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Journal of Contemporary Religion

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1936967>

Published: 01/09/2021

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Davis, H., Dallimore, D., Mann, R., & Eichsteller, M. (2021). Religion and local civil society: participation and change in a post-industrial village. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 36(2), 287-309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1936967>

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To cite this article: Howard Davis, David Dallimore, Marta Eichsteller & Robin Mann (2021) Religion and local civil society: participation and change in a post-industrial village, Journal of Contemporary Religion, 36:2, 287-309, DOI: [10.1080/13537903.2021.1936967](https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1936967)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.1936967>



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Published online: 01 Sep 2021.



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Religion and local civil society: participation and change in a post-industrial village

Howard Davis , David Dallimore , Marta Eichsteller , and Robin Mann 

ABSTRACT

The relationship between religion and civil society at the macro-level has attracted the attention of sociologists of religion but empirical detail of how religion is connected to the social relations and practices that constitute local civil society is relatively lacking. This article explores the contemporary social and communal significance of the religious dimension in local civil society using the authors' ethnographic fieldwork and biographical interviews in a post-industrial village in North East Wales. Data on social change and participation in the locality include evidence of decline in religious affiliation and practice alongside the persistence of religion in the built environment, family ties, memory, and sense of belonging. The evidence can be used to inform a number of recent debates in both the sociology of religion and studies of civil society, including (post)secularity, religiously motivated social action, networks and associations, beliefs and belonging.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 January 2018
Accepted 11 June 2019

KEYWORDS

Civil society; locality;
participation; religion; Wales

Introduction

Religion is an inescapable topic for those who wish to take the pulse of civil society at the local level. Researchers have explored the significance of religion and civil society in numerous ways, sometimes with an emphasis on forms of association and engagement that exist between the state, the market, and the private sphere (Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010; De Hart, Dekker, and Halman 2013), sometimes with an orientation to beliefs, values of civility, trust and tolerance, and activities for collective benefit (Berger 2014; Hervieu-Léger 2000). In certain quarters, the terms 'civil society', 'public life', and 'community well-being' have become almost synonymous (Dinham 2009; Smith 2004). We offer a place-based grounded study of a local civil society, which combines an interest in patterns of association with the meanings that their activities have for participants and how they are perceived to be changing. In this context, we set out to answer the following questions: what kinds of social significance does religion have today, if any, in local civil society? Where can it be found? What is the relationship between religion and civil society? We do not adopt

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an *a priori* definition of religion or civil society but aim to understand how religion features in narratives and practices of participation.

Working at the intersection between sociology of religion, locality studies, oral history, and studies of civil society, we draw on fieldwork from a project which examines continuity and change in participation in civil society. The larger project investigates the social relations and practices that constitute civil society (including but not limited to religion) in order to develop a better understanding of how changes in associational forms and the experiences of local civil society participants are shaped by local contexts.¹ The following discussion has a more specific focus and is informed by an extended period of data collection in Rhosllanerchgrugog (Rhos), a large village in North East Wales.

In exploring the complexities of civil society in Rhos we find frequent expressions of religion as a social institution, a form of association, a mode of participation, and a belief system. This is not to deny the general decline in membership and key practices in the main denominations since at least the 1950s. Sociologists of religion in the UK have differing opinions on what this implies for patterns of engagement in civil society. Grace Davie describes how Christian beliefs and practice have become less of an expression of community belonging and more a matter of private choice, which she characterises as a movement from a “culture of obligation to a culture of consumption or choice” (Davie 2015, 7). Abby Day, in contrast, emphasises the enduring social significance of the category ‘religion’. Christianity, the main object of her qualitative study, is seen as a cultural resource that is available to be used to reinforce identity almost without reference to belief or institutional affiliation (Day 2013, 189).

Few sociologists of religion predict a terminal decline in the role of the historic churches. Indeed, there is growing interest in ‘post-secularity’ and the changing relationship between religious institutions, secular culture, commodification, and individualism (Turner 2011, 146–150). In the local context, we anticipate that frameworks of interpretation exist where religious and secular awareness overlap and where religion has a public as well as a private role. Together with other faith groups, churches and chapels continue to act in civil society as centres of belonging and as sources of identity for some sections of the population. Religious institutions also represent forms of capital in terms of organisational structures, meeting spaces, supply of volunteers, symbolic and material resources, and ability to mobilise people around local issues and broader social policy.

With the help of official data, published sources, and initial observations we approached the religious dimension of local civil society in Rhos with four broad themes in mind. Firstly, while we fully expected to find evidence of decline in religious practices, we were also aware that this might take the form of ‘privatisation’ of religion. Secondly, we anticipated seeing some

signs of 'new' religion and spirituality. Thirdly, being aware of the impact of population change and migration on religious growth in some parts of the country we considered that minority religious groups were unlikely to have taken root in Rhos, given its population profile. Finally, we were interested in the way Rhos compared with other localities and whether it could claim to have special or unique features. Religion is present in and possibly constitutive of civil society and our intention is to use evidence to bring the domains of religion and civil society research into closer dialogue.

