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Baptists and the Outbreak of the First World War*

“IT WAS with a shudder of indignant surprise that the world learned on Monday morning that one more murder of European Royalties had been added to the already ghastly list of such horrible crimes.”¹

Thus the *Baptist Times* greeted the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28th June 1914. What significance did this far-off event have for Britain? None at all, apparently, beyond the patriotic sentiment:

“How much Great Britain has for which to be thankful in her constitutional and liberty-loving monarchy we little appreciate, until such lurid tragedy as this rouses us to a sense of how far King and Queen reign in the hearts, in the love, of their people.”

Weeks passed before anything further needed to be said. Meanwhile, domestic troubles provided more than enough anxiety, especially over Irish Home Rule. But by late July it was evident that the event in distant Sarajevo could be fateful in its repercussions. The Balkans had long been a volatile area, but hitherto diplomacy had managed to prevent the Great Powers from becoming embroiled. This time, however, Austria seemed determined to teach Serbia a lesson, while on the other hand Russia was not prepared to stand by and see her kindred Slavs crushed. Austria was counting on German support, and France was obliged to aid Russia. And Britain? People knew of the *Entente Cordiale*. Till now, few realised how deeply it might involve Britain in a continental confrontation.

The *Baptist Times* for 31st July, in a note headed “The War Clouds” discussed these dangers fully. But the actual possibility of war was dismissed. Diplomacy would surely triumph as in the past:

“We are glad that our Foreign Office is presided over by a man so cool in danger, so cautious, and so resourceful as Sir Edward Grey has proved himself to be. It is fortunate also that the relations between ourselves and Germany are today friendlier than they have been for many years. With the two countries working together for peace, there is still ground for hoping that it may be maintained.”

By the time the next edition appeared, on 7th August, the war was already three days old. In a tone of numb resignation the journal commented:

“It is useless to try to describe a situation which changes from day to day and from hour to hour. The salient fact for ourselves is that we, too, have been drawn into the vortex of war . . . In view of accomplished facts all discussion of the policy which has led up to them is now more than useless. Rightly or wrongly, we are committed to war, and there can be no drawing back. The

*A paper originally given at Baptist Historical Society Summer School, Manchester, July, 1974.

only possible course now is to carry the matter through as resolutely and as speedily as possible, doing and saying nothing which will increase bitterness of feeling between Germany and ourselves, and working and watching and praying for an opportunity to restore peace."

We shall comment later on the implications of initial hesitancy in these words. Here we need note simply the sense of shock, the feeling of helplessness, at the occurrence of the impossible possibility: total European war. But it was the positive resolve to "carry the matter through" which, as for the nation at large, was soon the attitude of most Baptists.

The first public response by the leaders of the Baptist Union was a mildly worded letter in the *Baptist Times* of 14th August, calling on all Baptists to pray for a return to peace. It was signed by the President, Charles Joseph, the Secretary, J. H. Shakespeare, and ex-Presidents J. T. Forbes, G. P. Gould and John Clifford.

Practical measures had to be taken quickly. The Autumn Assembly was cancelled (and has never been revived). The Council met in mid-September and was largely occupied with the many problems thrust upon the churches in the crisis.

The Council approved an 1100-word Manifesto on the war. This affirmed that Baptists stood for peace "where the sacred rights and liberties of men are not imperilled". It stood by the British Government in the decision to enter the war, taken only after the most strenuous efforts to find a diplomatic solution. The issue was clear:

"We believe the call of God has come to Britain to spare neither blood nor treasure in the struggle to shatter a great anti-Christian attempt to destroy the fabric of Christian civilisation."³

It called for prayers of penitence for Britain's own sins; for intercessions for her enemies; for prayers on behalf of Baptists and other Christians in Germany and Austria.

While not directly calling the men of the denomination to enlist, the manifesto rejoiced that "many of the young men in our Churches have dedicated themselves, with the consent of their parents, to the service of their country, and have been among the foremost to offer themselves for the liberties of Europe."

