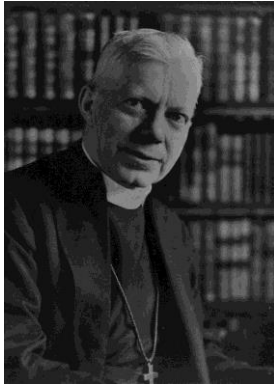


Unit 5: The Second World War and beyond: 1939 – 1959



Picture of Bishop Bell

The outbreak of the Second World War was greeted by church leaders in a much more subdued spirit than the outbreak of the First World War had been. There had been a distinct loss of innocence as far as the evils of warfare were concerned. Some senior churchmen, among them the Anglican Charles Raven, the Methodist Donald Soper and the Scottish Presbyterian George Macleod, took the pacifist position as did many of the Nonconformists in Wales. The most notable wartime English (if not British) Christian leaders were Bishop Bell of Chichester (1881-1958) and Cardinal Hinsley of Westminster. Both were controversial figures. Bell had long had an interest in ecumenical affairs and European Christianity, and maintained close links with the German Confessing Church in its struggle against the Nazis, and with other German resistance movements. He urged the British government to show restraint, and was an outspoken critic of the obliteration bombing of German cities. It was his unpopularity in government circles caused by his willingness to oppose the allies' military strategy which prevented him from succeeding Temple as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1944. Hinsley was regarded as having unquestioned loyalty to the British cause, despite the necessity for maintaining diplomatic contacts with the Fascist parts of the Catholic world. He was, as we shall see below, radical on ecumenism.

Ecumenism

The crisis of the Second World War speeded up ecumenical developments, and encouraged some activities which would have been previously unthinkable. In September 1940 the Free Church Federal Council was inaugurated in the midst of an air raid, and in 1942 the British Council of Churches was formed. In August 1941, Archbishop Lang led a mixed delegation of Anglicans and Free Churchmen to discuss the future of Christian education. It was a clear sign that the conflict which had been so apparent after the 1902 Education Act was finally at an end. Even the Roman Catholics, for a while at least, found themselves drawn into the ecumenical process. In the face of the national emergency, the ecumenical fraternity was for the first time in 1940 widened to include Cardinal Hinsley, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster who had succeeded Bourne in 1935. Hinsley was a different man from Bourne. A Yorkshireman of seventy, at first he appeared like an elderly stop gap (rather as Pope John XXIII was to do). Like Pope John, Hinsley turned out to be distinctly more liberal than any of his predecessors. Early on in the war, Hinsley, together with some lay Catholics, founded a movement called 'the Sword of the Spirit'. The purpose of the movement was to advance Catholic thinking on post-war planning, and to make it clear that Catholics should, ideally at least, throw their weight behind democracy and not totalitarianism. The Sword of the Spirit is interesting because it

was overwhelmingly a lay initiative. Only a few of the younger and more academic priests were willing to get involved. With the exception of Hinsley's own auxiliary bishop, none of the episcopal hierarchy were prepared to be associated with it, and indeed some, including the Archbishop of Liverpool, were exceedingly hostile. The Sword of the Spirit represented everything which they found objectionable: it was lay, ecumenical, intellectually progressive, decidedly English and fairly upper class (Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, p.394).