Our decision to frame the research in this way distinguishes it from earlier studies of localities and communities in Wales. As Graham Day explains (2002, 143–146), the 'classic tradition' of studying rural life in the mid-twentieth century (e.g. Emmett 1964; Frankenberg 1957; Rees 1996) was preoccupied with historical continuities, rurality, nonconformist religion, and Welsh-speaking, all seen as being under threat from migration, commercialisation, and urbanisation. Religion was a prominent theme. Subsequent research (e.g. Day and Murdoch 1993; Cloke, Goodwin, and Milbourne 1997) maintains the focus on community and locality but has little to say about the role of religion. While we acknowledge the valuable insights and empirical detail in these studies, our frame of reference is local civil society rather than 'community'. We avoid thinking of space as bounded and focus on all kinds of participation, including patterns of association which are shaped by larger, sometimes discordant, civic, social, and cultural systems.

Religion and civil society

We consider the contributions made by a number of previous authors on the themes of religion and civil society, with particular reference to Wales. We are committed to a broad definition of what can be included in civil society in order not to prejudge which types of activity are significant. Firstly, at the large scale, we can consider the relationship between church and state. Historically, the influence of religion on politics has been profound, both in the shape of Anglicanism (before and after disestablishment in Wales in 1920) and nonconformity, where 'dissent' itself acquired virtually established status in the Welsh context at its height in the early 1900s. Today, there is a much reduced role for religion in the public sphere but some ongoing recognition for it in the organisation of chaplaincy, education, and the participation of religious leaders in public bodies, including the Faith Communities Forum (an organ of the Welsh Government) and the Interfaith Council for Wales.

A second aspect of religion in civil society concerns social action carried out by faith groups, mainly within localities. From the 'top-down' perspective, they may be categorised as 'third sector' partners. From the

point of view of participants, their activities are likely to be understood as expressions of neighbourliness, support of vulnerable people or 'outreach' stemming from religious morality and values. The range of activities is very diverse and many are 'below the radar' (McCabe and Phillimore 2009; NCVO 2009) because of their small scale and self-organisation. Yet they are clearly a form of civil participation, which involves significant numbers of people in locally based social action (e.g. 'mums and toddlers' groups, recreational activities, education, support groups, food banks). This is not to say that the religiously minded are necessarily more inclined to be involved in voluntary activities than other groups, only that they choose to engage through a religious institution.

A third aspect of religion as civil society is the activities of religion *per se*, which include forms of worship and ritual, commemorations, religious rites of passage, and teaching. They represent forms of social, cultural, and symbolic capital which are to a large extent produced and consumed locally. Thus, we can see that religion does not have a single self-evident relationship to civil society. Complexity also follows from the changing role of religion over time: the paradox of secular decline combined with the increased prominence of religious themes in public life, the arrival of new religious groupings, growing diversity which is encouraged by the market model of religion.

The broad scale of participation can be judged from data and commentary on religious self-identification (ONS 2001, 2011a) as well as religious affiliation and attendance (Brierley 2014). In the 2001 Census, Wales had the highest proportion of people reporting no religion among the countries of the UK (Davie 2015, 44). This trend continued between 2001 and 2011 (ONS 2011a), with a further decrease in the number who identified as Christian (from 71.7% to 59.3%) and an increase in those reporting no religion (from 14.8% to 25.1%). Christian affiliation thus fell 14.3 percentage points in Wales. Some local authorities in Wales reported some of the highest levels of no religion. Caerphilly had the largest percentage point increase since 2001 (from 16.7% to 41%). The South Wales valleys of Blaenau Gwent, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Torfaen also saw large increases of no religion, with 16, 15.5, and 15.4 percentage points, respectively. There were increases in the other main religious group categories, with the number of Muslims increasing the most (from 3% to 4.8%). The main story is therefore one of a particularly steep decline in most areas but this should not be allowed to obscure the new sources of religious diversity or the absolute numbers, which remain significant.

Key sources on religion and civil society in Wales are Paul Chambers (2003, 2004, 2005, 2008, 2011) and Chambers and Andrew Thompson (2005a, 2005b, 2006). They include the most explicit discussion of the civil

society theme (Chambers and Thompson 2005a, 2006), with a strong focus on the alignment of ‘public religion’ (Christian and other faiths) with the project of political devolution. They conclude, with a positive reading of the evidence, that “faith groups in Wales are increasingly opting to reject the privatized role to which they have been relegated for much of the 20th century” and that devolution seems to be helping religion “to step back from the margins” (Chambers and Thompson 2005a, 44–45). Norman Bonney (2013) also finds evidence for continuing engagement between religion and the devolved governments of the UK, including that of Wales.

