

Introduction

It is surprising that no full-length study of the Church of England in relation to the First World War has yet appeared in England. Roger Lloyd devoted a valuable chapter to the topic in *The Church of England 1900-1965* (1966), but the material he drew upon was limited, and his conclusions were, in my opinion, over-sanguine. Professor Albert Marrin's *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War* was published in the United States in 1974. I am indebted to this pioneer work, and particularly for directing my attention to sources of information. Inevitably both Professor Marrin and I have traversed some of the same ground, though naturally our assessments and selection of material sometimes differ. On the one hand, for example, Professor Marrin devoted more space than I have to the state of the Church of England before the war and to English attitudes to German thought and philosophy. On the other hand, some themes which he treated only cursorily, such as the National Mission of Repentance and Hope, the pastoral and theological implications of widespread bereavement, and the impact of the war on ecumenism, I have treated at much greater length. His book concludes with the end of the war. I have continued the story up to the mid-1920s and therefore cover such topics as the development of remembrance rituals and the role of the Church in post-war reconstruction. The literary writings of the period which figure at certain points in this book find no place in Professor Marrin's study. I read Dr Stuart Mews's unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, 'Religion and English Society in the First World War' (1973) with great interest after I had completed my own manuscript. At some points he drew upon unpublished sources which I have not used, which gave extra detail to certain events of the period. He also paid much more attention than I have to the views of the non-Anglican Churches. Naturally, as one would expect in a thesis, his treatment is more intensive and less extensive than mine. But, rightly or wrongly, I did not feel that I ought to modify my own approach in the light of his researches.

In these ecumenical times it may be surprising to concentrate upon

the role of the Church of England, though I have made some reference to both Free Church and Roman Catholic attitudes. To focus on the Church of England provides a necessary boundary to the vast amount of material available. Moreover, at the beginning of this century the Church of England was still the national Church to a degree which was not true in the second war, and is even less true today. The reactions of the Free Churches ran along similar lines to those of the Church of England, though with differing emphases. There were, for example, proportionately more Free Church than Anglican conscientious objectors. The English Roman Catholic Church also gave its support to the war, but it was a much smaller and more private body than either the Church of England or the Free Churches. Whereas Anglicans and Free Churchmen wrote frequently to the newspapers, Roman Catholic participation in public political debate about the war was rare.

The references to the Churches in most of the secular histories about this period are often brief and sometimes snide.¹ Does this reflect an unwillingness on the part of such historians to engage deeply with institutions and beliefs which they find uncongenial? Or does their treatment imply that the Churches were in fact marginal to English life — a necessary corrective to the tendency of church historians to overestimate the influence of the Churches in their desire to hearten the faithful?² Ecclesiastical biographies of the period often give the impression that church leaders had close friendships with, and a good deal of influence upon, certain political and military leaders. Yet when one turns to the biographies of these secular leaders, frequently not even a passing reference is found to the ecclesiastics concerned. Perhaps church leaders were, and are, too ready to confuse secular deference to their office with the exercise of decisive influence.

I have tried to present church history as interacting with contemporary society, though to do so it all adequately would have meant a much longer book and have required a more competent author. We should, I believe, cease to speak of ‘church history’ as such, and rather speak of ‘the Church in history’. God speaks to the Church through the world, as well as to the world through the Church. God’s Word emerges through a ceaseless dialectical interaction between Church and world. In this period, that Word emerged more authentically from the prose and poetry of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen than it did from, say, the sermons of Bishop Winnington-Ingram. It is often pointed out that poets like Sassoon and Owen did not

necessarily represent the feelings of ordinary soldiers. Nevertheless, as Fr Martin Jarrett-Kerr C.R. has written,

In any age the artist is one who advances through the night with sensitive antennae. He is the first to feel the long coils of bramble in the forest, the trip-wire or the hidden pit covered with brush-wood. He is the seismograph, recording the shock of the distant earthquake, which will be on its way to us next.³