In Wales the Catholic Church had gathered strength during the previous two decades, not only under Archbishop Mostyn (d.1939), but his successor, Archbishop Michael McGrath of Cardiff, but for it the idea of ecumenism was anathema. The Welsh hierarchy, which also included Bishop Francis Vaughan of Menevia, a nephew of Cardinal Vaughan, former archbishop of Westminster, was unyielding in its loyalty to Rome when the Vatican, under Pius XI, was at its most authoritarian. The only concept of ecumenism that an ultramontane Rome countenanced was the return of separated ecclesial communities to the mother church. For Mostyn, the unity that Christ had willed for his church would occur 'in no other way than the submission of those outside the Catholic Church to the teaching and authority of that Church. Without this the true unity of Christendom is merely a pious wish which can never be attained' (Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, p. 100). McGrath - who although Irish-born had not only learned Welsh but had identified himself thoroughly with the indigenous part of his flock - repudiated the Sword of the Spirit movement totally. Instances of common prayer between Catholics and Protestants he found ignominious. They had led to 'the impudence of lay folk who ... do not know the implications of many of the acts they perform'. He told Hinsley that they had 'occasioned great scandal to our people. Both clergy and laity have been shocked'. Not even silent prayer could be allowed. Simply by associating with non-Catholics the Church was brought 'on the same level as heretical bodies ... The movement, carried on as it has been in England so far, would prove a catastrophe to the Church in Wales' (ibid., pp. 100-1). He forbade its establishment within the Welsh province. Whereas the by now disestablished Anglican 'Church in Wales' had also gathered some confidence in its current status, as yet it was too early for it to engage in ecumenical work *per se*. The one senior figure who could have led it towards a greater integration into the life of the nation - and who would also have provided a better appreciation for the spirituality if not the theology of Dissent - namely the Bishop of Llandaff, Timothy Rees, had died in 1939 (Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 88-91). Ecumenical engagement would thereafter be put on hold.

As for England, a crucial moment came in May 1941, when the Sword of the Spirit movement held an ecumenical weekend conference at Kingsway in London. The weekend coincided with one of the worst air raids of the war in which the buildings of church and state were pounded. During the appalling Saturday night air raid, the House of Commons was destroyed, and Westminster Abbey, Westminster Hall, Lambeth Palace, Charterhouse and the British Museum all seriously damaged. The following morning the shocked conference participants had to struggle over piles of rubble in order to get to the Sunday session. At the end of the meeting, and in a heady emotional atmosphere undoubtedly heightened by the severity of the blitz, Bishop Bell asked Cardinal Hinsley to lead the assembled company in saying the Lord's Prayer, which he did. In fact, this simple gesture proved to be a grave miscalculation. Hinsley was reprimanded by his fellow bishops for praying with heretics. When a new constitution for Sword of the Spirit was adopted in August 1941, non-Catholics were excluded from full membership. When the British Council of Churches got under way from 1942, and became one of the key institutions of post-war British Christianity, there was no Roman Catholic participation. Hinsley died a disappointed man in March 1943.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp.279-93; Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 273-90, 382-401; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp.78-106.

Christian responses to the welfare state

In 1942, William Beveridge published what was to become his famous Report, the purpose of which was to abolish all known causes of grave want. More than any other document, this paved the way for the welfare state, and what, until the 1980s at least and the advent of Thatcherism, was to become the characteristic social order of post-war Britain. The Labour landslide of 1945 set in motion the process by which Beveridge's proposals were put into practice, and the crowning glory of his system, the National Health Service, was unveiled in 1948. British Society had taken a decisive step to the left. Arguably, it was catching up with the type of social thought that some Christians had been expressing for decades. For many progressive Christians, the welfare state was the answer to the many prayers, petitions and conferences which had been a regular feature of the life of the British churches since the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship (COPEC) in 1924. In his presidential address to the Methodist conference in 1953, Donald Soper declared emphatically 'I thank God for the welfare state'. For much of the post-war period (in England at least), he and the Anglican Mervyn Stockwood functioned very much as unofficial chaplains to the Labour Party.

