

Unit 3: The First World War

Christian reactions to the War



Image World War One

When the War came in 1914, Christians were divided as to how to respond. At the top of the Anglican Church, a sober and cautious lead came from Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was the churchman who almost certainly had the greatest influence on politicians and military leaders during the war. When emotions ran high, and some churchmen succumbed to them, Davidson's emotional reserve, his un-dramatic, sober realism, and his feeling for the international dimension of Christianity, preserved him from indulging in the narrow patriotism which afflicted some of his brethren. At considerable personal cost, he was ready to defend unpopular attitudes, as for example over the question of reprisals on civilian targets in 1916. He received sacksful of hate mail when he used the Just War doctrine to argue that the killing and wounding of non-combatants in German cities, in retaliation for the Zeppelin raids on London, would 'permanently lower the standard of honourable conduct between nation and nation.' Davidson felt that it was the duty of the Church to give guidance on ethical issues, and he was deeply concerned lest the crisis of war should result in a gradual debasement of the moral currency.

Davidson's clear-sighted understanding of the complexity of the moral questions raised by the war may be seen in marked contrast with the attitudes displayed by A.F. Winnington-Ingram, the Bishop of London. Winnington-Ingram could always be relied upon for enthusiastic, if often naive and sentimental patriotism. He was a very effective preacher, and no English churchman was more successful at recruiting for the army. (His mirror image in Wales was the popular Calvinistic Methodist preacher, John Williams, Brynsiencyn (his home village on Anglesey) and a close friend of David Lloyd George). On the first Sunday of the war, Winnington-Ingram preached to the London Territorial Rifle Brigade. Before the service, he received a request from General Fry to 'Put a little ginger into your sermon', because some of the men had not yet volunteered for foreign service. After the sermon, the whole brigade volunteered for foreign service, as did all the men of another brigade, to whom he spoke the following day. A master of rhetoric, he asked them 'We would rather die, wouldn't we, than have England a German province?', to which there was 'a low growl of assent' (Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (1976), p. 35).

For some within the establishment, the Winnington-Ingram line was deeply inimical. The Bishop of Lincoln, Edward Lee Hicks, became president of the Church of England Peace League in 1910, and remained in the post throughout the war. The League aimed to combat the 'war-spirit' by arbitration and international friendship. As a peace advocate, Hicks hesitated about blessing regimental colours. According to his biographer, J.H. Fowler, he regarded war as 'the sport of a

corrupt gang of financiers, armament makers and imperial filibusters, made popular through an equally corrupt press'. The invasion of Belgium, however, forced him to clarify his beliefs, and prevented him from adopting a thorough going pacifist position. He came to the conclusion that German militarism must be overthrown, that the independence and neutrality of small states must be protected and that the manufacture of arms should be nationalised.

Hicks' Church of England Peace League, though a small organisation, enjoyed the support of some other highly influential Anglicans, including Bishop Gore of Oxford, Bishop Percival of Hereford, William Temple, Hastings Rashdall and George Lansbury. It would perhaps be more appropriate to see this view, and also the calm pragmatism exhibited by Randall Davidson, as more typical of the Church of England leadership's response to the War than that of the bellicose Winnington-Ingram. The war effort also received influential support from Free Church leaders. These included A.T. Guttery, President of the Primitive Methodist Conference in 1916-17, Robertson Nicholl of the Free Church of Scotland and editor of the British Weekly, the Baptist F.B. Meyer who threw his weight behind the campaign for military recruitment, and the leading Congregational theologian P.T. Forsyth, who argued for the ethical imperative of war (see document 2).

How did ordinary people react to the war? Amongst the Anglican rank and file, only about 7 per cent became conscientious objectors. Of the other main Christian groups, the Quakers maintained a corporate witness to peace, although in fact 33 per cent of Quakers of military age enlisted. Others who objected to military service were the Christadelphians, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Plymouth Brethren. Among the mainstream Free Churches, Methodists predominated as conscientious objectors. Interestingly, only a handful of Roman Catholics refused to enlist, and Jews were equally enthusiastic to demonstrate their loyalty to the nation by joining up before conscription.

In Wales, where the Nonconformity of the chapels was all prevalent, it was the influence of Lloyd George which was vital. In order to overcome the scruples of Dissent which tended towards pacifism, or at least was suspicious of government coercion, this Chancellor of the Exchequer (who became Minister of Munitions and in 1916 Prime Minister) used his Baptist connections and power of oratory to convince the Welsh that they had no alternative but to challenge the German 'bully'. Powerful preachers exemplified by John Williams and Dr T.C. Williams of Menai Bridge functioned as recruiting officers (as did Winnington-Ingram in London), and soon thousands of young Welshmen flocked to fight for the Empire and for Wales. It was only after 1916, when conscription was introduced, that an element of critique came to the fore.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 96-8, 102-5; Morgan, *Span of the Cross* 1999, pp. 41-6.

