

CHRISTIAN PACIFISM IN THE ERA OF TWO WORLD WARS

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‘WHENEVER THE actual historical situation sharpens the issue, the debate whether the Christian Church is, or ought to be, pacifist, is carried on with fresh vigour both inside and outside the Christian community.’¹ Thus wrote Reinhold Niebuhr, the American commentator on Christian ethics, in 1940, having himself been converted first to pacifism and then back again in the course of the interwar period. Final agreement in this debate is, of course, improbable. But this paper will argue that the Christian cases for pacifism and non-pacifism alike were clarified, at least in Britain and for several decades, by the extraordinary ‘sharpening’ of the issue afforded by the ‘actual historical situation’ in the era of the two world wars. The shock of the first world war produced unprecedented support for Christian pacifism; and the aggressions of the 1930s, culminating in the crisis of 1940–1 when Britain faced the possibility of invasion and defeat, provided a series of tests which only the most rigorously thought-out version of that faith could survive—but, having survived them, it could survive anything.

This clarification was not confined to pacifism of Christian inspiration, so it is helpful to begin with a consideration of the characteristics of pacifism in general. For all its apparent simplicity as a belief, it raises three difficulties which must each be discussed: difficulties over its definition, over its orientation towards practical politics, and over its inspiration or justification.² The definition of pacifism here adopted is that in normal usage since the mid-1930s: the personal conviction that, war being the greatest evil, it is wrong to take part in it or to support or condone it in any way. Defining it in this way has the effect of excluding two categories

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, [*Why the Christian church is not pacifist* (London 1940)] p 7.

² This framework was first developed in Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914–1945: the defining of a faith* (Oxford 1980), to which the reader is referred for a justification of the generalisations advanced here. The present paper reiterates some of the arguments of the book, but also uses some new illustrative material.

of anti-war belief often wrongly claimed to be pacifist. The first encompasses objections to fighting which fall short of being principled objections to war as such. For instance, some objectors do not regard war as wrong, merely their personal participation in it (on the grounds that, as the elite or the elect, they should be exempted). Certain members of the Bloomsbury group and certain millenarian sects fell into this category during the first world war. They are here described as 'quasi-pacifist'. The second category of beliefs excluded by the present definition is that to which the word 'pacifist' was understood to refer for the first three decades after it was coined soon after 1900. 'Pacifism' then implied, not its more precise modern meaning, but no more than the belief that war was a poor way to resolve disputes—a rejection of militarism, in other words. Since this position would now be described as merely 'pacific' rather than pacifist, the word used to describe it will be—in accordance with a developing convention—*pacifist*.³ Most members of the British (and other countries') peace movement have been *pacifists*, of course, since they have mainly pinned their hopes for war-prevention on to political causes such as the establishment of international institutions, or of socialism, or the abolition of nuclear weapons, rather than on to personal renunciation of war. Unlike pacifists, they would be willing to resort to military force if it were essential in order to achieve or protect such reforms. Yet, although the ablest members of the peace movement have usually understood the differences between pacifism on the one hand and *pacifism* or quasi-pacifism on the other, clarity concerning the definition of pacifism has understandably not always been achieved.

Clear-minded *pacifists* have, however, commonly condemned pacifists for being concerned more to salve their consciences rather than to prevent war. This relationship (if any) of pacifist belief to practical politics has been its second difficulty. In effect pacifists have adopted one of three orientations towards politics. Some have insisted that pacifism is practical politics—that nonviolence would be the most successful national defence policy. The difficulty of

³ The term *pacifist* (here italicised both in recognition of its etymological artificiality and to avoid visual confusion with pacifist) was first used in this sense by A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (London 1957) p 51n. Reviewing my book, Mr Taylor noted that the word was 'borrowed from me and which I gladly lend him' (*London Review of Books* 2 Oct. 1980 p 4).

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this approach has been meeting both the practical objection that it would not work against an adversary like Hitler or the imperial Japanese and the theoretical objection for some Christian pacifists that, if it worked, it would do so as a sophisticated tactic for 'winning' a conflict whereas pacifism should aspire to effect reconciliation and thereby abolish conflict.⁴ A larger second group has argued that pacifists should support, as interim improvements, *pacifist* remedies for war such as the curbing of aggression by sanctions applied by the League of Nations or United Nations. But this raises the question: can a pacifist support the use of, say, an international army in which he would feel personally unable to serve? The third orientation towards politics has been to admit that pacifism is a faith rather than a political recipe—that pacifists cannot expect to prevent war by following their consciences and may indeed even hasten it; their duty is to witness to the values of peace while waiting for the rest of humanity to be converted to the same way of thinking. As will be seen, this sectarian orientation (as it may be called) has come to be accepted by the most thoughtful pacifists; but it can have little mass appeal because it is not 'a stop-the-war trick'.⁵