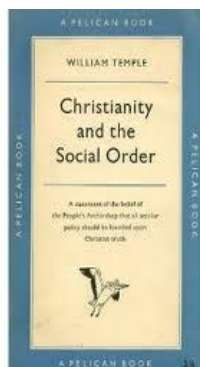


Image of the Book Christianity and the Social Order

William Temple would have been the obvious person to lead the Church of England into the post-war world, but it was not to be. He died suddenly in 1944 at the age of 63. Much of what he stood for was summed up in one of his wartime publications *Christianity and Social Order* (1942), a short book which was considered to be of such enduring significance that it was reissued with a forward by the then prime minister Edward Heath in 1976 (document 4). At the time of first publication, it sold over 140,000 copies. The content was not new, but it offered a useful distillation of the familiar Christian social message aimed at the nation (i.e. Britain), rather than the church. The early chapters traced the conventional history of the established church's involvement in social questions, from Ludlow, Maurice and Kingsley to Westcott, Gore and Scott Holland and the COPEC conference. This historical perspective was intended to be the grounding for Temple's contention that Christian involvement in the cutting edge of social questions was nothing new. But he drew back from being as radical as might have been expected, and from the kinds of statements that he had made as a young man. Whilst it was fine for individual Christians to be involved in politics, he argued, the Church itself should stand aside, and never go beyond the articulation of general principles. This should have been comforting to those worried critics who accused the new archbishop of openly preaching socialism. Yet it seemed woolly: 'it is very seldom that Christianity offers a solution of practical problems; what it can do is lift the parties to a level of thought and feeling at which the problem disappears' wrote Temple. The book concluded on a practical note, with a chapter on post-war reconstruction, 'The Task Before Us' and an appendix with 'A Suggested Programme'. Temple made it plain that he was making these suggestions as a Christian citizen, not as an archbishop.

In Wales, it was the Nonconformists who were most aware of the need to implement social change of a Christian kind. The fact, though, was that the effectiveness of chapel religion was being challenged by both Anglicans and Catholics on the one hand, and by secularists from the other. 'You

Welsh!', exclaimed the character in *A Withered Root*, a novel by Rhys Davies, 'A race of mystical poets who have gone awry in some way ... Your brilliant children leave you because of the hopeless stagnation of your miserable Nonconformist towns; the religion of your chapels is a blight on the flowering souls of your young' (Quoted in Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 169-70). Although it was still massively influential and a mainstay of national identity, during the 1920s and early '30s it was forced to respond to fundamental doctrinal changes, not least those instigated by the disciples of Karl Barth (D. Densil Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (2010), pp. 48-62, 154-9), while by the Second World War and beyond, it found itself being criticized for social conformism and an insipid conventionality. Decline seemed inevitable, and by the 1950s the term 'the crisis of Nonconformity' was being used repeatedly. Its over-enculturized nature; its narrow, individualized ethical sense - the so-called 'Nonconformist conscience' - ; its puritan, life-denying aesthetic; and its bleak over-seriousness, all militated against its continued influence. Nominal Christianity had become all too prevalent, while vital religion seemed to be at a premium. One commentator spoke of 'these recent withered and surly years ... these days of indefinite faith, of hazy half-belief, of lukewarm, occasional worship, of icy listening and blatant neglect of responsibility' (Lewis Valentine, quoted in Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, p. 211 but see the analysis on pp. 205-13). Although ecumenism was one of the potential engines of reform (ibid., pp. 215-6), Welsh Christianity, Nonconformity especially, was not best equipped to respond creatively to the social changes of the time.

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, many references in Chapter 5, pp. 323ff.; Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, many references in Part IV. pp.403 ff.; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp.148-80.