I have taken samples of Anglican opinion from a number of church periodicals. The *Guardian* (founded in 1846) gave extensive weekly coverage to church news, and regularly printed sermons verbatim or in lengthy summary. The *Church Times* (founded in 1863), more definitely Anglo-Catholic, had a larger circulation than all other Anglican weeklies put together. The weekly *Challenge* (founded in May 1914) represented a liberal Anglican viewpoint. William Temple was editor from 1915 to 1918, and Tissington Tatlow of S.C.M. was for a time chairman of the editorial board. *Commonwealth* (founded by Henry Scott Holland in 1895) was the monthly organ of the Christian Social Union. In 1901, A. C. Headlam became editor of the *Church Quarterly Review* and gave it a new lease of life as the main intellectual periodical of the Church of England. *The Modern Churchman* was founded in 1911 and edited by H. D. A. Major as the forum for the Churchmen's Union (after 1928 The Modern Churchmen's Union). To measure how far, say, episcopal utterances were regularly reported in the popular press would require another study. But it is clear that on occasion they were widely known. The fact that the support of church leaders was desired by politicians at certain junctures suggests that they were thought to possess political influence. That politicians who were consulted by Archbishop Davidson sometimes counselled him to avoid or to make utterances indicates that his words were credited with having an appreciable effect on public opinion.

Some find it hard to forgive people and institutions, not least the Church and its leaders, that fail to live up to idealized images of them. To the Christian, the Church is both more glorious and more scandalous than to those who see it only from outside. At the end of an Open Lecture given under the auspices of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity in 1968, Michael Howard asked that we should recognize that the 'moral' statesman plays a 'tragic' role, deserves our compassion and needs our prayers.⁴ If this is true of statesmen, it is also true of the Church. When we look at the Church in the first war we have the right

and the duty to be critical. But in doing so, we have no superiority of achievement to parade, despite our more sophisticated theological and ethical systems, despite our international organizations, political and ecclesiastical. We, with little idealism or optimism left either to inspire or delude us, are kept alive by a balance of terror. Margaret Thrall, surveying the attitudes of the bishops of the Church of England to nuclear weapons in the period after the second war, concluded: ‘the official contribution of the Church of England has been minimal or non-existent during the first two and a half decades of the nuclear era.’” Leslie Paul has written finely about the need to face the fact that the Church is a compromised institution:

It is compromised. Such is the situation of the Church of England, one which it shares with every other great Church. It is tempting to say, this has nothing to do with Christ, let it end, and let us start again. But starting again has its problems, particularly if it means the same old cycle, and it has been tried. It is unhistoric too. There are other things to be said. The struggle of the Churches for incorruptibility in the midst of corruption adds profoundly to our religious understanding of the tragedy and hope of man’s situation, and what it means in the absence of hope to be the recipient of grace. What the Churches tried to be, and what they became, and what they sought to undo, has added a rich strain to our culture and every culture is a form of man’s understanding of himself and his potentiality. We have to hold on to that understanding through the institutions which enshrine it, and remember that the Church is a sinning Church.⁶

What was the general state of the Church of England at this time? In the latter part of the nineteenth century all the Churches in this country felt that the tide was flowing in their favour, though most were acutely aware of their failure to attract the majority of the working class. It has been recently pointed out that ‘the phase of Anglican growth spanning the Victorian and Edwardian years represents the one prolonged period after the Restoration in which the Church of England succeeded in improving its quantitative position within English society’.⁷ The Student Volunteer Union (the missionary wing of the S.C.M.) in 1896 adopted its watchword: ‘The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation’ — significantly it was dropped in 1918. In the period immediately before the first war some foreboding voices were heard. In a remarkable sermon to the 1906 Church Congress, Bishop Charles Gore described a

sense of impotence in the Church (with which the twentieth-century Church has become all too familiar):