The majority of sources on religious institutions in Wales are historical and provide the essential background for understanding the legacies of Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Nonconformism, including the closely connected rise and fall of chapel culture and industrial labour, the Church in Wales as representative of the nation, and the role of religion in the maintenance of the Welsh language. Christopher Harris and Richard Startup (1999) undertook a major survey-based study of the Church in Wales (CiW). While it does not use the language of ‘civil society’, it does focus on the CiW as a “national, territorial and public institution” (ibid, 191). ‘Public’ is defined as ‘offering services to all’ and a substantial part of the work is about lay views and participation at the parish level. There is no equivalent research on the free churches, although Chambers (2008) provides an overview. Some aspects of Muslim religion are explored by Sophie Gilliat-Ray and Jody Mellor (2010), Rhys Dafydd Jones (2012), and Jones and Jesse Heley (2016). Overall, however, there is a dearth of contemporary empirical studies of the engagement of religious institutions and their members in social activities. The religious institutions’ in-house reports and publications are sources which show their self-understanding as a ‘moral community’ and strategies for responding to change. The *Church in Wales Review*, for example, does not refer to ‘civil society’ but juxtaposes ‘Christian community’ with ‘wider community’ or society. It refers to social responsibility projects which serve the wider community, employing 160 people and 3,000 volunteers (Church in Wales 2012, 30). The language used for talking about the relationship between church and society typically refers to ‘working in communities’, ‘outreach’, ‘supporting community development’, and ‘action for justice’. Understandably, the meaning of ‘community’ in the religious sense is more developed than the meaning of ‘wider community’.

In the light of these contributions, we can focus the questions that we stated previously and bring them to bear on the evidence we have collected in Rhos from documentary sources, our questionnaire, biographical interviews, and ethnography.

Method

The object of our research was to identify the forms of participation that exist in a local civil society setting and, as part of that, to explore evidence of the way participants relate to 'religion' (through affiliation and practice as well as through family ties, memory, and sense of belonging). Rhosllanerchrugog is a former coal-mining settlement with a population of 9,694 in 2011 (WCBC 2019), in the vicinity of the large town of Wrexham. It was chosen because of its size, diversity, and clear demarcation and because we had personal contacts that gave access to the life of the village. It has been the subject of previous studies which provide additional depth of perspective (e.g. Laidlaw 1995). Rhos offers a window through which to observe the effects of de-industrialisation, economic decline, and social change on participation in civil society.

The fortunes of the village were closely linked to the rise and subsequent decline of heavy industries in the area, including iron and steel production, quarrying, brick and tile manufacturing. The Hafod coal mine, along with the larger Bersham mine, was a major source of employment for people living in Rhos from the second half of the nineteenth century. The former closed in 1968, the latter in 1986. After the Second World War, North East Wales experienced employment growth in chemical, plastic, and other light manufacturing industries in surrounding villages, small towns, and new industrial estates, but little of this remains in Rhos today. Industrial and occupational changes had a significant influence on the complex patterns of settlement and mobility in and around Rhos. Today, mobility is reduced. There are more people who were born in Wales than in any other part of the county borough: 82% compared with 73% across Wales as a whole; only 3% were born outside the UK (WCBC 2019). The village is below average on some indicators in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, but overall it ranks in the third quintile (Welsh Government 2014).

Rhos is also defined by its historical connection to Welsh liberal nonconformism and the Welsh language. The significance of chapel religion will be explained below, but Roger Laidlaw (1995, 251–252) cautions against detaching religion from its links with families, employers, and aspects of local culture. For example, one legacy of the industrial and chapel culture is that the use of Welsh as an everyday language of interaction in the village has continued into the twenty-first century, although not for the majority. In the Rhos community council area, 24% of the population say they can speak Welsh, compared with 13% for Wrexham County Borough (WCBC 2019). The roots of the Welsh dialect within Rhos are strongly linked to the growth of industry, which brought Welsh-speaking workers from other parts of Wales to settle in the village (Jones 1998, 155).

Fieldwork took place in Rhos between April 2015 and July 2016. Data collection included 15 biographical narrative interviews with members of the community council and individuals playing active roles within a range of local groups and organisations. Interviewees (given pseudonyms in this article) were invited to tell their whole life stories, whether in or beyond the village. They were selected based on their leading positions within local groups, including the chapels, and participation in activities taking place over time and across different local spaces in Rhos. The interviews took place alongside participant observation of local events and meetings. In addition, we carried out a face-to-face, questionnaire-based, quota sample survey with 101 local residents. The responses were collected in public places and at different local events. Informal conversations were also held with people in Rhos in different public settings such as the library, cafés, and shops. We collected field notes at numerous meetings and events such as community council meetings and exhibitions, including an exhibition of old Rhos photos. We also collected documentary material from historical archives and internet sources, which provided additional evidence in support of the individual narrative accounts.