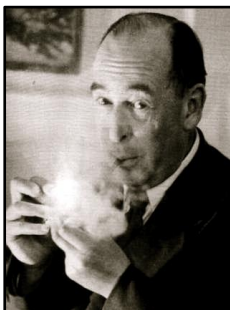
The 1950s: the evangelical decade

The fact that the coming of the welfare state was seen by many Christians as the fulfillment of the process which the churches had initiated in COPEC had the rather paradoxical effect of making them less interested in social questions in the 1950s. The major evils of the first half of the twentieth century - unemployment, bad housing, lack of access to healthcare, poverty and lack of educational opportunity - were being dealt with. Even nationalisation, for which the churches had also been calling, was being taken in hand. In the Church of England, this shift in emphasis away from social questions was in part due to a change in the leadership. William Temple, who had been at the centre of Christian social issues for nearly half a century, was replaced with the rather staid and uncontroversial Geoffrey Fisher. Fisher had little interest in social and political questions, though he could from time to time issue a head masterly rebuke to the government, as he did over the Suez crisis in the 1950s. Unlike his two immediate predecessors at Canterbury, Lang and Temple, Fisher had not been influenced by the Anglo-Catholic movement, and he tended to interpret 'sin' more in personal than in institutional terms. Meanwhile, Cyril Garbett, the archbishop of York who as an old-fashioned high Tory had been an effective campaigner on certain social issues, particularly housing, was replaced by Michael Ramsey. Ramsey's interests were in theology and spirituality, rather than social or political questions. He succeeded Fisher as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1961.

With social problems at home seemingly under control, Christians with a commitment to social radicalism increasingly began to turn their attentions overseas. A particular focus was South Africa, where the Anglican priest Trevor Huddleston emerged as the leading British critic of apartheid. He published his stinging indictment of racial discrimination, *Naught for Your Comfort* in 1956. British Christian interest in South Africa remained intense until the freeing of Nelson Mandela in the late 1980s. But whilst old problems were being solved, new ones were emerging, the most pressing in the late 1950s being the use of nuclear power and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The newly-formed Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was a cause with which many Christians could identify.

For the churches (Welsh Nonconformity notwithstanding), the 1950s was a period of modest growth. After the austerity, disruption and relatively small attendances of the Second War, the Churches in Britain experienced something of a revival, with increasing numbers of communicants, ordinands and churchgoers. All of the English denominations as well as Catholics and Anglicans in Wales (Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp. 181-205) shared in the phenomenon. In 1959, the Roman Catholic Church in Britain experienced an all-time peak in its number of adult converts (13,735) whilst the Church of England probably received about 15,000 new adult members a year. The later 1950s also witnessed the rapid development of the Black-led churches, as newly-arrived immigrants found that they were either unwelcome or uncomfortable in the mainstream British churches. From 77 Black congregations in 1962, it was estimated that there were 2,500 such congregations by the mid 1980s. Black Christians also found a home in existing Pentecostal congregations, which also expanded fast during the second half of the twentieth century.

The 1950s was the first decade of the twentieth century in which it can truly be said that Evangelicalism, mostly but not exclusively within the Church of England, was in the ascendancy and Anglo-Catholicism on the wane. Archbishop Fisher's sympathy towards Evangelicalism set the tone at the top. The ethos of university religion was increasingly set by evangelical Christian Unions, which were often student run, rather than led by chaplains. The once mighty Student Christian Movement became a shadow of its former self, although it continued to have a presence on some campuses for several more decades. Above all Evangelicalism in the 1950s was associated with the crusades of the youthful Billy Graham. In 1954 he conducted a three-month 'Greater London Crusade'. Over 1.3 million people heard him speak, and large numbers responded. The following year he led a similar, 'All Scotland Crusade'. A distinct new generation of ordinands and ministerial candidates emerged who had been converted as a result of the influence of Billy Graham. In the 1950s, to be a Protestant Christian seemed to become synonymous with being an Evangelical in a way which it probably would not be again until the 1990s.



Picture of C.S. Lewis

C.S. Lewis (1895-1963) was himself sympathetic to Evangelicalism, and has been much taken up by Evangelicals, both during his lifetime and since. He was probably the most popular British Christian writer of the twentieth century, and he remains very popular. He was a convert to Christianity (one of the influences on him was Chesterton's *Everlasting Man*) and a layman who expressed the faith with a clarity that many found compelling. Although his popularity has continued unabated for several generations, his writings are perhaps particularly emblematic of the mood and tone of the fifties. Unlike many Christian writers, Lewis always seemed to have had a clear sense of who his intended audience was, whether it was the children for whom he wrote the *Narnia* books, or the enquirers or new Christians for whom he wrote *The Screwtape Letters* or *Mere Christianity*. All these popular works were produced in addition to his academic output, for Lewis was a literary scholar; an English don at Magdalen College Oxford from 1925 to 1956, and professor of medieval and Renaissance literature at Cambridge from 1956 until his death. *Mere Christianity* (document 5) began as a series of radio talks broadcast on the BBC over five Sundays early in 1942, but it was first published (with other radio talks) in book form in 1952. In tone *Mere Christianity* changed little from its earlier radio talk format, and Lewis's 'voice' emerges clearly, exhibiting the confident, reasoned