The hope for revival



Image soldiers in silhouette

At the beginning of the war, church leaders thought they detected signs of a religious revival. In the summer of 1914, the churches were full. The clergy responded to the national crisis by organizing extra services, and they were well attended. It was believed that suddenly faced with basic and ultimate realities, the nation would turn from selfishness and squabbles to respond sacrificially to a great moral cause. The sentiments expressed by Theodore Woods, the vicar of Bradford, in October 1914 were typical of the early period: 'I believe that the Church is about to have the chance of her life...The churches are crowded with worshippers, and people seem to be up against the realities in a way which three months ago would have seemed impossible.' (Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, pp.71-2).

Soon it became apparent that a religious revival was not about to occur. In 1915, a group of Anglican clergy recommended to the archbishop that a national mission be held, to harness the solemnity of the national mood, and to capture what remained of the religious fervour which had been expressed in the previous year. Under the enthusiastic chairmanship of Winnington-Ingram, and with the young William Temple as one of the secretaries, the Anglicans began what became known as the National Mission of Repentance and Hope. It is significant that it was an exclusively Anglican endeavour, although thought had been given to including Nonconformists and Roman Catholics. The organisers eventually concluded that co-operation with other religious bodies was neither desirable nor practicable. They argued that they wanted to tell the nation of its corporate redemption in Christ, and that this was what distinguished the Church from Nonconformity, which centred just on individual redemption. Their attitudes reveal the extent to which the ecumenical outlook was still very much in its infancy.

The Mission took place in the Autumn of 1916. It was a major attempt by the Church to discharge its sense of vocation to act as the Christian conscience of the nation, and to answer the criticism that it was not rising to the challenges of the hour. However, like so many other missions before and since, its greatest achievement was in strengthening the faith of those who were already Christians, rather than in reaching the unconverted. The title of the mission created confusion in the minds of many. Some asked why soldiers, who were everywhere portrayed as heroes and gladiators, should be asked to repent at all. Christian Socialists and Anglo-Catholics, meanwhile, tended to interpret 'Repentance' as the need for corporate repentance of institutional sin - for acquiescence in the sorts of conditions which had made a world war possible. Evangelicals, however, tended to interpret 'Repentance' more in terms of personal conversion from individual sins, and Winnington-Ingram in particular was accused of dwelling obsessively on drink and lust. For those Christians who were sceptical about the supposed moral value of warfare, exploiting the war as a vehicle for mission was deeply objectionable. Canon Peter Green, a highly respected parish priest in Salford wrote: 'I profoundly disbelieve the possibility of any good coming from war, and I regard all talk

about war in itself being a moral purge, and a wholesome discipline, and a school of character, and all the rest of it, as being either profoundly immoral and anti-Christian, or mere moral platitudes' (Peter Green, 'The Humiliation of War' in G.K.A. Bell (ed.), *The War and the Kingdom of God* (1916). p.60). Hensley Henson, dean of Durham, also denounced the National Mission as 'a grave, practical blunder,' believing that it had given wholly unmerited importance to foolish and bigoted people who would never otherwise have gained a hearing. If nothing else, the National Mission suggested the depth of the divisions among senior Anglicans.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 131-5; Morgan, *Span of the Cross* 1999, pp. 65-7.

Clergy at the Front



Picture of Woodbine Willie

From the beginning of the war, the question as to whether clergy should be combatants was a live and emotional issue. If some clergy were so keen to advocate conscription, why should they be exempt from fighting? The rules which forbade clergy from undertaking combatant service and the constraints under which the chaplains had to work, meant that the troops tended to regard the Church as ineffectual. This is certainly the picture which was reinforced by the ex-soldiers who wrote about their experiences after the war. Frank Richards, a private soldier, described the clergy on both sides as 'a funny crowd: they prayed for victory, and thundered from the pulpits for the enemy to be smitten hip and thigh, but did not believe in doing any of the smiting themselves'. Robert Graves, in his best-selling autobiography *Goodbye to All That*, was bitterly critical of the Church of England, but far less so of Catholicism:

In the instructors' mess we spoke freely of God and Gott as opposed tribal deities. For Anglican regimental chaplains we had little respect. If they had shown one-tenth of the courage, endurance, and other human qualities that the regimental doctors showed, we agreed, the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival. But they had not, being under orders to avoid getting mixed up in the fighting and to stay behind with the transport. Soldiers could hardly respect a chaplain who obeyed these orders, and yet not one in fifty seemed sorry to obey them. Occasionally, on a quiet day in a quiet sector, the chaplain would make a daring afternoon visit to the support line and distribute a few cigarettes, before hurrying back. But he was always much to the fore in rest-billets. Sometimes the colonel would summon him to come up with the rations and bury the day's dead; he would arrive, speak his lines, and shoot off again. The position was complicated by the respect that most of the commanding officers had for the cloth - though not all.