Manifesto or not, there were already countless signs that Baptists, with other Free Churchmen, were generally wholeheartedly in support of the war. The support was seen in the daily prayer meetings at the City Temple; in the great public Free Church meetings called in support of the cause; in the way churches all over the country opened their doors to the thousands of recruits seeking billets and recreation; the relief work among Belgian refugees (especially by such as J. C. Carlile at Folkestone); by the massive support for the Prince of Wales' Relief Fund (missionary secretaries were heard complaining that people would not attend meetings if no collection was made); in the work begun and continued throughout the war by the relatively new Baptist Women's League in its national programme of relief work

and social service; particularly, in the efforts of J. H. Shakespeare and R. J. Wells, his Congregational counterpart, to secure Baptist and Congregational chaplaincies in the services, and in the eagerness of many ministers to volunteer for such work.⁴

But of course the most direct support came from Baptist recruits themselves. As we have seen, the Baptist Union Manifesto expressed pleasure at the large number of enlistments from the denomination, but did not directly appeal for recruits. There were those who wished that it had done so. An irate letter appeared in the *Baptist Times* from William Tulloch, a member of Hillhead Baptist Church, Glasgow. He declared that in Scotland men, at the call of duty, did not wait "for the consent of their parents" (as the Manifesto put it). Hillhead Church had not waited for any manifesto but had already responded by sending 120 from the Church and mission to the colours. All but one of the male Sunday School teachers had volunteered.⁵

It is hard to know just what was meant when a church claimed to have "sent" men to the colours. In many cases churches seemed to count among "their" volunteers any who had any connection with the church (such as Sunday School, Bible Class, Institute etc.), quite apart from actual members. Nor is it easy to decide just how important a factor was the church, by itself, in persuading a man to enlist. But we can hardly doubt that the minister, declaiming from the pulpit on the righteousness of the cause, must have powerfully reinforced Kitchener's pointing finger on the recruiting posters.

What is certain, is that churches were proud of those who enlisted. With a sense of prestige otherwise seen only in recording baptisms, churches large and small were soon reporting to the *Baptist Times* the numbers of their men joining the colours. By the end of November we read of Bloomsbury, 40-50; Westbourne Park, 100; Barnstaple, 14; Stockton-on-Tees, "a very considerable proportion"; Paisley, 40; New Southgate, 17; Mitcham Lane, Streatham, 43; Horfield, Bristol, 50; Swansea Tabernacle, 35; Zion, Cambridge, 30; Ferme Park, 120; Hyde, 22; Peckham Rye, 100; Edgeside, Waterfoot, 6. By the beginning of November Shakespeare had been notified by local churches of 13,255 recruits.⁶ We can hardly expect every recruit to have been reported.

Pride stirred in the hearts of previously peace-loving Baptists as they watched their young men go. They included the sons and grandsons of some of the denomination's leading figures. Dr. Ewing, of Rye Lane Chapel, Peckham, even suggested to Shakespeare that a Baptist Corps be formed and sent to the front.⁷ On this Shakespeare was sympathetic, but (perhaps fortunately) inactive. Welsh Baptists were annoyed by Anglican claims that the majority of recruits were coming from the Established Church. Not so, the Baptists declared at their autumn meetings; Nonconformists were at least well to the fore at the recruiting stations.⁸

All this is important, as illustrating how deeply Baptists in general became identified with the war effort, from the General Secretary to

the Sunday School teacher. But we should also mention the *Baptist Times* itself, then edited by the General Secretary's brother, A. W. Shakespeare. From the first week of the war till the last, latest news from the battle fronts and discussion of the allies' progress took pride of place in every issue. Indeed, without much exaggeration one could say that to be well informed on the war, the good Baptist would not have needed to read any other journal.

All this represented a dramatic change in a denomination which—at least in its leaders—had till August 1914 been strongly identified with those movements in British life quite opposed to the thought of war. Let an anonymous recruit, writing in November 1914, speak for all:

"I was once, alas! a peaceful civilian . . . schooled in the old Liberal belief that war was impossible, that to launch a Dreadnought was as absurd as throwing £2 million into the sea. As a Nonconformist I stood for independence and freedom. How many times from public platforms have I exhorted the working classes to regard every German as a brother? Now I am paying for it all. The bugle has sounded, and after a few months under canvas I emerge a disappointed Liberal, and with no feelings of brotherhood against the Kaiser. However, I am still a strong Baptist!"⁹

Still a strong Baptist . . . But the donning of khaki, literally or figuratively, by the denomination was to affect deeply the type of belief and outlook upon the world which till then had been typical. To understand this, we must look at the reaction to the war in its wider historical context.

