

## PREFACE

The overt theme of this book is how the English churches reacted to, and were affected by, the international crises of the first half of this century. (I have not attempted to describe the reactions of churches in other parts of the United Kingdom.) The underlying question is: 'How can the church be a creatively dissenting community in the modern world?' On the one hand, it is easy for the church to become a conforming community – as Martin Luther King put it, to become a thermometer registering the temperature of society rather than a thermostat seeking to alter it. In Britain, or at least in England, the consensual forces which begin to operate in church and state, immediately that dissent appears, are extremely subtle and powerful. On the other hand, it is fairly easy for at least groups within the churches to be uncreative dissenters – that is people who criticize those in power, but have no experience of exercising power, and have often neither the wish nor the ability to do so. Their natural *attrait* is opposition. By contrast with both the conformist and the uncreative dissenter, those who try to exercise a ministry of creative dissent are ready to be critical of political policies and social mores in order to be true to the subversive character of the biblical message – one thinks (for example) of Jeremiah, the Magnificat or the questions put against established authority by the fact that Jesus was crucified. But the creative dissenter knows at first hand what it means to exercise authority and power, what compromises and patient negotiations are necessary to produce change and where the levers of power are situated and how best to use them. The paradigm of creative religious dissent in England in the first half of the twentieth century was Bishop George Bell.

Nevertheless, as I hope to show, and as Edward Norman has frequently reminded us, dissent is usually a much more ambiguous phenomenon than the populist version of history inculcates. What

looks like courageous dissent at the time, may turn out, in retrospect, to be itself a type of conformity, for example to the dominant ideology of the intelligentsia. And within the total dialectic, there is a role for the anarchic clown figure, who with some (but not total) justification can trace his ancestry back to Jesus himself. The clown's laughter at the pretensions of the powerful is an eschatological sign, an anticipation of the hilarity of heaven. In part, Dick Sheppard fulfilled this role between the wars.

There are other sub-themes, for example: the interaction between various forms of liberalism and orthodoxy; the complex relationship between theological stance and political attitudes; the erosion of church allegiance and religious faith by secularization (which included the spread of leisure), modernity and pluralism; the failure of most church leaders to listen to the poets, unless (like Browning) they seemed to provide useful propaganda material. By 1945 it was clear that both the just war and pacifist traditions had been so battered since 1914 that they needed drastic redefinition, if either was to be of any use as a source of moral guidance about questions of war and peace. It was also after 1945 that the Christian basis of much anti-semitism was gradually realized, as anti-Judaism was traced, first back through the history of the church, and then to the New Testament itself. The painful process of recasting Christianity in the light of the holocaust has only really just begun, and no one can forecast where this may lead both Christianity and Judaism in the future.

'Christ is literally in no man's land' wrote the poet Wilfred Owen, from France in May 1917.<sup>1</sup> This was one of the most crucial theological discoveries of the twentieth century. If it were taken seriously it would drastically alter the whole perspective of the church's structures, ministry and liturgy. What Wilfred Owen realized in 1917, Dietrich Bonhoeffer also discovered in his prison cell between 1943 and 1945. During this half century, the most authentic Christians were those who, in different ways, lived on the frontiers and found Christ there – Studdert Kennedy, George Bell, Dick Sheppard and Reinhold Niebuhr among them.

The first three chapters examine some of the features of English Nonconformity in the first quarter or so of this century. The Nonconformist attempt (and ultimate failure) to produce an 'alternative society' is of considerable religious and social importance, and has been neglected by Anglican and many secular historians. These chapters concentrate on how the Nonconformist churches – and particularly Primitive Methodism, the most radical of them – reacted

to, and were affected by, the First World War. I have not in these chapters included material about the Church of England as I examined this in detail in my earlier book, *The Church of England and the First World War* (SPCK 1978). Thereafter, the focus shifts to the Church of England, though I include a good deal of evidence about both the Free Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. In any case, the most interesting conflicts between conformity and dissent after the First World War took place, not between the Free Churches and society, but within the Church of England itself. One of the many paradoxes of dissent throughout this period is that the hierarchical structures of the Church of England and the Roman Catholic church enabled them to participate more effectively in the decision-taking process of modern democratic government than the democratic structures of the Free Churches. Whereas in the episcopal churches Archbishop Temple, Bishop Bell and Cardinal Hinsley (for example) had plenty of time to get to know their jobs and to be known by the general public and by government departments, Free Church Presidents and Moderators, who held office for a year or two, were transitory figures, able to concentrate only on short-term aims, having to leave continuity in the hands of connectional departments. Thus Bishop Bell's dissenting ministry was inseparable from his membership of the House of Lords and his familiarity with Government ministers and departments. In relation to the public, an Archbishop or a Cardinal is potentially better press-copy, because he and his office are more widely known than a President or Moderator whose name is probably unknown and whose office means little to the nation.