We have won victories; but they have proved barren. We stand far stronger on the merely intellectual or apologetic ground than we stood thirty years ago. We have vindicated the liberty of Biblical criticism. . . . We have practically won the battle of the liberty of Catholic ceremonial. What is much more important, we have had great revivals of spiritual life, and if only there were more driving-power behind our organizations, we should be on the way to get rid of many old-standing abuses. The idea of the Church, free and self-governing . . . is awake and alive again. We understand, again, our great Mission in the evangelization of the world. Above all, we have laboured very hard for the poor, and amongst them. And yet; and yet — it all hangs fire. . . . Such a feeling is in the mind of very many of us as we take stock of the powerlessness of the Church, in spite of even splendid exceptions in this or that parish, to produce any broad, corporate effect, to make any effective spiritual appeal by its own proper influence, in the great democracy of England today.

Gore's answer was that of the Christian Socialist (his text was Mark 10.23-6). The Church of England was not in touch with the vast mass of the labouring people. The bishops' incomes linked them with the wealthy. The clergy sought their friends among the gentry and professional people. So clerical opinions and prejudices reflected those of the upper and middle classes, not those of the wage-earners. Episcopal incomes should be reduced. More clergy should be drawn from the working class, and be encouraged to maintain the tastes and sympathies of their background. The working class must be represented at all church meetings.⁸ Gore's solutions, though admirable, were oversimplified.

C. F. G. Masterman presented a more complex analysis. In close touch with Gore and the Christian Social Union, and consulted by Temple on social questions, Masterman lived for a period in a tenement flat in Camberwell, studying social conditions. He became a Liberal M.P. in 1906 and a member of the Government two years later. An 1909 he published *The Condition of England*. Religions, he wrote, can revive, but

present belief in religion, as a conception of life dependent upon supernatural sanctions or as a revelation of a purpose and meaning

beyond the actual business of the day, is slowly but steadily fading from the modern city race. Tolerance, kindness, sympathy, civilization continually improve. Affirmation of any responsibility, beyond that to self and to humanity, continually declines. Life therefore gradually ceases to be influenced or coloured by any atmosphere of 'other worldliness'.

Yet the Churches are extremely active and their social work is widely appreciated. 'Their definite dogmatic teachings seem to count for little at all. They labour on steadily amid a huge indifference.' People are no longer impelled by fear towards religion, for life is more orderly and secure.

The tide is ebbing within and without the Churches. The drift is towards a non-dogmatic affirmation of general kindness and good fellowship, with an emphasis rather on the service of men than the fulfilment of the will of God. . . . It is the passing of a whole civilisation away from the faith in which it was founded and out of which it has been fashioned.

In this analysis he anticipated many of the discoveries of the more perceptive chaplains during the Great War. During and immediately after the war, important elements within the Church of England tried hard to reform its life, restate its doctrines and draw nearer to the working class. But Masterman in 1909 was sceptical about the similar hopes which Christian social radicals then held that their programme of reform would bring back the working class to the Churches. He believed that the creation of the towns was a more potent cause of the drift away from organized religion than either intellectual difficulties or the class character of the Churches.⁹

Accurate and comprehensive statistics of church attendance for this period are not available, but such as they are, they confirm the forebodings of Gore, Masterman and other observers. Censuses of 1886 and 1902/3 showed a marked decline in London churchgoing in proportion to the population between those dates, particularly in the Church of England.¹⁰ The proportion varied considerably from area to area, usually according to its class composition. After surveying various statistics from different parts of the country Owen Chadwick concludes:

Until the last fifteen years of the century, the churches succeeded marvellously in their endeavours to keep pace with the rising

population. After 1886, though the leaders of most churches had just as powerful a feeling of advance, the figures show that the churches failed markedly to keep pace with the rise in people; and more, that in towns where the population was still rising, the number of attendants at church began to decline.¹¹

On the other hand, in 1888 about three out of four children attended Sunday Schools in England and Wales, a remarkable proportion when it is remembered that parents of the higher social groups did not particularly favour attendance.¹² In 1906, the Wesleyan Sunday Schools alone included over a million children. During the next half-century, numbers in the Sunday Schools of all denominations were to fall drastically.¹³ As the chaplains discovered, the religion of the average private soldier had been formed in the Sunday and day schools, not by adult worship in church. The war revealed the extent of the alienation of the majority of the English male population from the life and practice of the Churches — it revealed it, it deepened it, but it certainly did not create it.