and undenominational tone that characterises so much of his writing. (Three MTh students who read this text for the taught version of his module commented on the similarities between it and the *Alpha Course* - a hugely popular 1990's introduction to Christianity produced by Evangelical Anglicans. They noted, however, that the content of Lewis was rather more substantial than the *Alpha* material, as befitted the more religiously literate world of the mid-twentieth century.)

cf. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, pp.279-93, 321-7; Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 453-60. 493-5 etc; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, pp.181-205.

Christianity and culture

The 1950s were a generally fertile period for the relationship between Christianity and the arts, to some extent the result of churchmen and artists building on relationships which had been cemented earlier in the century. Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) was perhaps the greatest British religious painter of the twentieth century. Much of his work had been completed earlier in the century, some of it directly in response to the First World War, but in the 1950s his paintings began to be appreciated in a new way, and Spencer was knighted just before his death in 1959. Spencer had been brought up as a Methodist in Cookham, and served in the First World War as a private soldier, first as a medical orderly near Bristol, then in Macedonia. As a result, he began to interpret his religious vision in terms of these wartime experiences. This came to fruition in a cycle of murals he painted for Sandham memorial chapel, Burghclere, Hampshire (1927-9). The paintings depict soldiers performing their ordinary tasks, in apparently secular settings. The central panel on the east wall, entitled the *Resurrection of the Soldiers*, depicts post-resurrection soldiers and horses in a scene dominated by piles of white crosses. Christ sits inconspicuously in the middle distance, receiving the crosses, not as a judge, but rather as a quartermaster might collect in rifles at the end of a military campaign (Neil MacGregor with Erika Langmuir, *Seeing Salvation: Images of Christ in Art* (2000), pp.217-221). The *Resurrection of the Soldiers* prefigures Spencer's famous later work, *Resurrection at Cookham*, a surprisingly homely depiction of the dead clambering out of their graves in the churchyard of his native parish. *Resurrection at Cookham* was, as Hastings puts it, 'a vision of incarnation not transcendence', an earthy 'consecration of triviality, the canonisation of village gossip' (Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, p.502). It was a strikingly original interpretation of the theme of the resurrection of the dead. For the most part, it seems to have gained the approval of Christians.



Stanley Spencer's 'Resurrection at Cookham'

The most significant patron of the arts to emerge from the Church in England was Walter Hussey, vicar of St Matthew's Northampton, and later dean of Chichester, a friend to many artists from the 1940s to the 1970s. Hussey had an almost audacious willingness to cultivate the leading artists and musicians of the day. To celebrate the golden jubilee of St Matthew's Northampton in 1943, he commissioned *Rejoice in the Lamb* from Benjamin Britten and a fanfare from Michael Tippett. He booked an organ recital from George Thalben-Ball and engaged a further recital from Peter Pears,

the outstanding tenor, accompanied on the piano by Benjamin Britten. He arranged for the BBC Symphony Orchestra to do an outside broadcast (rare in those days). Finally, he commissioned Henry Moore to sculpt *Madonna and Child*. During his time at Northampton, Graham Sutherland, W.H. Auden, Malcolm Arnold, Lennox Berkeley and Gerald Finzi all worked for Hussey. He attracted the attention of Bishop Bell, who decided that his services should be secured for Chichester cathedral. In 1955, Hussey became dean of Chichester, beginning a twenty-year period in which he commissioned work from Leonard Bernstein (*Chichester Psalms*), William Walton, Marc Chagall and John Piper, in addition to many of those with whom he had worked earlier in Northampton. Dean Hussey's activities were by no means universally welcomed, and there were members of the chapter who worried that he was diverting the cathedral from its proper mission, and that money which might otherwise be given to cathedral purposes was being used for artistic commissions. Hussey showed little interest in supporting new or younger artists. He tended to seek commissions from the same circle of friends until the 1970s when these friends were either dying or elderly, and Hussey himself retired.

