could make it available to supplicants. All the major saints of the Christian pantheon, like Mary, Peter, Michael, Catherine, Ursula, and so on, were as well known in Wales as they were elsewhere. But there were also a great many native Welsh saints — David, Teilo, Beuno, Dwynwen, Winifred, and many others — who were thought to have a special regard and concern for their own people. Saints were, naturally enough, thought to be uniquely associated with and efficacious in those places where during their lifetimes, and afterwards, they had revealed their powers. Some of these were the places where they had lived and worked or were buried. David's particular locale was St. David's, where he had set up his chief monastery and been buried, while Beuno, the chief saint of North Wales, was specially associated with Clynnog. Wells linked with the saints, like St. Winifred's Well where the saint had been killed and then miraculously brought to life, were regularly resorted to. Holywell was one of the most magnetic places in medieval Wales and has remained so down the centuries. Sometimes it was a bone or bones of the saint that constituted the holy relic; other times his bell, or staff, or books associated with him. But it could also be an image, a painting, or some other relic that was the focus of attraction. Thus, for example, although the Blessed Virgin had no connection with Wales, there were two immensely popular images of her in the fifteenth century, the one in Penrhys in the Rhondda and the other in Mold. To these images and other shrines with a reputation for sanctity and miracle-working (especially the latter) pilgrims came by the thousands.

Pilgrimages were extraordinarily popular in the fifteenth century; probably more popular than they had ever been. The social composition of those who went on them was also broader-based than it had ever been. Pilgrims went for all sorts of reasons and as with almost every other form of medieval devotion there was oftentimes a curious mixture of motives, some of which might have been thought incompatible with one another in the same person. Some went out of genuine piety and devotion; others out of curiosity, or for a jaunt or change of air. Some went for the health of their souls; others for the health of their bodies, and this was probably the most important reason why they went. Quite frequently, pilgrims went to seek a cure for sick animals as well as for humans. Many were attracted by the indulgences which were almost invariably offered for sale at the shrines.

Pilgrimages and unthinking veneration of the saints were more popular with ordinary people than they were with some of the best and holiest minds in the contemporary church. The dedicated minority were well aware of the sensation-mongering, the superstition, and the cheating that were often rife in these practices. They also perceived only too clearly how little the supposed

benefits to be derived from them had to do with genuine devotion or Christian morality. Thomas à Kempis, author of perhaps the most influential book written in the fifteenth century, *The Imitation of Christ,* had this to say of those who went on pilgrimage: 'When visiting such places men are often moved by curiosity and the urge for sight-seeing, and one seldom hears that any amendment of life results, especially as their conversation is trivial and lacks true contrition'. Sir Thomas More was even more censorious of those who purveyed legends about saints and places of pilgrimage:

> No wonder then if ruder minds are affected by the fictions of those who think they have done a lasting service to Christ when they have invented a fable about some saint or a frightening story of Hell, which either melts an old woman to tears or makes her blood run cold. There is scarcely a life of a martyr or virgin in which some falsehood of this kind has not been inserted.

And, he added with withering sarcasm: 'This is an act of piety, no doubt, considering the risk that Truth would be insufficient unless propped up by lies'. Nevertheless, in spite of the censure of moralists like à Kempis or More, pilgrimages and the saints remained extraordinarily popular. Long after the Reformation, indeed, Erasmus Saunders reported in 1721 how the ordinary Welsh folk continued to venerate the saints. He told of

> the Roman superstitions practised in the later ages, such as many times in their ejaculations to invocate not only the Deity but the Holy Virgin and other Saints . . . as if they had hardly forgotten the use of praying to them. And there being not only Churches and Chapels but Springs and Fountains dedicated to those Saints they do at certain times go and bathe themselves in them and do sometimes leave some small oblations behind them.

Finally, the population in medieval times also looked with confidence to the Church and its sacraments for their salvation. An essential feature of medieval belief was the concept that any individual might find salvation outside the Church was unthinkable to anyone except a small heretical minority. The average person accepted without demur what he had imbibed consciously and unconsciously from childhood: that only by accepting the teaching of the Church and its ministers and by participating in its sacraments could he hope to safeguard himself against damnation. That did not prevent people from being oftentimes flippant, sacrilegious, and critical. They might break the commandments of the Church and scamp or evade the duties they were supposed to owe it. But they would not as a rule care to flout the authority of its ultimate sanction that it alone held the keys of eternal life and guarantees against everlasting punishment.