While the Great War came as a shock to the nation, it was to some extent a confirmation of fears which had been developing for over a decade. There were many signs of jingoism and Germanophobia in Edwardian England. Arthur Marwick comments: "To say that the country looked forward to war would be to say too much; but there can be no doubt that there was abroad in the land a spirit which made war, when it came, intensely welcome"¹⁰.

But there was another element in British life, quite opposed to the militaristic trends. It was represented in the Liberal press, particularly by the *Daily News* and *Manchester Guardian*. It comprised a variety of attitudes. There were those who were complete pacifists. There were those who opposed war on pragmatic grounds, as being economically and commercially futile. Norman Angell's *The Great Illusion* was the classic statement of this view.¹¹ Others were broadly internationalist, inspired by a vision of the world growing into a family of nations and races, in which war was a thing of the past.

As far as their articulated public opinion was concerned, Baptists till August 1914 were strongly identified with the anti-militaristic trend and, within it, with the internationalistic movement. We fully appreciate what the outbreak of war meant for them, only when we

understand how deep was their commitment in this field. Here are some aspects of this commitment.

First, the early years of the century saw a striking growth in the international consciousness of the Baptist community itself. The formation of the Baptist World Alliance in London in 1905 brought together representatives of 23 countries. John Clifford was its first President, and a further Congress was held in Philadelphia in 1911. Compared with other denominations, Baptists were relatively tardy in forming their world organization. The International Congregational Council, for example, had been formed in 1891. But for British Baptists, their international links become specially significant during the Edwardian period. And of all denominations, none became more interested in Europe, and especially in Germany, than did the Baptists in the years prior to 1914.

The first European Baptist Congress took place in Berlin in 1908, and it was an extraordinary success. Eighteen hundred delegates gathered from all over Europe, from London to Omsk, from Stockholm to Rome. A third of them were from Britain. Addressing the Congress, Clifford euphorically ascribed this spectacle to "the Spirit of that God who has made of one blood all the nations of the earth", and who was even now bringing about a new international brotherhood at very level—political, social and cultural. Baptists, he said, were taking part in this great march of progress, "growing together in a holy brotherhood in the Lord."¹²

British Baptists found a new interest in the groups of their brethren on the continent, many of which in Germany owed their origin to the work of J. G. Oncken in the previous century. They felt a special responsibility thrust upon them—not just for the well-being of these groups, all too often deprived of religious and social liberties—but for the social and spiritual health of Europe as a whole, still in the grip of ecclesiastical and political conservatism.

The success of the Berlin Congress, and the effectiveness of subsequent Baptist Alliance work in Europe, was due largely to the efforts of British Baptists, and above all to two ministers, N. H. Marshall and J. H. Rushbrooke. Both grew up under Clifford at Westbourne Park Chapel, and both developed strong personal links with Germany through completing their theological education there. Marshall became an outstanding authority on contemporary German theology and philosophy, through studying at Göttingen and Berlin, and gaining a doctorate at Halle. Rushbrooke studied in Berlin, and married the daughter of a university professor there.

Rushbrooke was to become a leading Baptist world figure. Marshall, tragically, died in January 1914 aged 42. But he had achieved much. During 1906 he travelled extensively on the continent, making contact with Baptist groups in preparation for the Congress. Sending home a constant stream of letters and reports he built up, impressively, the awareness of British Baptists in their co-religionists. Signs of this increasing interest, particularly regarding Germany, can be seen in

the numerous articles in the *Baptist Times* for the period, including reports received from German Baptist leaders and accounts of meetings with Baptists there by scholars, tourists and other visitors.

The significance of a Christian fellowship traversing national frontiers in a heavily-armed Europe was not missed. Marshall saw the need of a Christian re-awakening in a Europe which exhibited a "militarism without parallel in the history of the world, a militarism that not only threatens terrible bloodshed, but saps the strength of nations while at peace."¹³ Clifford believed the Berlin Congress to be aware of its responsibility here:

"This Baptist brotherhood is pledged in Christ's name and in every land to fight against the spirit of militarism, and whilst nations are everywhere preparing armies and navies, inventing and multiplying new engines of slaughter, we must by prayer and speech and example do our utmost to secure peace on earth and goodwill among men".¹⁴

In fact, a whole session of the Congress was devoted to "Baptists and Universal Peace".