Religion in Rhos

According to the latest Census data, Rhos is fairly typical of Wales in having a majority of the population which identifies as Christian: 60% compared with 58% for Wales as a whole (ONS 2011b). A decade earlier, the Census recorded that more than 77% of the population in the Ponciau ward identified as Christian, compared with 72% for Wales as a whole (ONS 2001). This suggests a rapid decline from a relatively high level of religious identification. Our own observations and enquiries indicate that a large number of the chapel buildings in Rhos are no longer in use, with some having been demolished or converted to other uses (see [Figure 1](#)). An older resident recited a litany of closures:

Horeb the Wesleyan chapel [has closed], Calfaria chapel, Seion chapel in Ponciau now. Another Wesleyan chapel, Ysbyty Isaf, is closed. Capel y Groes is closed. There are a lot. (Ifor, age 79)

Those that remain have small congregations relative to the past, with only two nonconformist ministers regularly holding services. St. John's, the main parish church at the village centre, closed in 2003 due to declining attendance and the need to find £300,000 for repairs to the church fabric. The places of worship still active in the village, including the remaining Anglican church, number about seven. In our local survey, 19% of the respondents said that they attended church or chapel more than six times



Figure 1. Mynydd Seion Welsh Independent Chapel, Chapel Street, Ponciau, Rhosllanerchrugog, built 1866.

a year. The numbers who identify with non-Christian religions are very small, likely to represent a handful of households.

However, these headlines do not convey the full sense of the importance of religion in the village's history. Rhos was a major centre of the nonconformist religious revival in 1904–1905 (Tudur Jones 2004, 306), which left a clearly visible legacy in the large number of chapel buildings. In 1905, when the population was about 9,500, the Royal Commission on places of worship identified 23 in Rhos (Laidlaw 1995, 180). As Robin Gill (2003, 1) has argued, the 'religious physicality' of churches and chapels plays an enduring part in popular perceptions of religion. Rhos is not unique in having a legacy of surplus capacity from the heyday of competitive chapel building. It would be unwise to assume that all chapel congregations were large enough to fill them in a past golden era. Yet the physical legacy, even when the buildings stand empty, evokes a powerful sense of the religious past.

Residents of the village still see nonconformity as important in making Rhos distinct. The local information sheet of the Chapels Heritage Society (Capel, n.d., 2) quotes a line of *cynghanedd* (a form of Welsh poetry), which has strong echoes in present-day talk about Rhos: *Beibl a rhaw i bobl y Rhos* (For Rhos people: a Bible and a shovel). The local coal industry, to which this refers, had ceased in the 1960s and chapel-going had been in decline since the 1950s, but religion persists in the cultural memory, if not as a centre of associational life. The work of historians and sociologists provides some useful pointers to the ways in which the impact of religion may continue to be felt well beyond the peak of membership and active

affiliation. For example, in his account of the effects of Methodism in a Durham mining community, Robert Moore (1974) concludes that, while the Protestant denominations provided a training ground for working-class leaders, their beliefs discouraged class politics or collective struggle for social improvement. Speaking of Methodism (but he could be referring to a wider spectrum of nonconformist denominations), he states:

Methodism was institutionalised as part of the community, not restricted to formal religious associations. The constraints on a member of a communal organisation were rather different from the constraints of an associational type of organisation. [. . .] The conclusion of the historical account is that the Methodists were so emphasising traditional and communal values and activities that they became increasingly disconnected not only from current political issues but even from official Methodist policy discussion and liturgical changes. (Moore 1974, 27)

This suggestion is based on historical evidence over a century, but it can be used to interpret some of the evidence of more recent trends in the development of local civil society. Chapel adherents in the early twentieth century would have participated in a wide range of chapel-based activities, involving major commitments of time and effort. As education, entertainment, culture, sport, and leisure became more differentiated over the century, other forms of association could replace the role of the chapel. For example, the acclaimed Rhos male voice choirs (Owen 2009), which had their origins in chapels and hymn singing, are now largely detached from their roots in religious institutions. We consider the evidence from Rhos with the theme of differentiation (or disembedding) in mind because it is particularly appropriate for a small locality study. It relates to the sociology of secularisation which informs a large part of contemporary research in the sociology of religion (Brown 2001; Bruce 2002a, 2002b, 2010). However, while the evidence from our study is consistent with some aspects of secularisation theory, our main concern is to explore changes in civil society participation at the local level, not to use the secularisation thesis as the main explanatory framework.

Chapels, networks, and culture: voices from Rhos

We now turn to the data from the study participants to see how ‘religion’ features in their talk about the village and their places in it. In our street survey, we invited local people to think about ‘the best things about living in Rhos’. The responses are full of references to the strong sense of community, the close-knit and friendly feel of the village. They are mirrored in some of the negative comments about the ‘worst things’ about Rhos: its being small, cliquey, and people ‘becoming more and more insular’. Sometimes, the chapels and their histories were mentioned as some of the features that

helped to make the village special, but the references to the chapels were usually made in the same breath as the culture of the mines, Welsh language, and even the pubs. A 67-year-old retired male Welsh speaker contrasted the influence of incomers with the old ways of Rhos: “We have a way of our own: chapels, Welsh language, the Stiwt [the miners’ institute]—that kind of thing.” Many older residents lamented the changes: “It’s not quite like it was. The old days were the best. The pubs and chapels have almost all gone and that’s what kept everyone together.”