Inevitably my treatment of such a large area of religious, social and political history is selective, so this book can be read as a series of case studies on the themes already stated, and others to be discovered by the reader. Though some of the topics in this book have been previously examined by others, this is the first attempt to cover the whole ground in one book. Certain aspects have not, as far as I am aware, been written about before. Some of the source material has not been published before, like that from the papers of Archbishops Lang, Temple and Fisher which have only recently become available at Lambeth Palace Library. Undergirding the first three chapters is a good deal of contemporary newspaper material from Free Church journals and my father's diaries and press-cuttings. The staple background material for the rest of the book is the weekly Anglican newspaper *The Guardian* (not to be confused with the *Manchester Guardian*) – an intelligent, middle-of-the-road journal. It has been

supplemented at some points by the *Church Times*, then pugnaciously and waspishly Anglo-Catholic, *The Times* and other newspapers, popular as well as serious.

The plan of the book is chronological. But it does not progress along a straight line. Rather it is like a series of waves, each one of which recedes before the next wave moves forwards.

Except at intense crises, people have a lot of other things to think about and do, apart from attending to international events. For most people, including church leaders, these are pushed into the background by the ordinary demands and enjoyments of life and work. It is essential to remember this when we seek to understand how the people of this period thought about peace and war.

I am deeply grateful to the Archbishop for finding the time to read the typescript, and for his generous commendation. In July 1982, many were thankful (though some were angry) when he refused to make the Falklands service a nationalist celebration and said: 'War is a sign of human failure and everything we say and do in this service must be in that context . . . People are mourning on both sides of this conflict.'

Throughout the last decade of research for this and my earlier book, I have been sustained by the encouragement and advice given to me by both the Rev. Dr F. W. Dillistone and Canon Dr Robert Winnett. I wish also to express my gratitude to Dr E. G. Bill, the Librarian of Lambeth Palace Library, for permission to consult and use material from the Lang, Temple and Fisher papers and from the Diaries of Dr A. C. Don. The Bishop of Ripon (the Rt Rev. David Young) kindly permitted me to use and quote from two 1939 files of correspondence belonging to the then Bishop. I am grateful to the Rev. Tony Shepherd, the Bishop's Chaplain, for drawing my attention to these files.

To several people I am indebted for writing special material at my request. Mr Jackson Page wrote about some of his first war experiences which I have quoted in Chapter 3. Dr J. R. H. Moorman, formerly Bishop of Ripon, provided an account of his resignation from his parish in Manchester in 1942 in order to become a farm worker. This material is used in Chapter 9. My sister, Mrs H. M. Dormer, my brother, Dr J. L. Wilkinson and the late Rev. Frank Kelley kindly amplified my recollections of my father.

I owe much to many others who have helped in various ways in the making of this book. Among them are: the Rev. A. M. Barton; Dr David Bebbington; the Rev. James Bentley; Professor Günther Bornkamm; Dr Richard Byrn; Dr Martin Ceadel; former staff and students of Chichester Theological College; the Rev. Owen Conway;

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I first explored the subject of this book in the Passiontide Lectures at Lincoln Theological College which I gave in 1981 under the title 'Leaves from the Deciduous Cross' (a phrase from 'The Prayer' by R. S. Thomas). I am grateful to Canon Henry Richmond, the Warden, for inviting me, to staff and students for stimulating comments and to the Bishop of Lincoln and Mrs Phipps for their generous hospitality. In 1982 I repeated the lectures at St Matthew's Study Centre, Sheffield, by invitation of the vicar, the Rev. A. V. Longworth. Material now contained in Chapter 11 was also used for theological seminars for clergy of the Wakefield diocese and for a lecture at York Minster.

It is nearly forty years since, as a sixth-former, I first used the resources of the Manchester Central Reference Library and pondered the words from Proverbs 4 which encircle the great dome ('Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom . . .'). The Library staff there and also at the Methodist Archives of the John Rylands Library, Manchester have been unfailingly helpful.

Dr Haddon Willmer, of Leeds University, and the Rev. J. Munsey Turner, the Methodist church historian, read the first three chapters of this book and the Ven. Francis House read the whole manuscript. I greatly profited from their comments and suggestions, and express my deep thanks for all the help they have given so generously.

Through the long gestation of this book, my wife Fenella has not only been a constant source of support and judicious advice, but has also provided the peaceful atmosphere which enabled me to research and write. In the final stages of the preparation of this book she has been an invaluable collaborator, typing and checking the whole manuscript.

*Darley Vicarage  
Harrogate*

A.W.