Artists, however, liked the fact that Hussey accepted them easily. '...if only all vicars had been so understanding as you are' Peter Pears wrote to Hussey 'I don't believe the church would have lost so many of her artist sons' (Garth Turner, '"Aesthete, Impresario, and Indomitable Persuader": Walter Hussey at St Matthew's Northampton, and Chichester Cathedral' in *The Church and the Arts: Studies in Church History* 28 (1995), p.533). Benjamin Britten was another frequently-commissioned musician who became one of Hussey's circle. Britten (1913-76) was arguably the greatest British composer of the twentieth century, and the writer of much innovative religious music. Although brought up in a conventional Anglican household, Britten had an ambivalent relationship with organised Christianity. He caused some offence with an early work *Our Hunting Fathers* (1936) which was regarded as disrespectful because it could be interpreted as containing a passage that parodied the Trinity. Britten wrote the work against a background of weekly Saturday night rows with his mother about his unwillingness to attend Holy Communion on the following day (Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (1992), p.82). Nevertheless, the point about Britten and many of his contemporary musicians, artists and poets, is that although they may have had difficulties with conventional Christian belief and practice, few of them moved so far from Christianity that they were unwilling to use their creativity to explore religious themes. C. Day Lewis was unusual in declining an invitation from Hussey on the grounds that his outlook was too agnostic.

The post-war rebuilding of the cathedrals at Coventry and Llandaff, and the building of Guildford, provided a unique opportunity for the commissioning of some major artistic works. At Llandaff, Jacob Epstein provided the huge figure of *Christ in Majesty*, controversially attached to the organ case and mounted on a solid concrete pulpitum. Stained glass was made by John Piper and Patrick Reyntiens. At Coventry the cathedral was completely new, rather than simply restored. It was consecrated on 30 May 1962, with the first performance of Britten's *War Requiem*, perhaps his most important work. The cathedral was designed by Basil Spence, featured glass from Piper and Reyntiens and was dominated by Graham Sutherland's tapestry *Christ in Glory*. Meanwhile, in Liverpool, a totally different modernist style of cathedral was being constructed for the Roman Catholics. Again, Piper and Reyntiens supplied the glass for the great lantern. The mid-twentieth century was the moment when artists and churchmen felt most able to work together.

cf. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, pp. 491-504.

Further reading

- David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), chapter 8.
- G.I.T. Machin, *Churches and Social Issues in Twentieth Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), chapters 4 & 5
- Stuart Mews, 'The Sword of the Spirit: A Catholic Cultural Crusade of 1940' in *The Church and War: Studies in Church History* 20 (1983)
- D. Denis Morgan, *Barth Reception in Britain* (London: T & T Clark, 2010), chapters 7 to 10.
- Michael J. Walsh, 'Ecumenism in Wartime Britain: The Sword of the Spirit and Religion and Life, 1940-1945' *Heythrop Journal*, July 1982.
- Alan M. Suggate, 'The Christian Churches in England since 1945: Ecumenism and Social Concern' in Sheridan Gilley & W.J. Sheils (eds) *A History of Religion in Britain: Practice and Belief from Pre-Roman Times to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).
- Garth Turner, '"Aesthete, Impresario, and Indomitable Persuader": Walter Hussey at St Matthew's Northampton, and Chichester Cathedral' in *The Church and the Arts: Studies in Church History* 28 (1995).