While these data are not fully representative, they point to two important themes which are elaborated in the biographical narrative and ethnographic data. On the one hand, there is a strong sense of the former embeddedness of the chapels and their positive contribution to the local culture. On the other hand, there is a feeling that this era has virtually come to an end: “The chapels are all closing. The chapels used to teach people high standards. That’s disappearing.” Many spoke of the chapels as centres of association in the past, with not only Sunday Schools, but also choirs, amateur dramatics, sports, and a range of other societies and activities. The youth temperance movement *Gobeithlu* (Band of Hope) was very active in Rhos until the 1970s, with interviewees recalling that it had provided a range of social activities designed to divert young people from the evils of drink.

It is noteworthy that the shorthand people used is ‘chapels’, not religion, faith or belief. This is consistent with comments that chapel-going was nearly universal for the generation that grew up in the 1950s and 1960s and that it was as much for the culture as for the religion. The ambivalence was captured by an interviewee who left the village as a young adult and recalled that

Sundays used to be a major, major depression for me because I was never really persuaded by my family to be a church- or a chapel-goer, but at the age of eight, I did join practically every church and chapel in the village and leave on my own accord because I found them very, very hypocritical and I would leave and go to another chapel, but I was really looking for community spirit. (Cai, age 53)

A choir member described his growing feeling of detachment from the chapel because of his own mobility and the absence of a minister:

When I was younger I did go every week to Sunday School—but it was actually when I went away to University [that] was the time [when] there was a very good minister; [then] he moved and then there was a lot of time then—well, in fact, there still isn’t, an actual minister who serves the chapel. And so I stopped going then, because it was always different people and, yeah, you feel a bit more conspicuous, I suppose, because I was a lot younger than anyone else who was going there, really. And then you get out of the habit of going. (Aled, age 36)

Chapels are a recurring theme as spaces of participation, sociability, and structures of association. For many, chapels are deeply enmeshed in the

identity of the individual, the collective, and the place, even if chapel-going has ceased to be the norm.

Respondents spoke of “a twin identity of the chapel and the coal mines” (Alison, age 48) and the strength of the connection between religious nonconformity and industry:

What religion I had was when I worked in the pit because Hafod was a religious pit if you like because it was a lot of people [who] went to chapel—in them days, in the sixties it was. (William, age 66)

The phrase ‘the pub and the chapel’ occurs several times in our data. There were as many pubs as chapels, even at the peak of chapel-going. Although they competed fiercely for the villagers’ loyalty, both were spaces of association that defined individuals’ places in the community. What is striking about these accounts is that they remain salient in people’s talk, although they draw on a collective memory of a distant past and describe an identity which, for most people, is not based on current participation in religious activities.

One of the narrative interviews provides especially rich material to explore further the themes of participation and change. It was conducted with the minister of a local chapel, formerly part of a small Protestant denomination that became independent when the denomination folded in the 1970s. The minister Gwilym, now retired, has always served the chapel without pay. He comes from a mining family and worked in the mine in his youth. The interview, conducted in Welsh in the chapel building, sometimes resembles a religious testimony and is distinctive in the way it uses biblical expressions. The narrative is shaped by references to family and includes a long section on the unbroken continuity of generations of family members who were local chapel leaders. The line is clearly at risk of coming to an end with the present generation. Meanwhile, there is a very strong sense of work and determined effort to maintain the tradition: “But we’re still faithful and, while we still can, we’re going to keep this chapel going. . . Co-workers in the vineyard, for the glory of God.” Regular Sunday services continue, but there is no Sunday School. Out of necessity, religious participation has become more ecumenical as the few trained ministers help out in other congregations to cover the lack of leaders. Engagement in social responsibility initiatives (e.g. Christian Aid, Operation Christmas Child) also requires co-operation between the local churches and chapels. Gwilym said, “we used to look forward to united services, where the chapels would be full.” While the narrative is full of religious themes, ranging from hymn books and baptism to communion, it is firmly set in the taken-for-granted world of the village (rather than doctrine, denomination or religion versus secularity), summed up in the phrase “The village is the important thing; work and the village you live in”. The emphasis on communal values

suggests a relationship between religion and community similar to the one described by Moore in the Durham coalfield. However, the social fabric which sustained this relationship has become thinly stretched.

Civic engagement

Religion has a role in public affairs through the activities of voluntary associations beyond the chapels and churches. ‘Civic’ here refers to group activities which further collective interests through organisation, association, negotiation, and conflict. In this section, we use three examples to highlight the changing interactions between religion and village life: drinking culture and the miners’ institutes, Welsh language, and participation in local associations.