Randall Davidson (1848-1930) had been Archbishop of Canterbury for eleven years when war broke out. Church and nation were fortunate to have as Primate one whose concern for the Church was set in the wider context of his concern for the Kingdom. His was a lay rather than a priestly mind. During his primacy (1903-28) he knew each of the seven prime ministers personally, and four intimately. His cautious temperament made him unwilling to act precipitately. During the war, when easy emotions ran high, and some churchmen succumbed to them, Davidson's emotional reserve, his undramatic, sober realism, and his feeling for the international dimension of Christianity, preserved him from indulging in a narrow patriotism. As Dean of Windsor he had been prepared to stand his ground with Queen Victoria. During the war he was ready on occasion to take unpopular attitudes. But a cautious temperament has its drawbacks in a period of change and crisis. Sometimes he was too ready to take advice from politicians, too reserved to make those imaginative gestures that are needed from those in positions of leadership. A pragmatist rather than a theologian, out of touch with the world of the universities, he was not the one to realize how searching were the theological and ethical questions being wrung out of men's hearts by the experience of war, and how much the Church needed to change. Davidson was incredulous at Canon Peter Green's refusal of the see of Lincoln in 1920 on the ground that the size of

episcopal residences and incomes was scandalous to ordinary people. Cosmo Gordon Lang (1864-1945) was a much more complex personality. Though both as Archbishop of York (1908-28) and as Archbishop of Canterbury (1928-42) he was capable of acting with independence on political questions, national and international, and put his weight behind the ecumenical movement, he was too patrician to be in touch with the lives of ordinary people — it was said that after becoming Archbishop of York he never entered a shop. During the war E. S. Talbot (Bishop of Winchester 1911-24), Charles Gore (Bishop of Oxford 1911-19) and A. F. Winnington-Ingram (Bishop of London 1901-39) were at the height of their powers and influence. The older generation of such Protestant evangelical leaders as H. C. G. Moule (Bishop of Durham 1901-20), E. A. Knox (Bishop of Manchester 1903-21), and F. J. Chavasse (Bishop of Liverpool 1900-23) was being replaced by a new generation of liberal evangelicals committed to ecumenism and a social application of the Gospel, typified in the episcopate by Theodore Woods (Bishop of Peterborough 1916-24, of Winchester 1924-32). The new generation of bishops which was to dominate the post-war leadership of the Church of England was emerging: William Temple (Bishop of Manchester 1921-9, Archbishop of York 1929-42, Archbishop of Canterbury 1942-4), Hensley Henson (Bishop of Hereford 1918-20, of Durham 1920-39), Cyril Garbett (Bishop of Southwark 1919-32, of Winchester 1932-42, Archbishop of York 1942-55), Geoffrey Fisher (Bishop of Chester 1932-9, of London 1939-45, Archbishop of Canterbury 1945-61), George Bell (Bishop of Chichester 1929-57), and F. R. Barry (Bishop of Southwell 1941-63). Their experiences between 1914 and 1918 equipped them to provide seasoned leadership in the second war.

Of the party groups, the Anglo-Catholics and Liberal Modernists were nearing their peak of influence and coherence as the first war ended. But Evangelicalism was gravely weakened by a series of disputes between its conservative and liberal wings. In 1910, Cambridge conservative Evangelicals withdrew from S.C.M. Later, conservative Evangelicals formed their own national student society, the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. In 1922 a conservative group broke away from the Church Missionary Society to form the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society. The Group Brotherhood of liberal Evangelicals, formed in 1906, published in 1923 a volume of essays, *Liberal Evangelicalism*. In 1923 the rather private Group Brotherhood became the much more public Anglican Evangelical Group Movement. After