In addition to these difficulties of defining pacifism and determining its orientation towards the political world, all pacifists have faced problems in justifying why they are pacifists in the first place. Three types of inspiration for pacifism are found. The first is political, claiming that, for example, a socialist or anarchist must also be a pacifist. The second deduces pacifism from humanitarian beliefs of various sorts, such as humanism, rationalism and utilitarianism. The third inspiration is religious: most commonly the claim that Christianity is a pacifist religion. Disagreements between pacifists moved by different inspiration have presented surprisingly few problems for the pacifist movement (although each inspiration has tended to respond differently to political circumstances). More difficult has been the task of justifying to their fellow socialists, humanists, Christians, or whatever, why the

⁴ For this reason several Christian pacifists were disappointed with Gandhi when they met him in the autumn of 1931. See the *Friend* 18 Dec. 1931 p 1150; London, British Library of Political and Economic Science, Fellowship of Reconciliation, minutes of executive committee 18 Nov. 1931; London, Friends' House Library, minutes of Friends Peace Committee 5 June 1930.

⁵ A phrase used by the sectarian pacifist journal *Reconciliation* Aug. 1935 pp 145–7.

pacifist interpretation of their common inspiration is in fact the correct one.

Each of these difficulties—over definition, orientation, and inspiration—was confronted in the era of the two world wars, as an examination of the evolution of Christian pacifist thought can now reveal. Prior to the first world war, despite being able to trace its ancestry back almost two millennia to the early church, it was surprisingly inchoate. The problems of definition were wholly unresolved. For one thing, much of what passed for Christian pacifism was quasi-pacifist. One interpretation of the pacifism (whether complete or partial) of the early church takes this view, attributing refusal to bear arms to a dislike of pagan ritual, notably the idolatrous military oaths required by the Roman army, rather than to a rejection of war itself. But, whatever the truth about the early church, it was clear that Christian pacifism was wholly sustained for fifteen centuries after Constantine's conversion by a series of unorthodox sects, most of which were quasi-pacifist. The major exception was the Society of Friends, held in high esteem by mainstream Christianity, which itself, partly under Quaker influence began in the nineteenth century to acquire a tiny pacifist minority of its own. But when the first world war broke out quasi-pacifists still outnumbered pacifists. The largest single category of conscientious objectors was the Christadelphians, who were prepared, unlike true pacifists, to work in munitions factories;⁶ so, in the words of one objector: 'It was assumed that every pacifist . . . was a narrow-minded religionist, basing his creed upon the literal reading of Biblical texts And indeed there *were* many conscientious objectors of this type'⁷

As well as confusion with quasi-pacifism, there was confusion with *pacifism*. Before 1916 there was no conscription in Britain to sort pacifists out from mere war-haters: it is noteworthy that one of the most active Christian pacifists in the first world war, the Revd. Leyton Richards, had already been able to clarify his views as a result of seeing the military training provisions of the 1910 Australian defence act in operation while spending three years as a congregationalist minister in Melbourne. Another pre-war

⁶ Their objection was to coming under military authority. See John Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (London 1970) pp 88–9.

⁷ Gilbert Thomas, *Autobiography 1891–1946* (London 1946) p 128.

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experience which had alerted certain pacifists, including Stephen Hobhouse and the Revd. Cecil Cadoux, to the full implications of their faith was reading Tolstoy. But the majority of Christians believing themselves to be 'pacifists' were lulled by the length of time which had elapsed since Britain's last major involvement in European war into believing that war was unlikely and British participation in it even more so, which meant that it was not important for them to decide whether they were pacifists or *pacifists*. The major pacifist society, the Peace Society (which had been established by Quakers in 1816 as the Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace) had become penetrated by *pacifism*, so much so that its chairman in 1914 supported the war.⁸ The major study of Christian pacifism to appear at this time was, significantly, preoccupied to a considerable extent with showing that Christian pacifism had not been superseded by, and was not incompatible with, the *pacifist* analysis of writers such as Norman Angell.⁹

It was thus in the crisis of August 1914 that many anti-militarists, such as bishop Hicks of Lincoln, an advocate of arbitration and former pro-Boer, had to make up their minds somewhat hastily whether they were pacifists or *pacifists*. Reeling from the shock of Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality, most—including Hicks—decided they were in the latter category and that the war had to be fought in order to end war. Some of these later believed that they had thereby taken the wrong decision: for example, William Robinson, who served in the war and afterwards became principal of Overdale college, Selby Oak, and a pacifist who was convinced that in 1914 people like himself 'were caught napping. They had been in a sense unconscious pacifists, but with no thought-out convictions. Then the challenge came . . . It was necessary to act quickly. How were they to act? . . . There was no definite code to which they could appeal . . .'¹⁰

This confusion of pacifism with quasi-pacifism or with *pacifism* before 1914 was related to its problems concerning orientation and inspiration. Because so much hope was vested in *pacifist* measures

⁸ Oxford, Bodleian Library Gainford Papers, J. A. Pease to J. B. Hodgkin, 4 Aug. 1914.