When a large proportion of the population lived their lives within the social compass of nonconformity, religion was influential in a range of public activities. The numerous pubs were an alternative form of association and the symbolism of chapel and pub was strongly contested by both sides. For example, when the miners’ institute in Rhos, known as the ‘Stiwt’ (see [Figure 2](#)), was founded in 1926, it adhered to values of temperance, which was almost synonymous with nonconformity. These values prevailed until the late 1960s, when the economic argument for introducing a bar gained ground. Dafydd recalled:

Well, in those days, you see, there were . . . all were dead set against drinking. A lot of the—well, most of the people on the committee were chapel people. That was the



Figure 2. The Miners’ Institute, Rhosllanerchrugog, the ‘Stiwt’.

opposition really—they didn't want this bar. You know, at that time bars weren't allowed to open on Sundays. No taverns were open on Sundays. (Dafydd, age 77)

The Stiwt eventually opened a bar in 1968 following 'heated debate' and a vote of six for and three against (Ellis and Bolton 2016, 91). It did not prevent the decline of the Stiwt and its closure in 1977. Like other civil society organisations, the Stiwt (which re-opened in 1999 following an heroic local "Save the Stiwt" campaign) is no longer defined by temperance culture. Yet it is interesting to note that a smaller second miners' institute was established in 1966 as a 'wet' institution, only yards away from the Stiwt. It still exists. As Laidlaw (1995, 219) observes,

temperance convictions were not simply an aspect of the world view of local elites, which they sought and often succeeded in foisting on the rest of the population, drink-related issues were capable of mobilising larger sections of the community.

These ways of thinking still echo in the pattern of associations, buildings, and collective memories.

The second example concerns religious involvement in issues of wider public interest and the case of lobbying for the Welsh language. Family, workplace, and religious worship have all been important for maintaining the vitality of the Welsh language over time. Welsh was the language of nonconformity in the nineteenth century (Tudur Jones 2000) and in the twentieth century its fate was bound up with the rise and decline of chapel culture (Morgan 2000). By mid-century, the challenge for language maintenance was to establish Welsh in secular domains such as the media, education, and leisure. The frame of reference was shifting from religion to civic nationalism. The editor of the *Papur Bro* (the local Welsh language community newspaper) described his role since the 1970s in establishing a Welsh school, among other interventions to support the Welsh language:

The Council of Churches in Rhos at the beginning of the seventies asked me if I would write a paper discussing the situation of the language. And I went and listed the kinds of activities, or institutions, that once established would help secure the future of the Welsh language. I remember talking about establishing a nursery school—we had rejected this at the end of the sixties, but were seeing its necessity at the beginning of the seventies. Establishing a Welsh school. . . (Ifor, age 79)

The organising committee met in one of the chapels. Today, there are two primary schools in the village—one Welsh- and one predominantly English-medium. The interviews with the older generation convey a strong sense of pride in such achievements, the solidarity and the work required to keep traditions going. However, this comes with a sense of loss. The chapels continue to uphold the tradition but the outlook is retrospective and somewhat defensive, reminding people that "look, you have a tradition that you should be proud of" (Ifor, age 79).

Thirdly, there is evidence that participation in civil society associations was embedded in experiences of religion. Religious institutions were once schools for participation and leadership in the working class (Moore 1974, 3). The chapel and church milieu encouraged literate, disciplined development of the person, self-organisation of associations, indigenous leadership, and investments of time. An ex-miner and union organiser spoke of the close connection between religion and the labour movement:

Now, [in North Wales] most of the people involved in change were chapel people and somewhere Edward Hughes, who was from the first miners' agency, said the hand of God—or something like that—guides us in our work. (William, age 66)

His memories of 'old Rhos', including the role of religion, drive his current participation in mining heritage and educational activities. Similarly, a music festival volunteer described his pathway to involvement:

We had a lot to do with church . . . my father was a warden, so then you naturally become a choir boy and then you become a server at communion, then you read lessons, then you become a Sunday School teacher, and so that's all about volunteering. (Tony, age 70)

A person who left Rhos to pursue a career in the media described how he used to perform in the local chapels, although he had no attachment to the religious life (Cai, age 53). He remains connected with the village through participation in cultural associations and events. It is clear that these illustrations are from the older generation of men, which reflects the dominance of males in the mining industry and chapels. The younger generation is influenced less, if at all, by these institutions and their patterns of civic engagement. Their participation is likely to be more individualistic, episodic or goal-orientated (Hustinx and Meijs 2011). Their accounts focus on their school experiences combined with self-selected participation in sport, music, and other forms of leisure. The context is still local, underpinned by a strong sense of belonging. As one interviewee, still at school, commented: "Rhos is where people are . . . closer together, everyone knows each other" (Iestyn, age 16). Our research inquiry was open to the possibility that civic participation might be taking place on a wider scale, in new forms, and beyond the boundaries of Rhos. The data do not suggest that this is an important trend in the way locals participate, except that networks of charity shop, homeless support, and food bank volunteers extend to the county borough. What is clearly apparent is the dwindling influence of religious institutions and experiences in civic engagement, while, at the same time, the religious past is an active symbol of identity.