the war the liberal Evangelicals began to demonstrate a quality of scholarship which the older generation of Evangelicals had lacked. How did these three groups of churchmen, Catholic, Liberal, and Evangelical, react to the war? The relation between theological belief and political stance is notoriously complex. Charles Gore, Scott Holland, Fr Paul Bull C.R., A. F. Winnington-Ingram, and Basil Bourchier were all Catholic churchmen, yet they took differing attitudes to the war. H. D. A. Major, Charles Raven, Dean Inge and Hensley Henson were all Liberal churchmen, yet they also differed in their approach to the war. On the other hand the opinions of conservative Evangelicals like Chavasse, Moule, Taylor Smith and Knox were more cohesive. Nevertheless, those Anglicans (like Gore, Scott Holland, Peter Green and Bell) whose primary allegiance was to the Catholic Church, transcending nationality, felt the scandal of war between Christian nations more acutely than those whose primary allegiance was to the Church of England as the national Church.

In seeking to determine a Christian attitude to the war the Churches were able to draw upon a long experience, although the Great War was in some ways different from any previous one. St Ambrose and St Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries had laid the foundations of Christian thinking about the Just War, which had been developed in the thirteenth century by St Thomas Aquinas and by Vitoria and Suárez in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Article XXXVII of the Church of England stated: 'It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars.' The official Latin version rendered the final phrase as 'et justa bella administrare'. Traditionally, Anglicans have resorted to such passages as Matthew 22.21 ('Render therefore unto Caesar. . . .') and Romans 13.1-7 ('the powers that be are ordained of God') to expound their theology of the State. In the later nineteenth century, Christians noted with satisfaction the embodiment of principles of the Just War in international conventions established by the Law of Geneva and the Law of The Hague.

The Crimean and Boer Wars drew varying reactions from the Churches. The Crimean War (1854-6) was the last English war to have begun with the proclamation of a General Fast; during the war military disasters prompted the holding of another General Fast.¹⁴ Two main views of the spiritual significance of the war were proclaimed by the clergy: the war was a solemn duty laid upon the nation by God; it was a divine punishment for a variety of national sins. Though sermons

mostly proclaimed that the war was just, a defence of international order, they also emphasized the evil and sufferings of war. In evangelical circles, it was widely believed that England had replaced the Jews as God's chosen people and instrument. The failures or successes of the war were frequently explained in terms of divine punishments or rewards. As the war proceeded, and it became more difficult to present it as a crusade, clergy turned to expound it as human folly which God could use for his purposes, for example in order to rouse England from selfishness and complacency — sentiments which found eloquent expression in Part III of Tennyson's *Maud* (1855), and were often echoed during the Great War. Christian reactions to the Crimean War showed a deep belief in the direct and identifiable providence of God. This was also evidenced in the reactions to other disasters of the period. In 1866 there was an outbreak of cattle plague in Warminster. The people observed Days of Humiliation. It was a chastisement from God, wrote the vicar, 'a loud call to us to mend our lives, and to walk more closely with our God'.¹⁵ (Some countrymen rejected such Christian interpretations of the cattle plague and resorted to magic instead.)¹⁶ The Christian tradition of interpreting specific events as revelations of divine providence received a fatal battering during the two world wars, and the Churches are now notably reluctant to venture in this field. Christian opinion about the Boer War (1899-1902) was sharply divided, though the majority in the Churches supported the war.¹⁷ Many Christian socialists, led by Gore and Scott Holland, publicly attacked the war as an expression of British imperialist arrogance, regarded its military reverses as a divine chastisement of this spirit, and denounced the concentration camps. Peace Night sickened and frightened Scott Holland. In Hereford, rowdies tried to attack the palace of the Bishop of Hereford (John Percival). He and Canon E. L. Hicks of Manchester (later Bishop of Lincoln) had also been forthright critics of the war. In 1901, over 5,000 Nonconformist ministers signed a manifesto against the war. However, B. F. Westcott (Bishop of Durham 1890-1901), President of the Christian Social Union, supported the war. He believed that imperialism embodied the principles of brotherhood and service. Fr Bull of Mirfield, who had been a chaplain in South Africa, wrote *God and our Soldiers* (1904) in the style of a romantic adventure story 'to claim for our army that respect which is due to it, and to show to others what God has shown to me, the strong virtues which burn so brightly in our soldiers' lives'.¹⁸ A Christian socialist, he regarded war as a product

of the competitive economics of capitalism; imperialism, like socialism, extended man's visions beyond nationality.