This intense and growing international interest of Baptists meant that they were well placed to contribute to the wider peace movements of the Churches. In this more ecumenical internationalism, the Baptist names that occur most frequently are again Clifford, Marshall and Rushbrooke.

The Anglo-German Churches' peace movement originated largely with J. Allen Baker, M.P., a Quaker. At the Hague Peace Conference of 1907, he and Baron Eduard de Neufville, a German, talked over the possibility of an exchange visit of British and German Churchmen. Both secured support for the idea in their own countries. As a result in May 1908 130 German Churchmen (of the Evangelical State Churches, Roman Catholic and Free Churches) visited London for several days.

Baptists played a very full part in arranging this. William Thomas, a Baptist minister and Secretary of the Metropolitan Free Church Council, acted as General Secretary of the joint committee, while Clifford, Shakespeare, Marshall, Rushbrooke and A. J. Avery were committee members. And while only four of the German visitors were Baptists, fourteen of the party were invited to preach from Baptist pulpits in London on the Sunday of the visit.

The tone of the whole visit was of hearty conviviality, with trips to places of historic, religious and academic interest; no doubt real personal friendships resulted between visitors and hosts. Clifford, of course, was much in evidence at the various meetings, particularly at the great public meeting in the Albert Hall. His oratory soared as usual:

"We are predestined, . . . we German and British folk, to march step by step through the practical union of these two peoples, in the interests of peace, in the interests of righteousness and holiness and goodness, in the interests of all humanity."¹⁵

The resolution carried at this meeting is worth quoting fully, as summing up the spirit of the speeches made by both sides throughout the visit:

"We, as representatives of the Christian Churches of Germany and of the United Kingdom, recognising how greatly the world's peace depends upon the amicable relations between our two countries, appeal to all classes in both nations to promote, by their earnest endeavours, a mutual spirit of goodwill and friendship. Our nations are closely allied by the stock from which both nations spring, by the kinship of our Sovereigns, by our history, our long friendship, our mutual indebtedness in Art, Literature and Science, and above all by our common Christianity. We believe that the consciousness of these great traditions is deeply engraved in the hearts of our peoples, and that they endorse our conviction that frank co-operation between us will do much to promote the coming of the kingdom of peace on earth and goodwill among men."¹⁶

Those concerned with the visit were greatly encouraged. The *Baptist Times* hailed it as a great success—owing an immense amount to the efforts of the Baptists involved.¹⁷ Next year, an English party returned the visit, and were similarly fêted in Berlin. Eight Baptists went, including Marshall, Rushbrooke and Sir George White, M.P. These three gave public addresses. The speeches and resolutions were in similar vein to those of the previous year—common blood, culture and Christianity should enable the right spirit of friendship to prevail between the two peoples.¹⁸

The concrete result of these exchanges was the formation of "The Associated Councils in the British and German Empires for Fostering Friendly Relations between the Two Peoples". The English committee received the blessing of the Archbishop of Canterbury and prominent men in all denominations. The Autumn Assembly of the Baptist Union in 1910 unanimously passed a resolution urging Baptists to associate themselves with it. The committee, chaired by Allen Baker, received strong Baptist support, with the Vice-Presidents including John Clifford, F. B. Meyer, J. H. Shakespeare, Charles Brown, Sir George Macalpine, and Sir George White. In 1911 the movement's quarterly magazine *The Peacemaker* began to appear—with Rushbrooke as editor.

In addition to the Anglo-German activity, calls were now coming from various quarters for the Churches of the world to unite in working for peace. American Christians were particularly concerned. In 1914, a group of representatives of various European Churches planned to meet at Constance on 3rd and 4th August. Two of the main resolutions were entrusted to Clifford and Rushbrooke. But by the time they reached Constance it was clear that the conference, unwittingly, had been timed with fateful irony. As the delegates unpacked their bags, the troops of the Great Powers were packing theirs on the order to mobilise. We shall return to this later.