New forms of religion

What is ‘new’ has to be understood in relation to what is perceived to be traditional, mainstream or dominant. It is experienced in beliefs, practices, organisation, leadership, and finances and in the responses it receives in the social setting. We found some evidence of newer ‘alternative’ Christian activity focused on an evangelical Community Café, opened in 2012. A place to meet and eat, it also holds ‘services’ on Sundays and offers training, co-ordinating volunteering, and hosting other community activities. Activities include cooking and Welsh language classes. The café operates largely outside any conventional denominational structure. It occupies a double-fronted shop on the main street in Rhos and has a simple sign saying “The Community Café” (see [Figure 3](#)). There are no overtly religious symbols.

Unlike the self-supporting chapel relying on family and local social networks, this new entity emerged from the vision of an ‘outsider’ who mobilised sources of funding, including lottery grants, religious charities, and volunteer help. It has relationships to a community church in the region, but it was not locally embedded in the same way as the chapels were. It has links to the wider civil and civic spheres, which the chapels do not have, including the county voluntary council and the Welsh Government’s Communities First programme. It is sustained through voluntary participation. Joan, the pastoral worker who leads the venture, described her motivation in these terms: “For me, it wasn’t about trying to evangelise . . . it’s just about doing good and just about enhancing people’s lives at whatever level they’re at.” The interview displays a number of



Figure 3. The Community Café, Rhosllanerchrugog.

interesting contrasts with the Gwilym interview. It is more action-oriented, concerned with the nuts and bolts of running a multi-faceted social enterprise and, at the same time, it uses religious language in a different way. It is the language of individualised spirituality, with references to counselling, empowerment, individual healing, and ‘spiritual readings’: “It’s taking spirituality out where everybody is and saying, ‘you don’t have to conform; this is what I’m seeing for you, if you choose, then that’s fine’.” It suggests that the privatisation of religious belief and practice is perfectly compatible with a strong sense of social responsibility. The success of this faith-based venture over a number of years implies that this model, which is very localised in form, is capable of becoming well embedded in local civil society despite being dependent on non-indigenous resources at the outset.

Discussion

The investigation of civil society and religion in Rhos largely confirms our expectation that Christian religion and related social activities would be at a much lower level today than in recent generations. The counter-evidence for new growth in religiously motivated social action is relatively small but significant in the way it has forged a new kind of relationship with the locality. Non-Christian religion has not established a visible presence. In this respect, along with most parts of Wales, Rhos shares the story of the steep decline of nonconformist institutions. In summary, we can see in Rhos, as in the rest of Wales, a decline in religious affiliation and activity, with nonconformist chapels hit hardest by falling numbers and ageing congregations. As places of participation in civil society, they are becoming less relevant and provide decreasing opportunities. However, too much emphasis on the evidence of decline would neglect their ongoing presence in local life. They are part of the social setting and places where associational life and informal networks continue to be enacted and they have enduring symbolic significance in people’s sense of belonging. Rhos people continue to believe in belonging and continue to perform belonging with reference to the religious as well as the industrial past.

This finding is consistent with some of the discussion arising from the ‘spatial turn’ in the study of contemporary religion (see Kong 2001 for an overview). Kim Knott values an approach to local forms of religious life and new geographies of religion “which look beyond the officially religious, and are sensitive to differences in context, aesthetics, scale, constituency, dialectics and morality” (Knott 2013, 122). For geographers, the aim is to develop an inductive spatial methodology to examine religion, not just as a belief system or tradition, but wherever it is found in material, symbolic or experiential forms. It is about locating religion within particular places,

whether in persons, objects or events. Our approach is similar in that it treats the local scene as a space of action for its participants without prejudging what is religious. However, we have adopted the lens of local civil society, which sensitises us to the interaction between existing social domains such as the family, work, the market, the state and, of course, religion. In this sociological perspective, we have found it helpful to distinguish between the vehicles of participation at the local level—people, associations, sites, and events.

In a contribution to the debate on postsecularity, Paul Cloke and Justin Beaumont (2013) describe emerging spaces of ‘postsecular partnership’ or *rapprochement* between secular and religious spheres. Their examples are drawn from urban contexts where the distinction between public (secular) and private (religious) is transcended in professional and voluntary activities to relieve social problems. While acknowledging that it may not be a uniquely urban phenomenon, they argue that the city affords more networks, resources, and opportunities for *rapprochement* (Cloke and Beaumont 2013, 45). According to this understanding of postsecularity, Rhos does not contain significant emerging postsecular spaces. The narratives from Rhos do not display new ‘cross-over’ characteristics as much as a shared sense of the past and a pervasive memory of religion. One pertinent issue in this debate is the territorialisation of the religious, secular, and postsecular. The evidence for postsecularity is located in sites of socio-economic need, resistance, spaces of reconciliation, and ethical engagement (Cloke and Beaumont 2013, 32–33). Today, the sites of participation in Rhos are essentially differentiated by their religious or secular functions. The Community Café is an exception because it is a new space where local need has prompted a ‘religious’ response. However, the forms of engagement are based on person-centred spirituality, not postsecular *rapprochement*.