During the Boer War, in a speech to the Church Congress of 1900, H. E. J. Bevan, Professor of Divinity at Gresham College (later Archdeacon of Middlesex) produced an apologia for war. Its themes were echoed in many sermons and speeches during the Great War. He cited the classic Victorian sources: J. B. Mozley's sermon 'War' (1871), Ruskin's *Crown of Wild Olive* (1866) and *Maud*. He declared:

History lends but scant support to the theory that a great nation is necessarily demoralised by war such as this. Rather does it arouse a slumbering patriotism, and call citizens from the luxurious enjoyments of peace, and from petty and selfish interests, to sacrifices and self-denial for a common cause. It awakens in many a lively consciousness of the perishableness and insecurity of human affairs, destroys the artificial barriers between class and class, and teaches multitudes to pray.

War, he considered, did not on the whole brutalize the soldier but elicited 'nobler and gentler qualities just in proportion as his courage and endurance have been more or less severely tested'.¹⁹ In 1899, Winnington-Ingram, then Bishop of Stepney, preached a sermon which included this description of the role of the Church in time of war: '... there are worse things than war. . . . We remember that when the commanders of a ship are steering round a difficult corner the crew and the passengers ought not to choose that time to shout advice in their ears . . . we hold that in silently praying for their guidance we best do our duty.' In the Great War also he always assumed that the military and political leaders of the nation could and should be trusted. In 1901 when he preached his first sermon as Chaplain to the London Rifle Brigade he chose Joshua as his subject. The title 'The Happy Warrior' was taken from Wordsworth's poem so often cited during the Boer and Great Wars.²⁰

Perhaps the most powerful (and ambiguous) contribution which the Churches made to the nation during the Great War was in the realm of imagery. Horatio Bottomley, editor of *John Bull*, regularly laced his articles and speeches with biblical imagery and religious sentiments. When he calculated that an audience would pay well he inserted a set piece of oratory about 'the patient figure of the Prince of Peace pointing the Star of Bethlehem which leads us on to God'.²¹ Donald Hankey,

officer and churchman, went over the top shouting to his Men: 'If wounded, Blighty — if killed, the Resurrection.'²² The public schools had taught their pupils patriotism, self-sacrifice, athleticism, spartan habits and discipline in the name of 'The Manliness of Christ' (the title of a book by Thomas Hughes published in 1876).²³ At a popular level, the imagery of the Christian life as one of warfare was universally diffused through well-known hymns and memories of baptismal promises. The Salvation Army consistently used the metaphors of war. Its publication was called *The War Cry*. Preachers of all traditions reached all too readily for texts like Ephesians 6.12 ('For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the rulers of the darkness of this world'). The comradeship of the trenches was described in language from the Gospels. The potent biblical imagery of sacrifice was widely used to describe the slaughter. Some drew with eagerness and damaging naïvety upon the more pathological imagery of apocalyptic. Biblical apocalyptic writings depict a world catastrophe in which evil political forces mass themselves in cosmic combat against God who finally and totally defeats them. The saints, thus vindicated, begin their reign, and history is over. The language of apocalyptic was particularly dangerous for Christians to use during the war because of its sadistic undertones, because of the bestial imagery used to describe the opposing powers, because it encouraged a view of the war as a straight conflict between good and evil, Christ and Anti-Christ, God and the powers of darkness, and because it offered an eschatological escape from wrestling with the moral ambiguities of contemporary human history.