All those over fourteen years of age were expected to attend mass regularly, although they did not usually communicate more than once a year. We do not, in fact, know how regularly they went to church. Churchgoing may have been very difficult in many parts of Wales, with its enormous parishes extending over many thousands of acres, its rough trackways and its inclement weather. Nor can we tell with any certainty how much they understood of what was going on when they got there. For most people, it may be suspected, it was enough for them to be present in the church or, more often, outside it and rushing in to see the host being elevated, They were collective Christians, i.e., they accepted that the ritual, being conducted by the priest in a language that almost none of them

understood, was being undertaken on behalf of them all. It was the sacerdotal, the priestly aspect of his function that counted; his duties as a teacher hardly seemed to matter. Religious instruction seems to have been distinctly scanty and perfunctory; many of the parish priests were themselves under-educated and unlettered, hardly capable of giving much instruction to their parishioners. Nor, as far as can be judged, did they set a very notable example in their own moral behaviour. But that, of course, did not affect the efficacy of the sacraments. The church always firmly maintained that the value of the sacrament did not depend on the character of the priest who was ministering it.

For all the seasons of the year and at all the great milestones in the ordinary person's life — birth, marriage, and death — the church and its ministers conducted appropriate services and sacraments. The popular view of these could sometimes be mechanical and lacking in true understanding. In relation to the mass, for example, the most important sacrament of all, the layman came to believe that he could increase the effect by the simple process of multiplying masses or making them more elaborate. The benefits which the living and the dead received from the mass were thought to be in direct proportion to the number of masses sung, the magnificence of them, and the amount of offering made at each. So it became an increasingly common practice to leave in one's will as much money as could be spared for the singing of as many masses as possible after one's death. The idea was the simple but hardly moral one that there was safety in numbers!

Another way in which a strongly commercial tendency entered into popular devotion was by means of the purchase of indulgences. Official teaching on indulgences, as on mass, was careful and scrupulous; it was the way in which it was popularly interpreted as a rule which was at fault. The theory was that after a man or woman had confessed his or her sins, he or she was supposed to undergo temporal punishment for them, which might be undertaken on earth or in Purgatory. But penitential discipline had been relaxed and it had become the practice to issue indulgences for the remission of these punishments. The sale and purchase of indulgences had become more and more widespread and more and more a commercial transaction. The highest church authorities themselves had found it such a convenient way of raising money that they could not resist the temptation of issuing indulgences for sale on a huge scale. Inevitably, ordinary people came to see it as an easy means of buying relief from the consequences in the afterworld of sins committed on earth: *pardwn rhag y Purdan dig* ("pardon from that savage Purgatory"), as one Welsh poet put it. This kind of commercialization of the means of grace — selling it for money, in effect — could be very destructive in its consequences. There were widespread abuses in the sale of indulgences, which were often forged and sold by unscrupulous vendors. Even worse was the growing risk that it might come to be supposed that grace was far more readily available for the rich than the poor; that only those who could afford to pay for it would obtain it. One Welsh poet, Pylip Emlyn, — and he a cleric at that — sang merrily of the power of his purse:

And God's pervading grace within me dwell,
Strength for my body, Heaven for my soul,
With many a Pope's indulgence furnished well.
So am I sure to assuage each enemy,
My purse, for this grammercy be to thee.

(The quotation is taken from Sir Idris Bell's delightful translation of the whole poem.)

It would be a mistake, no doubt, to take such satirical verse quite literally; yet the essential criticism made by the poet was not unjustified. Money was talking louder than official doctrine, and many besides the poet were well aware of that. Such transactions tended gravely to weaken the connection between religion and morality. The Church lessened the value of its own ideals and its own official teaching when it allowed, even encouraged, the faithful to conclude that their own lack of virtue and Christian behaviour could be made good by a monetary exchange which enabled the merits of the truly good and holy to be applied to them.

Yet in conclusion it has to be said that whatever may have been the failures and shortcomings of popular religion at the end of the Middle Ages there is very little evidence of serious discontent or deepseated criticism in Wales. For most Welsh people their religion, however badly understood or at times distorted and abused, was as necessary, as inevitable, and as natural a part of their universe as the air they breathed.

FURTHER READING

The following items may be of interest and value:—

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