

ATKIN, LEON (1902-1976), minister of the Social Gospel and a campaigner for the underclass in south Wales

Name: Leon Atkin
Date of birth: 1902
Date of death: 1976
Gender: Male
Occupation: minister of the Social Gospel and a campaigner for the underclass in south Wales
Area of activity: Philanthropy; Religion
Author: D. Ben Rees

Born in Spalding, Lincolnshire on 26 July 1902, the son of a gas manager, he was one of seven children. The family lived next door to the Methodist chapel, and though they were Anglicans, Leon as a child attended their activities and he became a Methodist. The family moved in 1914 to Biddulph, and in 1916 he became a boy preacher, which brought him a great deal of publicity that he thoroughly enjoyed. After serving an apprenticeship as an engineer he was accepted as a student for the ministry and received his training at the Methodist College in Handsworth, Birmingham. Even at this time he had a series of confrontations with the college authorities but he was appointed Probationer Minister at St John's Church, Risca, Gwent, in 1930. He adopted the Social Gospel and challenged the militant Communists and the secularist movement in the mining valleys of Monmouthshire. Atkin held weekly open-air meetings in the tradition of his contemporary Donald Soper in London. For a whole year he debated every Friday night in a working men's club in Risca, and with members of the Community Party as well as with unbelievers who attended the Sunday evening services. As a rule 800 to 900 people would attend the service.

He was moved in 1932 to the Methodist Central Hall in Bargoed and in a short period of time he transformed the institution. Atkin utilised the large chapel and its schoolroom to assist the unemployed by opening the building every day of the week, and he established a shoe repairing workshop, a barber shop, and a kitchen which provided free meals. He converted part of the building as a hostel for 28 young unemployed people who were denied dole because their fathers earned a few shillings too much under the Means Test. Allowing unemployed, homeless men to lodge at the Central Hall so as to have an address which enabled them to claim benefit angered the authorities and Atkin was threatened with prosecution for 'obstructing the administration of his Majesty's Government'. His response was to criticise the Labour Party (a political party he had joined when he was 16) and the churches in Wales for being so ineffective. The leaders within the Synod were disturbed with him and arranged for him to be moved to Cornwall. Atkin refused to accept their verdict.

The Reverend Edward Morgan, a Congregationalist minister in Cardiff, heard of Atkin's refusal, and suggested to a number of chapels belonging to the denomination that they invite him as their Minister. Invitations came from Mountain Ash, Swansea and Ely in Cardiff. Atkin chose the weakest of the three, St Paul's Swansea which only had 12 members and a debt of £2,000. Immediately he began in Swansea his open-air ministry by holding meetings in a place called the Forum. His congregation grew at St Paul's from ten to two hundred on Sunday nights in the winter and to five hundred in the summer, the majority of these being holiday visitors.

Atkin adapted the crypt of the chapel as accommodation for his family, his wife May and their two children. But his relationship with the Congregational Union of England and Wales was fraught with tension as he was not conducive to any positive suggestions on their part and as he had a high profile within the Labour Party against Fascism. On 1 November 1935 he stood as a Councillor for the Labour Party and lost as he did the following year in the Victoria Ward, but in November 1936 he entered the Swansea Borough Council for Brynmelyn Ward. Many of the Christian leaders were annoyed, in particular Father J. Cahalane from St Joseph's RC Church who regarded Atkin an atheist. Atkin remained on the Council in the name of the Labour Party until 1947 when he was asked, because of his constant criticism, to stand in another ward. He refused and formed his own political party called The People's Party and he kept his seat until he lost it 17 years later in 1964.

He stood as a Parliamentary candidate at Swansea East in the by-election on 28 March 1963 as a result of the death of the MP, David Llewelyn Mort. He did well, coming third out of six, saving his deposit, and receiving 8% of the vote, more than the Communist and Plaid Cymru candidates together. The result was as follows: **Neil McBride** (Labour), 18,909; R. Owens (Liberal) 4,895; Reverend Leon Atkin (People's Party), 2,464; Miss A. P. Thomas (Conservative), 2,272; E. Chris Rees (Plaid Cymru), 1,620; Bert Pearce (Communist Party), 773.

Atkin had become a well known figure in Swansea with his beret and clerical collar, but extremely unpopular with Labour Party activists and Free Church leaders. The Labourites and the Free Churches ostracised him from all their committees.

In 1940 he discarded his pacifist views and joined the Royal Artillery, but when the United Chaplains Board heard of his decision he was invited to be an Army Chaplain. During his chaplaincy in the Netherlands he heard that his deacons at St Paul's had terminated his ministry, and when he returned to Swansea he realised that the chapel had been locked. He regained the initiative by his open-air addresses at the Forum and with the support of ex-servicemen. Atkin settled again at St Paul's, this time without the formal support of the Congregational Union. He battled with the civic authorities in Swansea for illegally showing films on Sunday evenings after the service without a music licence. He also upset the leaders of the Free Churches on his standpoint on Sunday observance.

Atkin developed his ministry among needy people, and his care for the disadvantaged and the 'down and outs' became known through his articles in the press, in particular through the *News of the World*. In the bitter winter of 1947 his chapel became a refuge for dozens of men who would otherwise have perished. He visited weekly, every Friday, the public houses of Swansea to collect money to enable poor children from Swansea to enjoy Guy Fawkes night and to be taken by him to the circus.

Atkin could not be content within any movement or organisation. He was a maverick, an extreme individualist who missed few opportunities to taunt the Nonconformists and the Labourites. His love of alcohol was a failing in the eyes of most ministers and churchgoers in West Glamorganshire. Often he would drink in Swansea in the company of **Dylan Thomas**. His life and his witness were unique and he proved a controversial figure for 42 years in Swansea and District. He died at Swansea on 27

November 1976.

Author

D. Ben Rees

Sources

Robert Pope, *Building Jerusalem* (1998), p 205

David Parry Jones, 'The Man who did not care a damn', *Western Mail*; 28 February 1961

Arnold J. James and John E. Thomas, *Wales at Westminster* (Llandysul 1981), p 165

detailed notes by the Reverend Ivor Rees, Swansea

personal knowledge

Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Leon Atkin](#)

Additional Links

Wikidata: [Q20746822](#)

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