Many other illustrations could be cited of Baptist concern with peace up till 1914. For example, since the turn of the century they expressed increasing alarm at the steady rise in armaments expenditure, first under the Conservative, and then under the Liberal, governments. The return of the Liberals in 1906 brought the hope of "peace, retrenchment and reform", and the naval estimates for 1906-07 gave some hint of this. But by 1908, following the failure of the Hague Peace Conference to agree on any disarmament proposals, it was clear that even a Liberal administration was going to be committed to keeping Britain's naval strength well ahead of Germany's. The Dreadnought programme went on apace, and so did the volume of protest from the peace lobby.

Resolutions on the issue at Baptist Assemblies and Association meetings became almost routine. To condemn the "mad competition" in armaments as wasteful of home resources and provocative of friction abroad, became almost as familiar a feature of the platform as calls for disestablishment and the ending of the drink trade. By 1914, a note of despair was creeping into the protest. There was developing a good deal of frustration in Baptist circles that many of the original Liberal pledges of 1906, on this as on other matters, still showed little sign of fulfilment. In March 1914 the *Baptist Times* saw the increased estimates for that year as a "sinister commentary" on the professions of Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman nine years before.¹⁹

One could cite, too, the intense interest displayed in the possibility of arbitration as a means of settling international disputes, and the euphoria aroused among Baptists and other Free Churchmen by the proposal of President Taft, in 1911, for an arbitration treaty between Britain and the United States.²⁰

What of Baptist attitudes to Germany as a nation? Most interesting is a leader in the *Baptist Times* of 9th January 1914. It strongly reflects Rushbrooke's interests, and most probably reveals the sympathies of the General Secretary also. The article speaks of evidence of much more cordial Anglo-German relations in recent months—presumably referring to progress on near-eastern affairs. It was now recognised by both countries "that there is nowhere any real divergence of interests" and it was hoped that shortly an agreement between the two powers would be published to "dispose of the possibility of misunderstandings and scares". The past few years had undoubtedly seen strained relations, and the burdens of arms expenditure had weighed heavily on both countries' economies. Such "scares" as the Agadir crisis were due to secretive diplomacy and "might have been avoided if Germany had been aware of the precise obligations to France which we had incurred". The constant atmosphere of suspicion was largely due to the jingoistic press. The article then expounds what is virtually an *apologia* for current German policy:

"Opportunities of commercial development she does desire, but evidence of her need of territorial expansion is simply non-existent . . . Her navy, we are convinced, has no aggressive pur-

pose: it cannot be said . . . to be disproportionate to the growth of her mercantile fleet. She regards it as essential to the safety of her maritime trade. In some measure it expresses the pride of a great people, refusing to carry on a world-business at the mercy of other Powers: in some measure it is an instrument of diplomacy, Germany desiring to be strong enough to compel consideration of her interests. To look upon it as merely directed against ourselves is to forget the existence of French and Russian fleets."

And so on. The article concludes by ascribing a large measure of the improved relations to the work of the Associated Councils of Churches (and particularly the Baptist members).

On the eve of war, then, leading Baptist opinion was deeply committed to internationalism, opposed to militarism, and even prepared to defend German policy in the face of English accusations. To what extent complete pacifism was found among Baptists is hard to say. Not until an actual war situation develops does the pacifist position really make itself clear. Certainly there was a proportion, but a minority. One cannot even find in Clifford a statement saying categorically that under no circumstances could he ever condone the use of force. Most, like him, were content to condemn war and militarism as horrors of a bygone age.

Against this background, we begin to see how shattering was the outbreak of war for Baptists and others of their views. The pendulum swung violently. Ten days after the outbreak of war, the *Baptist Times* declared that all along the German government had been resolved on war.²¹ A week later, there appeared a long and carefully-argued article on "Christian Patriotism" attempting to reconcile the ethic of the cross with national self-preservation.²² It concluded that it could be a Christian duty to maintain the State for the sake of the kingdom of God, since the State had a real part in God's purpose for civilization. This moral justification of war was dealt with in very general terms, making no reference to the present conflict, and theoretically could have appeared at any time. But it is frankly impossible to imagine the article appearing before August 1914, in a journal which till then had recoiled in horror at the mere mention of war as an actual possibility.