⁹ By the Quaker William E. Wilson: *Christ and War: the reasonableness of disarmament on Christian, humanitarian and economic grounds* (London 1913 and revised edn. 1914).

¹⁰ For Hicks, see Alan Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London 1978) p 27; for Robinson, see his *Christianity is Pacifism* (London 1933) p 9.

such as free trade, arbitration and disarmament, it was simply assumed that pacifists should collaborate with them. Any special obligations incurred by being pacifist rather than *pacifist* were largely ignored. And the prevalence of quasi-pacifism illustrated how poorly the Christian inspiration for pacifism had been expounded: with too much sterile text-swapping and too little theological inquiry.

The subsequent refinement of Christian pacifist thinking took place in three stages: under the impact of the first world war; while the League of Nations was being challenged from 1931 to 1935; and under the shadow of Hitler from 1936 to 1940. The contribution of the first world war was thus important but far from decisive. On the question of definition, the minority which stood out against the tide of jingoism and crusading *pacifism* in August 1914 made clearer the distinctiveness of pacifism as an anti-war belief. So, *a fortiori*, did the introduction of conscription in 1916, which elicited from heroic absolutists such as Hobhouse a principled objection to compulsory service of any kind which contrasted with the willingness of most quasi-pacifists to do anything which exempted them from combatant service. Yet it was possible to oppose the war or be a conscientious objector for non-pacifist reasons (some socialists, for instance, rejected the war because it was 'imperialist' and not a people's war, and conscription could be objected to on purely voluntarist grounds) and quasi-pacifists were numerous, so that some confusion could and did persist.

This partial clarification of the meaning of pacifism was reflected in the setting up of a new society that was explicitly Christian and pacifist: the Fellowship of Reconciliation (F.o.R.), a discreetly named body founded at a necessarily unobtrusive gathering at Cambridge in the last days of 1914 (and still in existence). The F.o.R. formulated a five-point 'Basis', which argued that 'Love, as revealed and interpreted in the life and death of Jesus Christ, involves us in more than we have yet seen, that it is the only power by which evil can be overcome, and the only sufficient basis of human society.' Those accepting this had to do so 'fully, both for themselves and in their relation to others, and to take the risks involved in doing so in a world which does not as yet accept it.' F.o.R. members of whom there were 8,000 by 1918 were called 'to a life of service for the enthronement of Love in

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personal, social, commercial and national life.' This established that Christian pacifism had to be justified in terms of the essential spirit of Christianity which applied to all aspects of political life, rather than a selective treatment of ambiguous texts about force. Yet, in seeking to apply its Basis the F.o.R. was, as a Congregationalist founder-member, the Revd. W. E. Orchard, noted, too 'heterogeneous', encompassing as it did a handful of Anglicans and Christian socialists as well as Quakers and all varieties of nonconformist. Even at the end of the war, Orchard admitted, 'a really Christian pacifist philosophy was still in need of formulation'.¹¹

Progress in expounding the inspiration for Christian pacifism was matched by a similar awareness that, if pacifism was theologically correct, its political consequences were secondary. This view was accepted during the war by a majority of members of the F.o.R., which remained a quietist organisation, and by the leading Christian conscientious objectors, who accepted that, since pacifism was justified with reference to the sanctity of the individual conscience, it could not be made the subject of a mass propaganda campaign (which could at best produce superficial, rather than truly conscientious, conversions). Nevertheless some F.o.R. members and conscientious objectors wished to see their stand as a politically-effective campaign against the military machine. The difficulty in taking this view is always that, once political effectiveness is defined as the objective, then pacifism is reduced to being a mere means to that end—and a means, moreover, which may well have to be discarded in favour of a more obviously practical one. This happened to many of the socialist pacifists who in 1916 had seen resistance to conscription as the best available form of protest against militarism, but who by 1917–18 were coming to see that an increasingly war-weary labour movement offered a far more potent weapon against war than a few thousand conscientious objectors ever could. In other words, pacifism itself could do little; it would be a broader *pacifist* campaign that would end the war if anything did. Socialist pacifists were thus faced with a choice. Some opted to remain pacifists, while abandoning their belief that pacifism itself could have an independent political impact, and accepting that if they wished to work to end the war they had to collaborate with