The direct implications for a locally based empirical study are that we should recognize two forms of overt religious activity which are closely connected but analytically distinct. (We do not have data to confirm whether general religiosity has declined at the same pace as the chapels). Firstly, there are activities which the contemporary sociology of religion literature views in terms of continued secularisation, shrinkage, marginalisation, and privatisation of religion—secularisation in the classic sense of social relations where religion has low impact on the dominant structures of society and culture. In the religious milieu, these activities can be characterised as maintenance of ‘services’ for members (buildings, fellowship, regular worship, spiritual life, personnel, organisational networks, music, social activities, fundraising). Groups become more sect-like and focus on their members, sustainability, and common commitment. Paradoxically, this leads to more ecumenical co-operation and hardly any of

the doctrinal disputes which led to the fragmentation of chapel congregations at their peak. Maintenance has priority over outreach, whether in terms of mission or social responsibility. As associations, they may have some vigour and contribute positively to the well-being of their members. While they survive, they play a role, albeit self-limiting, in civil society.

In a relationship of tension to these is a second type of activity—when religious institutions appear as constitutive elements of local communities. This aspect may be articulated in negative reactions to church or chapel closures and in positive responses to religious events such as the major festivals of Christmas and Easter (which can bring together congregations, schools, and families). Such activities may be stronger where institutions are organised on the basis of territory. They engage in formal and informal ‘outreach’ activities of a non-religious kind (e.g. crèches, coffee mornings, visits to the elderly). Some would argue that faith-based social entrepreneurship offers a potential route back to social and communal significance (Chambers 2011, 278); the Community Café is a prominent example of this in Rhos. Religious settings may indeed provide opportunities for wider participation, through charities, for example. Yet, contemporary patterns of volunteering tend to be episodic (as is the case at the Community Café) and rather disembedded, unlike traditional church institutions with long-term adherents or older community ‘stalwarts’. In this scenario, the fate of religion is bound up with the fate of the civil society as a whole.

In the Rhos locality, there is little to support the notion that secularity has advanced because “religion is increasingly part and parcel of the market” (Turner 2011, 274–275) or that pluralism has generated a new understanding of contemporary religion and social action through the knowledge and experience of difference (Zavos 2017, 68). The constant reference back to the shared historical experience is almost the antithesis of what Andrew Williams, Cloke, and Samuel Thomas (2012, 1490) describe as emerging postsecular urban spaces where diversity opens up new and flexible ways of thinking about religion and new chances to deploy religious ideas to motivate social action.

In addition to the two overt forms of religious practice outlined above, there is the implicit relationship to religion which echoes the forms of ‘nominalism’ and ‘performative Christianity’ that Day (2013) describes in her study of belief and identity. She argues, based on Census and survey data, that “Christianity is an important resource people sometimes use to reinforce their identity and therefore, through public discourse, the ‘British culture’” (Day 2013, 189). We conclude that something similar applies at the local level and possibly at the level of Wales. The major buildings in Rhos, which include the miners’ institute and the numerous chapels, are constant

reminders of the durability of the physical structures, their social uses, and symbolic valencies. These objects occupy a place of their own, which is immensely resistant to change. Religion, especially the memory of chapel culture (individual or collective, real or reconstructed), is available as a resource to express how people belong. For some, it is part of how they express being Welsh. This is particularly evident in the biographical interviews, where the respondents use this resource in the narrative work they do to account for their involvement in local civil society activities.

Conclusion

We set out to answer the question ‘what kinds of social significance does religion have today in civil society in Rhos?’. We have presented evidence of the relationship between religion and civil society in its material, mental, and social dimensions. Religion has continuing social and communal significance in the above senses and this is the dynamic we have explored through ethnography and biographical research. Being part of a wider study, our evidence regarding the religious dimension of civil society is complemented by data on non-religious activities and there are further aspects of religion in relation to civil society which could be explored—for example, the personal motivations of those who become active in or lead local associations or the relationship between class, religion, and the local status system (Day 2002, 148). While in other areas, chapels and churches provide hubs for community activity and local development, in Rhos, we see a struggle for maintenance, aggravated by an over-supply of spaces in which participation might take place, few of which are suited to the kinds of association needed by the community today. The strength of collective memory from within a community that is fairly static serves to bolster a sense of local identity, but it is unlikely to stimulate the imagination necessary to project alternative uses. Finally, for some in Rhos, the chapels are not a benevolent or benign influence and are thus seen as dominated by a particular age group and a cultural, linguistic, and moral cohort that is increasingly irrelevant in a non-religious, diverse, and mobile society.

Note

1. The study was part of the WISERD Civil Society Research Centre’s five-year multidisciplinary programme of research addressing civil society in Wales, the UK, and internationally (see <https://wiserd.ac.uk/research>; Mann et al. 2021).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research for this article was supported by the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research & Data (WISERD). WISERD is a collaborative venture of the Universities of Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, South Wales, and Swansea. The research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (ES/L009099/1).

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