The German invasion of Belgium, the sack of Louvain, the first allegations of atrocities and "frightfulness", wreaked havoc with the former sentiments. The *Baptist Times* declared on 4th September that the Germans were setting aside all the rules of "civilised warfare". Civilised warfare! A month earlier, that phrase would have been struck out as a contradiction in terms. A week later, the editor elevated the conflict to something more than a clash of national interests:

"It is the clash of two totally different and quite irreconcilable ideals. On the one side is the ideal to which mankind has been painfully climbing, that love and righteousness are the law in the life of nations as truly as in the life of individuals. On the other is the ideal, openly announced by German philosophers, states-

men and soldiers, that brute strength, reinforced by science, is supreme in international relationships."²³

In such eyes, the war was taking on the dimensions of good versus evil, Christ versus the devil: a conflict of apocalyptic significance. This article goes on to call for all who could, to "join the armies that are fighting for the Kingdom of God as surely as did the Puritans in Cromwell's day."

It is impossible here to give an account of the welter of published sermons and articles from this early period of the war, from such figures as John Clifford, J. T. Forbes, Charles Brown, W. Y. Fullerton, S. Pearce Carey and Thomas Phillips. Their preaching stressed the moral justification for Britain's entry into the war, the need for trust in God who would vindicate the right, and a deep eschatological sense of standing at an ultimate divide between good and evil, a momentous point in human destiny. Through it all reverberated a sense of shock that the unbelievable had happened. A. J. Nixon of Burnham, Somerset, put it vividly:

"Before we could realise what was happening, we found all the apparent solid ground beneath our feet breaking up, and ourselves standing in horror on the edge of the abyss. We would not be educated into seriousness, and now God has shocked us into it . . . It needs little foresight to see that as a result of this war ancient institutions will be shaken, much will be overthrown never to rise again, and a staggering blow will be dealt at our civilisation."²⁴

The shock was caused by what was seen in Britain as Prussian militarism acting out a philosophy of brute force. F. C. Spurr, minister of Regent's Park Chapel, was typical of many who saw this as the culmination of trends in German philosophy over many years. He laid the blame on the permeating influence of Nietzsche, given political expression by such military writers as General F. von Bernhardi. Like most Baptist spokesmen, Spurr did not consider the German people as such to be guilty, but laid the blame on the arrogant, militaristic ruling class.²⁵

At first it seems extraordinary that those who had been so deeply concerned with international peace, should now be the ones most shocked by the outbreak of war. For surely, did not the internationalistic movement spring from a recognition of the dangers to peace? Why be so concerned for peace and international relations, unless you have good reason to fear for them? The outbreak of war would then simply have confirmed the peace-workers' fear, and their reaction would have been a predictable "We told you so". But this reaction is hardly to be found.

This is strikingly clear, for example, on the armaments issue. As we have seen, right up till the eve of war the arms competition was consistently condemned as not only wasteful of resources, but as being itself a danger to peace. But once war was declared, there was barely a mention of the preceding arms competition. It was certainly not

identified as a main cause of the war. That was claimed to be the aggressive militarism of Germany.

August 1914 meant for Baptists, as for many others who had been committed internationalists, a violent re-appraisal of their previous assumptions. For their peace activities had worked on the premise that while there were indeed "suspicions" and "scares" between Britain and Germany, these were not based on any real divergence or contradiction of interests. They were phantasmagoria conjured up by the chauvinistic press to excite a public who liked to be horrified. For the peace movement, the "danger" lay in imagining these so-called dangers to be real. The way to dispose of them was therefore to inculcate a friendlier atmosphere, beginning on the personal level. Englishmen and Germans, by coming to know each other better and learning about each others' countries, would discover how much they had in common, and find that they could be friends. This was the basis of the exchange visits of 1908-09. The development of such ties would dispel all suspicions, and make the thought of war impossible.

August 1914 exposed a dreadful truth, which the peace-workers had been unable or unwilling to perceive. Their concern for peace had indeed been justified—but the dangers lay far deeper than they imagined. They had rightly been horrified at the thought of war, and the toll of the trenches over the next four years would more than justify that horror. But their attention had been focused on the outward symptoms of potential conflict, treating these themselves as the dangers. The Dreadnought had been viewed as carrying in itself the danger to peace, whereas the depth of the imperial rivalry which it signified was not apprehended. The records of the exchange visits of churchmen²⁶ show what is, in retrospect, a tragically naive refusal on the part of any theologian to dare to suggest that Britain and Germany, by both playing the imperial game so close to one another, were living dangerously.