¹¹ W. E. Orchard, *From Faith to Faith* (London 1933) p 122.

pacifist measures. But this merely prompted the question: why remain a pacifist? In response to this, others switched from pacifism to *pacifism*. Christian pacifists were less excited by the prospect of revolutionary activity against war by the labour movement; but when in 1920 the League of Nations was set up, stimulating hopes that it could prevent war by applying moral, economic, or, in the last resort, military sanctions, they were among its most enthusiastic supporters. Although compared with the years before 1914 the difference between pacifism and *pacifism* was more generally understood, many pacifists resumed their pre-war habit of assuming that *pacifist* schemes would prevent war, without, however, facing up to the question of how it was possible for a pacifist to endorse League of Nations sanctions. Characteristic of the state of Christian peace thinking after the first world war was the way pacifists collaborated with *pacifists* in the 'Christ and peace' campaign, a series of meetings started in the autumn of 1929, the main achievement of which was the declaration by the Church of England's 1930 Lambeth conference: 'War as a method of settling international disputes is incompatible with the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ'—an ambiguous statement, which was interpreted as anodyne *pacifist*.

It was not surprising, therefore, that those newly converted to Christian pacifism in the 1920s were not attracted by its potential for war-prevention. In several cases they were Anglicans (whose importance in the formerly Quaker- and nonconformist-dominated pacifist movement dates from this time), who viewed pacifism as an ecclesiastical purgative—an issue of principle on which the Church of England could redeem itself for its wartime worldliness. Thus the Revd. H.R.L. ('Dick') Sheppard declared himself a pacifist in 1927 while going through a phase of acute 'impatience' with the church; and canon Charles Raven did the same three years later because he regarded pacifism as the best issue with which to follow up the COPEC movement (so called after the much vaunted but ultimately disappointing conference on politics, economics and citizenship he had co-organised at Birmingham in April 1924). When pressed, by socialists in particular, to explain why pacifism was chosen as the key issue instead of the other forms of exploitation condoned by modern society, pacifists began to evolve a domino-theory of reform. Thus Leyton Richards argued in 1929 that it was

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not irrational to isolate the problem of war from those other problems and practical difficulties which call for the exercise of coercive force in human relationships. The history of moral achievement suggests that organised evil is eliminated from the common life of man by a succession of attacks in detail rather than a mass attack all along the line.¹²

At any stage in history, Richards and others argued, there was a key issue which could become the thin end of a reforming wedge. The abolition of slavery had started off a series of humanitarian reforms in the nineteenth century. The renunciation of war would, they claimed, be the equivalent issue for the twentieth century; thus as Raven later put it, it would be 'in the campaign against war' that the first blow against 'the evils of competitive capitalism' could be struck.¹³ The problem with this argument was, of course, that it was far harder for a nation to opt unilaterally out of war than out of the slave trade. The argument saw pacifism primarily as a domestic political issue—a test of the idealism of the church or a strategy for moralising society. The international context was ignored, mainly because *pacifism* seemed to be in the ascendant.

It was thus only when the international situation began to deteriorate and *pacifism* began to falter in the 1930s that pacifism could make further progress. Before the Japanese attack on Manchuria in September 1931, it had been assumed that in practice moral pressure brought to bear by the League of Nations would be enough to prevent aggression. When the Japanese flouted world public opinion, this view had to be revised. One immediate Christian pacifist response (devised by Maude Royden, the Christian socialist preacher at the Guildhouse in Pimlico, and backed by Dick Sheppard, the Revd. Herbert Gray and the Revd. Donald Soper, among others) was to step up the moral pressure by despatching an unarmed Peace Army to interpose itself between the Japanese and Chinese troops. The idea proved impractical, however; and after Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, most pacifists remained convinced that the League of Nations still offered the most practical means of war-prevention, even though it was clear after the Manchurian crisis that economic sanctions at

¹² Leyton Richards, *The Christian's Alternative to War: An Examination of Christian Pacifism* (London 1929) p 58.

¹³ Charles Raven, *Is War Obsolete? [A study of the conflicting claims of religion and citizenship* (London 1935)] p 52.