The colonel in one battalion I served got rid of four new Anglican chaplains in four months; finally he applied for a Roman Catholic, alleging a change of faith in the men under his command. For the Roman Catholic chaplains were not only permitted to visit posts of danger, but definitely enjoined to be wherever the fighting was, so that they could give extreme unction to the dying. And we never heard of one who failed to do all that was expected of him and more. Jovial Father Gleeson of the Munsters, when all the officers were killed or wounded the first battle of Ypres, had stripped off his black badges and, taking command of the survivors, held the line. Anglican chaplains were remarkably out of touch with their troops. The Second Battalion chaplain, just before the Loos fighting, had preached a violent sermon on the Battle against Sin, at which one old soldier behind me grumbled: 'Christ, as if one bloody push wasn't enough to worry about at a time!' A Roman Catholic padre, on the other hand, had given his men his blessing and told them that if they died fighting for the good cause they would go straight to Heaven or, at any rate, be excused a great many years in Purgatory. When I told this story to the mess, someone else said that on the eve of a battle in Mesopotamia the Anglican chaplain of his battalion had preached a sermon on the commutation of tithes. 'Much more sensible than the Battle against Sin. Quite up in the air, and took the men's minds off the fighting.' (Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (1929), from chapter 17).

Graves, Richards and Siegfried Sassoon belonged to a generation of authors who were very bitter following the war. Later evidence and more recent research has challenged the view that cynicism of this magnitude was quite so widespread. In fact the view of the bellicose chaplain skulking behind the lines away from personal danger is probably grossly unfair (Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World War* (2005)). It needs to be set against the celebrated ministries of individual chaplains such as Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy ('Woodbine Willie') and Philip ('Tubby') Clayton. Archbishop Davidson took a strong line from the beginning of the war that combatant service was incompatible with ordination. But non-combatant service, with the Royal Army Medical Corps for example, or in the chaplaincies, was perfectly acceptable. B.K. Cunningham, afterwards principal of Westcott House, the Anglican theological college, defended this position by suggesting that it would be particularly incongruous for a priest to kill and to hurl men unprepared into the presence of their Maker. His priestly commission extended to men as men, and not as members of any one nation.

The practical effect of this policy was that the clergy became labelled as shirkers, despite the fact that most of the able bodied took on war work in addition to their parish duties. Ben Tillet, the dockers' leader, was typical of those hostile to the Davidson position when he asked the TUC conference in September 1916 why the men who were so fond of talking about heaven were so afraid of going through its gates? The Congregational theologian P.T. Forsyth stated unequivocally that 'If a minister as a soldier shot a German, it would not affect his clerical vocation. No man can be a worse minister for having done his duty' (*The Christian Ethic of War* (1916), p.8.). Attacks on the clergy for being cowardly and unpatriotic were wounding. Alan Wilkinson has remarked that the clergy were liable to be thrown on the defensive when accused of not being 'real men'; at a time when masculinity was more narrowly defined than it is today, such accusations were less easily rebutted. It could be argued that the exemption of the clergy was a mistake, and that if the clergy had shared the sufferings of the trenches, this might have bridged a gulf in the post-war world. Whatever the situation was elsewhere, there is no doubt that in Wales, the work of the chaplains was well appreciated, possibly because many were Nonconformists and much less implicated with the moves of the establishment. The Calvinistic Methodist D. Cynddelw Williams was only one of

their number, and his reputation of sincerity, integrity and rectitude did not suffer as a result (Morgan, *Span of the Cross* , pp.47-55).

At the outbreak of war in 1914, there were 117 chaplains to the British Army, of whom 89 were Anglican. By the time of the Armistice, there were 3,475, of whom 1,985 were Anglican. During the war as a whole, 172 chaplains were killed, or died as a result of the conflict. Four were awarded the Victoria Cross and many others were decorated or commended for bravery. In the early years of the war, the chaplains were hampered by total lack of training, and by the regulation which prevented them from going to the front. Later on, however, the chaplains were granted greater flexibility to move about, and some had no qualms about breaking the rules in order to minister to the dying.

For some, the war revealed the extent of the alienation of the majority of the male population from the life and practice of the churches. Although 70 per cent of those who enlisted in the army described themselves as 'Cof E', the Anglican chaplains were horrified by the profound ignorance of religion which they encountered in the men in the trenches. In 1919, a report entitled *The Army and Religion* was published by an interdenominational group under the chairmanship of Bishop E.S. Talbot. It observed that although the men believed in, and often displayed, unselfishness, generosity, charity and humility, they hardly ever connected these virtues with Christianity. Christianity in their minds was associated with not swearing or drinking, and with believing that Jonah had been swallowed by the whale. The very high proportion of children who had attended Sunday schools in the 1880s and 1890s meant that most of the men at the front had some acquaintance with the central tenets of Christianity. But the remnants of this Sunday school religion were an inadequate basis for a faith which could respond to the gruesome reality of trench warfare. Christianity was seen in terms of rules and negative commandments. (Snape challenges this assumption, while the evidence from the Welsh sources shows that this was not wholly the case, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 47-55).

