SUMMARY

This paper reports on one particular aspect of a survey conducted in Wales—namely the relation between Christian belief and two of the most characteristic marks of post-Enlightenment modern society. These are (i) personal autonomy or freedom and (ii) egalitarianism or social autonomy in a pluralistic society. The question, therefore, is whether there is any causal-relation, positive or negative, between modernity and current perceptions of God and God's relation to the world. Such a study could illuminate, on the one hand, how contemporary Christians handle a belief in God that has to take account of the pressures of modernity and, on the other hand, whether having religious faith actually affects attitudes.

1. Context and conduct of the survey

This survey is part of a series of such surveys relating to a study project based on the Department of Empirical Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, in the Netherlands. The aim of this international project is to produce an increasing number of parallel soundings across the urbanised and secularised modern world which can explore the similarities that reflect the process of globalisation but which can also point up the differences to be found against cultural backgrounds. It also provides part of the empirical data that can inform the continuing debate about faith and secularisation.

The earlier studies have been carried out (i) in ten Catholic parishes in the Netherlands, grouped locally in Arnhem and Nijmegen; (ii) with a radical, activist para-ecclesial group in the Netherlands, designated May 8th; (iii) and in ten Catholic parishes in Canada, French speaking from the city of Hull, in Quebec Province, and English speaking in Ottawa. This Welsh study, therefore, adds an important new dimension as the first to be conducted in a predominantly Protestant context with largely Protestant respondents.

Two other factors have also to be recorded. Religion in Britain is essentially associational whereby people opt into religious belonging. This voluntarist principle means that even in the established churches, membership
lists are of those who "sign on" in the appropriate way. Parish membership, therefore, consists of those who have identified themselves with the Church. Though there are nominal members in every tradition, this is a comparatively small fringe. Such people would tend to drop off such lists. Moreover a congregation (i.e. active participants) may well be larger than the membership list. In Wales this tendency has been reinforced by the Disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales (1922) and a strong, even dominant, Nonconformist (Free Church) tradition which itself is pluralistic and voluntaristic. Secondly British congregations are comparatively small, normally from two or three hundred to a score or so, though there are exceptions. This has always been so, though it also reflects the present radical pluralism and the recent decline in practice.

These factors affected the management of the survey. It was decided to work through local congregations rather than attempt a very broad populist response. This, therefore, meant that the sample is almost entirely made up of those that in the earlier surveys were regarded as "model" or "core" members of the Church, i.e. moderate to very active practitioners (95.6%). This put the Welsh sample, in this respect, much closer to the May 8th Group, which also consists in self-selected members. It also meant that the Welsh sample represents a cross section of denominational allegiance scattered across Wales from the urbanised south-east to the rural areas of the rest of the country. In 1996, 500 questionnaires were sent out through selected channels of which 296 were returned, i.e. 60%. Further details of the sample are provided in the appendix.

2. The theoretical framework

The questionnaire was designed to test out the relation, if any, between faith in God and the modernistic characteristics of individual autonomy and social autonomy. To do this there have to be developed certain normative criteria against which the data is measured, both in relation to the nature of religious belief in the post-Enlightenment context and the expression of personal and social autonomy. These criteria, as related to this series of surveys, have been discussed in greater detail elsewhere (see bibliographical note). Here it is only necessary to rehearse the basic conclusions.

(i). First, there is the shape of belief in God. Three models are offered as being characteristic of religious belief in reaction to the rationalistic challenge: theism, deism and pantheism. It is argued that modernism, with its emphasis on a universe which does not demand for its existence or coherence any explanations that are not immanent within itself, has undermined the classical (mediaeval?) Christian view of the world governed in its every