least, if not military measures, would be necessary. Could pacifists collaborate with such measures? On the question of economic sanctions, an increasing number of pacifists became aware that a blockade, which would involve starving the civilian population, was objectionable. Yet it continued to be widely hoped that a trade boycott would be both Christian and effective;¹⁴ not until the Abyssinian war of 1935–6 was it realised that an effective sanction, however humane, would provoke a military retaliation. More helpful for clarifying pacifist thinking in the meantime was the proposal made by a number of League supporters as a result of the Manchurian setback, that the League should be equipped with an international police force. Some Christian pacifists such as Leyton Richards came to admit in 1934 that ‘an International Police Force equipped for military operations. . . would be a striking and significant step towards the realisation of a Christian world order.’ But Richards also argued that a pacifist ‘cannot himself enlist in an International Police Force’. He admitted he was thereby applying a double standard, but found it hard to produce a coherent justification for it.¹⁵ Others found difficulty too. A humanitarian pacifist, C. E. M. Joad, put forward what amounted to a quasi-pacifist argument for exemption from a socially necessary duty because his refined sensibility would find the experience less congenial than would an ordinary citizen; and a writer in the F.o.R.’s journal recommended that pacifists simply evade the issue.¹⁶ But a clear answer was obtained from Charles Raven, a former dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, who had in 1932 returned to that university as regius professor of divinity. He admitted that pacifists seemed to be saying: ‘Eighty per cent of you are unchristian, and of course may fight: I am a Christian and I won’t.’ But what they were really doing was accepting different vocations and admitting the limits of revelation. ‘Absolute truth is and must remain beyond us. . .’, he insisted. ‘Hence it by no means follows that a judgment valid for me is necessarily valid for another.’¹⁷ He further insisted that pacifism had its own practical contribution to offer to peacemaking, because a declaration of pacifism by the

¹⁴ See the Revd. E. N. Porter Goff, *The Christian and the Next War* (London 1933) pp 76–82.

¹⁵ Leyton Richards, *The Christian’s Contribution to Peace: a constructive approach to international relationships* (London 1935) pp 137–8, 142–3.

¹⁶ *New Statesman* 25 Nov. 1933 p 653; *Reconciliation* May 1934 pp 118–9.

¹⁷ *Reconciliation* March 1934 p 66; Charles Raven, *Is War Obsolete?* p 86.

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British churches would have a major (but unspecified) impact on the international situation. Thus, as explained by Raven, a pacifist endorsing as a second-best the establishment of an international police force in which he was not prepared to serve, was humbly doing his own thing for peace while being careful to give support to those whose vocations differed from his.

In addition to this discussion of pacifism's orientation, more thought was being given at this time to its Christian inspiration. For example, in 1933 William Robinson's *Christianity is Pacifism* made clear that pacifists regarded the new testament as a higher source of revelation than the old; and in 1934 Canon Stuart Morris began stressing the importance for pacifism of the idea of redemption (interpreting the pacifist role as that of a redemptive minority).

This intellectual activity was matched by organisational advance in the years 1933–5. Pacifist groups were established within most Christian denominations: in May 1933 Leyton Richards reactivated the Christian Pacifist Crusade within the Congregational church which had first been set up in 1926; and in November 1933 the Revd. Henry Carter, himself converted from *pacificism* to pacifism earlier in the year, launched the Methodist Peace Fellowship. These, plus a newly established Unitarian Peace Fellowship, were represented along with the F.o.R., the Society of Friends, and the Church of Scotland Peace Society on a Council of Christian Pacifist Groups set up late in 1933 and reinforced the following year by a Presbyterian Pacifist Group, a Baptist Pacifist Fellowship, and a Church of England Peace Fellowship. This last was largely the initiative of Stuart Morris, who helped to persuade Dick Sheppard to send his famous letter to the press on 16 October 1934, asking for postcard pacifist pledges, which led finally in May 1936 to the establishment of the world's largest pacifist society, the Peace Pledge Union (P.P.U.). Though catering for pacifists of all inspirations (and having a predominant humanitarian pacifist element), the P.P.U. owed its origins and its most important leaders to Christian pacifism.

1936 proved to be a major watershed in British thinking about the international situation. Mussolini's conquest of Abyssinia, Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, and Franco's rebellion in Spain all demonstrated that economic sanctions could not guarantee peace and that, to be effective, collective security

requires a readiness to go to war. Only a minority of former League enthusiasts were then prepared to accept this, for, as the *Church Times* put it: 'The League . . . was founded to promote peace and not as an instrument of war.'¹⁸ The drift of support away from the League which had begun slowly in the early 1930s increased markedly after 1936. The greatest beneficiary was the appeasement movement, which called for fairer treatment of the 'have not' nations (Germany and Italy) by the 'haves' (Britain and France). But a significant minority went all the way to pacifism: the P.P.U., set up in May 1936 to cater for this, grew rapidly in 1936–7, attracting a hundred-thousand pledges of total pacifism. The problem of definition was thus solved: after 1936 pacifism could no longer be confused with *pacifism*, and attention could more easily be given to the problems of orientation and inspiration.