What was also revealed were the deeper vestiges of folk belief. One chaplain who invited his men to Holy Communion was told that it was a service for officers, or for those who were especially good. Fatalism seemed of more help to the soldiers than Christianity, and it steadied the nerves. 'If your name is on a shell, you will get it', was a widely reported saying. Men prayed under stress, and particularly before battle, but the fact that there seemed to be no providential pattern discernible in the slaughter, with one killed and another saved, encouraged fatalism and notions of predestination. Equally, the macabre sight of rotting corpses left unburied in no man's land made glib teaching about the resurrection of the body hard to assimilate. Much was made of the so-called 'angels of Mons', strange lights or mysterious figures that some soldiers claimed to have seen tending the wounded. As John Wolffe has pointed out, this supposedly miraculous intervention was not interpreted in traditional Protestant terms as a manifestation of the providential power of God, but rather as the activity of intermediate agency (John Wolffe, *God in Greater Britain*, p.241). The enormous growth of interest in spiritualism witnessed during this period was another example of the gulf between popular religious belief and mainstream Christianity.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp. 115-24; Morgan, *Span of the Cross* 1999, pp. 47-55, 69-77.

A theological response to the War



Picture of Peter Taylor Forsyth

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) responded to the outbreak of war with disillusionment and dismay. 'One day in early August 1914 stands out in my memory as a black day'. 93 German intellectuals, including all his revered theological teachers, had supported unequivocally the Kaiser's war policy. 'I suddenly realized that I could no longer follow either their ethics or understanding of the Bible or of history. For me at least, nineteenth century theology no longer had any future.' (D. Densil Morgan, *The SPCK Introduction to Karl Barth* (2010), p. 17). Liberal theology was bankrupt and there had to be a new beginning: the theology of the Word. The Barthian theology would reject the nineteenth-century synthesis between theology and culture, insisting instead on the sovereignty of God and the sinfulness and finitude of man. The Scottish Congregational P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921) is a much less well-known figure than Barth, but he is recognised as having been one of Britain's leading Nonconformist theologians. Indeed, Hastings describes him as 'probably the greatest British theologian of the Edwardian age'. Like Barth, Forsyth began as a theological liberal and had even studied under one of the Germany's most famous liberal theologians, Albrecht Ritschl in Gottingen. But Forsyth, who had been a Congregational minister since 1876, experienced a change in his religious faith in the 1880s, and was forced to re-evaluate his thinking with a greater emphasis on the atonement and humanity's need for redemption. He adopted a 'Barthian' position before Barth: 'The first charge on divine love as holy love is the practical honouring of universal righteousness. This is the profound principle lost from a religion that founds Christian ethic (sic) in the teaching of Christ and not in His death, and that cherishes love at the cost of all atonement. The end is the debasement of love (*The Christian Ethic of War* (1916), p.10).'

When he wrote *The Christian Ethic of War* (document 2) in 1916, Forsyth was the principal of Hackney College, Hampstead. This was a Congregational college for the training of ministers, and as a Congregational college principal, he had a much wider role than had Anglican college principals of the same period. His status was more akin to that of a bishop, frequently called upon to arbitrate in denominational disputes, and a key man at ordinations. The war depressed Forsyth greatly, not least because of his deep love for Germany and its people. Nevertheless, he had no time for the pacifism of his students. The book, although able, is flawed. It is, however, a trenchant defence of Britain's participation in the war and an example of the way in which the war caused fresh theological thought.

Further Reading

Clyde Binfield, 'Et Virtutem et Musas: Mill Hill School and the Great War' in W.J. Sheils (ed.), *The Church and War: Studies in Church History* 20 (1983).

Clyde Binfield, 'Principal when Pastor: P.T. Forsyth, 1876-1901' in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds.) *The Ministry, Clerical and Lay: Studies in Church History* 26 (1989).

Albert Marrin, *The Last Crusade: the Church of England in the First World War* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1974).

D. Densil Morgan, *The SPCK Introduction to Karl Barth* (London: SPCK, 2010).

Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World War* (2005).

Michael Snape, 'The Great War' in Hugh McLeod (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Christianity: world Christianities, c.1914-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 131-50.

David M. Thompson, 'War, the Nation, and the Kingdom of God: The origins of the National Mission of Repentance and Hope, 1915-1916' in W.J. Sheils (ed.), *The Church and War: Studies in Church History* 20 (1983).

Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London: SCM Press, 1978).

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