

A HISTORY OF HUMANISM IN WALES

Wales has long been a nation of nonconformists, with a history of challenging the power and influence of the established church. Wales' early history of freethought is closely tied to questions of nationalism and Welsh identity, and to efforts of all kinds – by men and women of all backgrounds – to make people's lives better. During the 1800s, the influence of humanist ideas through movements like Chartism, Owenism, and the Ethical movement saw many Welsh people inspired to act for the good of other people, based on what they could see and do on earth – not in hopes of a heaven afterwards. The 20th century – especially after the First World War – saw the rise of secularism, a drop-off in people attending church, and the growth of organised humanist groups.

Today, 50% of people in Wales describe themselves as having 'no religion', and many of these hold humanist values.

WALES' EARLY HISTORY

Before the coming of Christianity during the 1st century CE, Wales, like other parts of the British Isles, was home to a variety of different religious beliefs. Evidence for these includes ceremonial burials, and stone structures and circles, whose meanings we can only make theories about. When the Romans invaded in 43 CE, they combined their own gods with native British ones. As long as it didn't threaten the power of the Romans, people seem to have been allowed to continue following their own traditions. By the end of the 4th century, however, Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. Like in England, Ireland and Scotland, the power of Christian rule made expressing humanist ideas or challenging religion dangerous for many hundreds of years.

ENLIGHTENMENT

The period of history known as the Enlightenment (or sometimes the Age of Reason) began in the 17th century, and saw a new faith in human reason to discover natural laws and human rights. During this time, ideas like **deism** emerged. Deists believed that truth could be discovered through reason, and by using the senses, and challenged the authority of holy books. During the 18th century, Wales was home to some very influential deists, including Thomas Morgan (d. 1743) and David Williams (1738–1816).

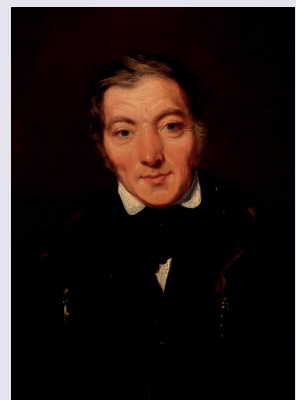


David Williams moved to London, England, and opened up a school there. He described his deist ideas as a 'religion of nature', which he hoped could bring all

David Williams by John Thornthwaite © National Portrait Gallery, London CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

people together while allowing them to think for themselves. Above all, Williams believed in every person's right to form their own ideas about things, based on their own reason. Like the other people mentioned, he was a 'freethinker', which meant never accepting something to be true without first thinking about it for yourself.

The 1700s also saw the birth, in Newtown, of Robert Owen, whose ideas would inspire a movement based on cooperation and social improvement – focusing on what human beings could do to make the world better, without relying on any god to help them.



Robert Owen by William Henry Brooke oil on canvas, 1834
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CHARTISM

Others in Wales, like Zephaniah Williams, were chartists: who took their name from the 'people's charter' they drew up. Chartists wanted all adult men to have the vote, believing that without it their power to influence change and improve their own working and living conditions was limited. Many later humanists would also campaign for the right of women to vote. Zephaniah Williams, like Robert Owen, was a freethinker, and both believed that it was in the hands of human beings to make things better. They used their reason to draw conclusions about

how society should be organised, and were driven by their compassion for other people to try and make change happen.



Chartist Broadsheet
- To the men and women of Newport.
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THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN HUMANISM

The nineteenth century was a time of enormous change and major discovery. In Wales, as we have seen, movements such as chartism and Owenism saw working people campaigning for more rights and a better quality of life. Many people involved in these movements were freethinkers. Today, many of the ideas held by freethinkers are ones we would call humanist.

Alfred Russel Wallace c. 1899



New scientific understanding (like Charles Darwin's theory of evolution) helped to give explanations for the world based on science and evidence. A Welshman, Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913), developed a theory of evolution at the same time

as Charles Darwin, and their writings were first published together. These ideas changed the way people understood the origins of human beings, and led lots of people to question their religious beliefs.

Towards the end of the 19th century, groups called ethical societies began to form in the UK. Many would later rename themselves as humanist organisations. They were influenced by an American social reformer called Felix Adler, who had started a society in New York with the motto 'deed not creed', meaning you did not have to be religious to do good in the world. He hoped to join people of all beliefs together in living good lives, and working for change. There were a number of ethical societies (and later humanist groups) in Wales.

DISESTABLISHMENT AND SECULAR IDEALS

The 1914 Welsh Church Act enabled the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales, and the creation of an independent Church in Wales – but one separate from the state. This was something many non-religious people had campaigned for, alongside others who disagreed



with the Church of England having special privileges in Wales. Because of the First World War, the Act did not take effect until 31 March 1920.

National Disestablishment Demonstration in Swansea, 28 May 1912.
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During the 20th century, Welsh humanists played important roles in the arts, science, politics, and much more. One, Nye Bevan, oversaw the creation of the National Health Service (NHS) – which made healthcare free to all who needed it. As his wife, Jennie Lee, said: 'He was a great humanist whose religion lay in loving his fellow men and trying to serve them'.



Aneurin Bevan, Minister of Health, on the first day of the National Health Service, 5 July 1948 at Park Hospital, Davyhulme, near Manchester

TODAY

Today, 50% of people in Wales describe themselves as having 'no religion', and Wales Humanists aim to work with the Welsh Government and people of goodwill from all backgrounds to achieve a situation where everyone in Wales is treated equally, regardless of religion or belief.

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WALES

The Senedd was the first UK nation's government to be created on secular ideals. Unlike the parliament in Westminster, Senedd meetings have no Anglican prayers as part of their business, and no member is privileged or disadvantaged because of their religion or beliefs. The Senedd's secular basis also has an important effect on the way decisions are made and laws are passed: based on evidence and human rights, and recognising the many different religions and beliefs present in Wales today.



Rhodri Morgan, who became First Minister of Wales in 2000, was a humanist. When he died in 2017, his was the first public humanist funeral in the United Kingdom.

Rhodri Morgan at the official opening of the Senedd, 2011. Senedd Cymru CC BY 2.0



GLOSSARY

Deism

The belief that a god created the world and the laws of nature, but does not get involved in human affairs.

Disestablishment

Disestablishment is when a country removes the official status of a religion. The Church of England was disestablished in Wales in 1920.

Dissenter

A dissenter is someone who refuses to go along with the established church. This is similar to a nonconformist.

Freethinker

A freethinker is a person who forms their ideas and opinions by thinking for themselves, rather than accepting authority without question.

Humanist

A humanist believes in humanism: the idea that people can achieve happiness and live well without religion, using reason and compassion to guide them.

Rights

Your rights are what you are morally or legally entitled to do or to have.

Secular

Secular describes things which are not religious, or separate from the church and religion.

Suffrage

Suffrage is the right of people to vote for a government or leader.