Most of those who signed the pacifist pledge did so because they believed pacifism alone could prevent war, their reasoning being: all other means of war-prevention have been tried and found wanting; pacifism is thus the only remaining option. But by 1938 it had become clear that, although organised pacifism was unprecedentedly influential, it would never have enough clout to influence government policy in Britain, let alone elsewhere. And many pacifists had by then come to doubt whether a nonviolent defence policy would work, even if the government suddenly espoused it. Bishop Barnes of Birmingham, for instance (the sole pacifist on the ecclesiastical bench), was admitting privately by the spring of 1938 that 'pacifism in England would be taken as a sign of weakness by the dictators and lead them to make increasingly extravagant demands.' Though remaining a pacifist, he looked increasingly to appeasement to prevent war, supporting Neville Chamberlain and going out of his way to be generous towards Germany in the interests of good relations.¹⁹ Most Christian pacifists who were motivated largely by the desire to avoid war did the same. Leyton Richards' response to the Munich settlement was to claim that 'the parallel between the action of the Czechs and the events of Calvary is not too remote for us to see the

¹⁸ Editorial, *Church Times* 15 May 1936.

¹⁹ John Barnes, *Ahead of His Age: Bishop Barnes of Birmingham* (London 1979) p 350. For his willingness to say that 'German legislation on "race hygiene" was on the right lines as it provided for voluntary sterilisation' see p 351.

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redemptive principle at work²⁰ while the Marquess of Tavistock (later Duke of Bedford), chairman of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship established (as will shortly be noted) in 1937, became overtly pro-German and anti-semitic.²¹ Tempering all such support for appeasement must have been awareness of the ill-treatment of German churchmen by the Nazis (although it was not much discussed in Christian literature on pacifism). After the Prague crisis of March 1939, when Hitler took control of the non-German rump of Czechoslovakia and thereby revealed himself to be an imperialist aggressor rather than a nationalist restorer of Germany's lost territories, it was hard to believe that appeasement could work anyway. As this reality dawned, many pacifist-appeasers recanted: such as the Revd. Leslie Weatherhead of the City Temple, who had been converted to both causes in the Abyssinian crisis. A few, including Maude Royden, delayed their recantation until the outbreak of war in September 1939. And the Dunkirk crisis and fall of France in the summer of 1940 weeded out from the pacifist ranks a rather larger remainder of those whose 'pacifism' had really been based on an isolationist feeling that Britain could and should avoid war (by appeasing Germany or, once war started, by negotiating peace in accordance with Hitler's offers). By mid-1940 the political implications of pacifism had been made starkly clear: a pacifist had to believe it was a greater wrong to resist Hitler than to submit to him.

Those whose pacifism survived these successive tests of the years 1936 to 1940 were those prepared to accept the sectarian orientation that pacifism had no necessary political relevance and might indeed be disadvantageous in worldly terms. It was, in other words, a faith—the personal conviction that war was the greatest evil—rather than a political strategy for reforming the international or domestic order. Some pacifists whose inspirations were political and humanitarian came to accept this fact; but it was easier for Christians to accept that the correctness of their belief did not depend on political circumstances. (In the case of one leading pacifist intellectual, John Middleton Murry, the realisation that pacifism was sectarian led to his conversion from political pacifism to Christianity.) As Donald Soper, who had once

²⁰ Leyton Richards, *The Crisis and World Peace* (S.C.M. Press Crisis Booklet No. 4 London, Dec. 1938) p 50.

²¹ See his article in *Peace News* 30 Oct. 1942. He launched the British People's Party in 1939.

expected pacifism to prevent the second world war, expressed it during that war: 'The utilitarian argument for nonviolence breaks down under the overwhelming pressure of brute fact. I am alone sustained by the Christian faith which assures me that what is morally right carries with it the ultimate resources of the universe.'²² Thus whereas in the mid-1930s it had been somewhat overshadowed by the mainly humanitarian pacifism of the P.P.U., the explicitly Christian pacifist movement enjoyed a revival immediately before and during the second world war. The F.o.R., which had lost support since 1918, trebled its membership between 1936 and the start of the war (when it stood at 9,813 members), and although suffering two-hundred resignations in the summer of 1940 managed further expansion during the war. In 1937, moreover, an Anglican Pacifist Fellowship was set up to fill a gap (the Church of England Peace Fellowship of 1934 having apparently collapsed when Morris and Sheppard turned their attention to the P.P.U.): it had fifteen hundred members by September 1939, gaining a further thousand by May 1940, and a further hundred by 1945.²³ This can be compared with the P.P.U., which, though gaining recruits until April 1940 (when it claimed 136,000 members), suffered significant net losses thereafter and ended the war with only 98,414 pledges in its files. It can be compared also with the rate of conscientious objection among successive batches of conscripts, which fell steadily throughout the war (from 2.2 per cent to 0.2 cent).

But Christian pacifism had no cause for complacency. Its enrolled numbers were few, perhaps fifteen thousand at most,²⁴ and constituted a tiny minority even of the small pacifist movement. Although since 1914 it had expanded from the historic sects into first the nonconformist churches and then into the Church of England, it had captured no church and made no inroads at all into Roman Catholicism.²⁵

²² *Peace News* 15 Dec. 1944. Soper remained pacifist throughout the war.

²³ These figures are taken from the newsletters of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, consulted through the courtesy of its present secretary, the Revd. Sidney Hinkes, at St Mary's Church House, Headington, Oxford. In July 1982 its membership stood at 1131 and was on the increase.

²⁴ To arrive at this figure one has to assume negligible overlap of members between the F.o.R. and the various church pacifist fellowships—a very unlikely assumption.

²⁵ The only Roman Catholic pacifists I have discovered in this era are Francis Meynell (who abandoned pacifism in 1935) and Eric Gill, both of whom can be classified as political as much as Christian pacifists. For a book which came close to explicit pacifism, however,

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Moreover, as Christian pacifism had begun, particularly in the latter half of the 1930s, to expound its theological principles more clearly, it had found itself driven unexpectedly onto the defensive. The first blow came from the Church of England leadership. During the Abyssinian crisis, William Temple, archbishop of York, condemned pacifism as heretical. He subsequently admitted he should have written “‘heretical in tendency” for I do not know any formal condemnation by the Church of pacifism as such’, but made clear that in his view pacifism committed the marcionite, manichean and pelagian heresies.²⁶ This did not overly dismay pacifists, however: Raven argued that such criticism ‘is compelling us to that deeper examination of our principles which is essential to the growth and unifying of our movement’;²⁷ and Sheppard still felt it worthwhile in September 1936 to try to arrange a deputation to the archbishops ‘both to hear our reasoned statement on this issue and to tell us in what way we seem to be lacking in loyalty to the mind of Christ and the Catholic Church’.²⁸ Worse than the hostility of ecclesiastical leaders was the second blow, a new current of criticism from theologians and writers on Christian ethics. In September 1936 G. H. C. Macgregor, professor of divinity and biblical criticism at Glasgow and president of the Church of Scotland Peace Society, had completed a major study, *The New Testament Basis of Pacifism*. This admitted that Christian pacifists had formerly been ‘too apt to assume without a sufficient proof that Jesus’ ethic is incontestably “pacifist” and that, even if so proved, he intended the pacifist ethic to be applied to the wider sphere of social and national politics.’ Rather than base pacifism on selected texts (although he discussed these fully), Macgregor explicitly defined the ‘positive imperative of the Christian ethic’ as he saw it, which comprised three basic principles: ‘love towards one’s neighbour’; ‘belief in a Father God who loves all men impartially’; and the principle that all Christ’s teaching ‘must be interpreted in the light of his way of life, and above all of the Cross’. These basic principles—with which most Christian pacifists would have agreed²⁹—led him to pacifism, not merely in its

while staying discreetly within the just-war orthodoxy favoured by Roman Catholicism, see Gerald Vann, O.P. *Morality and War* (London 1939) esp pp 72–3.

²⁶ *Church of England Newspaper* 1 Nov. 1935.

²⁷ *Reconciliation* Dec. 1935 p 320.

²⁸ *Church Times* 18 Sept. 1936.

²⁹ See e.g. A. Herbert Gray, *Love: the one solution* (London 1938).

negative aspect of refusal to fight but also its more important positive commitment to love and sacrifice.

Yet, just as pacifists were making clear that they took an immanent interpretation of the Christian faith, that view was coming under attack. At the rarified level of theological scholarship, the works of the Swiss-born theologian Karl Barth were being translated into English, 'reaffirming the transcendentalism and otherness of God' (to quote Raven)³⁰ as against the pacifist stress on the 'divinity' of man and the 'humanity' of God. At a more popular and therefore more influential level, the writings of the American lapsed-pacifist Reinhold Niebuhr—which had 'broad affinities'³¹ with those of Barth—attacked pacifism for having 'reinterpreted the Christian Gospels in terms of the Renaissance faith in man', thereby ignoring 'the contradiction between the law of love and the sinfulness of man'. It is rarely noted that Niebuhr did not object to sectarian pacifism, which was 'not a heresy. It is rather a valuable asset for the Christian faith. It is a reminder to the Christian community.' His scorn was reserved for the view that nonviolence would work, that (as he put it in 1940) 'if Britain had been fortunate enough to have produced 30 per cent instead of 2 per cent of conscientious objectors to military service, Hitler's heart would have been softened and he would not have dared to attack Poland'.³² But for pacifism of any kind to be dismissed as humanist or utopian by a radical like Niebuhr came as a considerable shock to those accustomed to regard themselves as the true idealists and strictest adherents to Christian principles who had constantly to battle against ecclesiastical hierarchies prepared to compromise the faith in the interests of political acceptability. G. H. C. Macgregor was forced to issue a second book in 1941 as a reply to Niebuhr, which paid a grudging tribute to his influence: 'To the non-pacifist in the churches, his arguments have come as a veritable godsend, and no one has been so successful in weaning the pacifist from the pure milk of his faith.'³³ Thus, as a result of

³⁰ Charles Raven, *Is War Obsolete?* p 96.

³¹ Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: prophet to politicians* (Nashville 1972) p 120. For discussion of the differences, which on domestic politics were considerable, between Niebuhr and Barth, see pp 122–32.

³² Reinhold Niebuhr pp 11, 18, 30, 32.

³³ G. H. C. Macgregor, *The Relevance of the Impossible: a reply to Reinhold Niebuhr* (London 1941) p 11.

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the growing criticism from the Anglican leadership and the most influential thinkers of the decade, Christian pacifists had to come to terms with the fact that they were the liberal deviationists of their faith rather than its incorruptible fundamentalists.

The humbling effect of this realisation was reinforced by the predicament in which Christian pacifists found themselves in the second world war. The harsh treatment conscientious objectors received in the first war had, paradoxically, kept their morale high: they felt themselves to be martyrs at the hand of a repressive state. Their more generous treatment in the second war, and the fact that the war was, moreover, as close to a just war as any modern war could be, made them feel guilty rather than defiant. Whereas the finest conscientious objectors of 1916–19 had rejected alternative service and gone to gaol, their counterparts of 1939–45 were eager to undertake Quaker-type humanitarian work and drew comfort from the respect they could win from non-pacifists for such service. The mellowing of Christian pacifist attitudes to society that resulted can be illustrated by two pacifist documents issued during the worst phase of the war, in 1940. The first was the 'agreed report on a deputation of pacifist clergy to the archbishops of Canterbury and York, Lambeth Palace, Tuesday, June 11th, 1940', in which the pacifist deputation expressed 'its deep sense of gratitude to the archbishops for their unfailing courtesy and understanding in their treatment of *a rather obscure minority*'.³⁴ The second was a circular letter written by the Revd. C. Paul Gliddon on 25 October 1940 from a heavily blitzed part of London to members of the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, of which he was honorary secretary. Gliddon was unsentimental about the fellowship's achievements: 'We have attracted a small section of the people who go to Church, we have interested a further section of the type who go to meetings and take interest in movements; but the rest we have left in unruffled indifference.' And he pointed out that this was partly the fault of Christian pacifists: 'We shall never win men's conversion until we have won their confidence; we shall never win their confidence until we have won something like their affection.' Successful enterprises like the Pacifist Service Units (which undertook community service and relief work) showed, however, that attitudes were changing for the better:

³⁴ Anglican Pacifist Fellowship leaflet, July 1940, shown to me by the Revd. Sidney Hinkes; italics added.

There has been a tendency to appreciate more fully the courage and sincerity of those who do not take up the pacifist position, a softening of a criticism which was often carping and sometimes cruel, and an eagerness to travel in company with those from whom we differ in conviction just as far as our loyalty to our own principles would permit. A pacifism which was sometimes precious and often factious is giving place to an attitude which is practical, good humoured, humble and understanding.³⁵

To sum up this paper: under the cumulative impact of the first world war, the crisis of the League in the years 1931–5, and the threat from Hitler from 1936 to 1940, the meaning of pacifism became clearly defined in Britain for the first time; the difficulties presented by its orientation towards politics were appreciated, also for the first time, and it was realised by its leading exponents that lasting pacifism was a faith rather than a political strategy; and the liberal theological assumptions that were required in order to interpret Christianity in a pacifist way came to be more generally recognised as such. Of course some confusions remained, as the operations of the tribunals to determine conscientious objection in the second world war and after were to show.³⁶ But in general, like other forms of pacifism, Christian pacifism was refined into a rigorous faith, thereby ensuring it was hardy enough to survive, but reducing its appeal to the casual war-hater. Indeed, so exacting was the Christian pacifist faith shown to be that few have embraced it since the second world war, despite the extraordinary difficulty of fitting thermonuclear war into the just-war tradition of orthodox Christianity.

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³⁵ Circular letter, in the collection of Anglican Pacifist Fellowship newsletters.

³⁶ See especially the complaints (mostly about what is here called quasi-pacifism) by a member of the south-western tribunal 1940–4: G. C. Field, *Pacifism and Conscientious Objection* (London 1945) esp pp 3–7.