The British and German churchmen resembled two parties of passengers standing on the decks of their respective ships, waving cheerily across the water to each other, sincerely proffering hands of friendship—but unaware that the vessels on which they stood were on collision course.

The extent of this lack of perception is well seen in John Clifford, who eagerly seized on any apparent sign of the dawn of the new age of peace and brotherhood. In his Berlin address of 1908, he included "alliances" among the signs of the new internationalism.²⁷ In an article a year later he put it more specifically:

"A slow, peaceful evolution is being effected in the interests of amity, goodwill and brotherhood. The *entente cordiale* with France is an accomplished fact, and the prophecy of a coming advance in which an *entente cordiale* shall bind not two nationalities only, but the whole human family in one."²⁸

We may think it incredible that a man of Clifford's intellect should have been blind to the fact that alliances are formed not just for

friendship's sake, but for security against a potential common foe. Such ingenuousness needs to be seen against the ignorance then current about foreign affairs in general, not just among the public at large, but even politicians. David Lloyd George records that not till a year after the Agadir crisis in 1911 were members of the Liberal Cabinet informed as to British obligations to France—and some were kept in ignorance almost to the eve of war itself.²⁹ Nevertheless, it does seem strange that the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance were seen only in their unitive aspects, not in their deeper, divisive significance. The possibility that the Great Powers might have truly incompatible interests, and would be prepared to pursue these interests beyond the brink of war, was too much to contemplate. How tragically innocent was the comment of the *Baptist Times* when, three days before war was declared, it remarked on the crisis:

“But after all, the chief ground of a hope of a peaceful issue seems to be the tremendous issues involved. A general European war would mean the destruction of Western civilisation”.³⁰

One main factor in the inability of liberal Christianity to read adequately the signs of the times seems to have been its own close identification with imperialism. The Baptists with whom we are dealing accepted the fact of Empire and thought from within its framework. Not that they were uncritical of Empire. Clifford, as is well known, had vehemently opposed the Boer War, and few Baptists felt able to join in the “Mafeking” fervour released at home. But it is important to note that while Clifford opposed the recourse to arms, he was not prepared—as, for example, were W. T. Stead and Thomas Spurgeon—to oppose British annexation as such in South Africa.³¹ He and other Baptist leaders took the line that while the war was dishonourable, all races in South Africa would benefit more under British rule than under Dutch. Such imperialism had a strongly idealistic tone, which was often uneasy about the acquisitive and militaristic features of colonial policy. Clifford and F.B. Meyer could view the Empire in a very exalted light, as being God's means of revealing His ways to the whole human race.

However benign their conception of Empire, the fact that they so closely shared the presuppositions of imperialism meant that such churchmen—however internationalist in other ways—could scarcely be expected to ask the most searching questions concerning the relative ambitions of Britain and Germany. So long as British Christians spoke of their Empire as God's chosen instrument, and Germans spoke of their *Kultur* in similar vein, this simply conceded the perilous dynamic of the situation till the collision occurred—and made it all the more bitter.

What, then, did the support given to the war by Baptists and other Free Churchmen signify? The sheer collapse of all idealism and internationalism, succumbing to patriotic fervour? We have already noted the intensely moral note of preaching and writing early in the war. Since Reinhold Niebuhr, we have learnt to suspect that such

moralising is usually the cloak for the self-interest of parties to a conflict. It would, indeed, be pointless to try to defend Baptists of the time from the charge that in various ways they allowed patriotic prejudice and anti-German hysteria to get the better of them. The treatment of atrocity-stories in the *Baptist Times* affords one such example.

But to suggest that Baptists went to war on patriotic impulse—"my country right or wrong"—and then sought grounds for moral justification of their action would be very misleading, at least as far as their chief spokesmen were concerned. There is good evidence of the greatest reluctance, if only for a day or so, before full support was given to the Government's decision. The sad, bewildered and resigned note in the *Baptist Times* immediately after the outbreak of war is eloquent of a costly and painful realisation which went against every inclination in the writer (probably reflecting J. H. Shakespeare's own views). Moreover, we do know that John Clifford, still the most influential leader of opinion in the denomination, was initially opposed to British involvement.

Clifford and Rushbrooke, we have seen, were attending the Constance Peace Conference. This was hastily abandoned, leaving future arrangements with a small group who were to meet in London. Rushbrooke journeyed to the Baltic coast to join his wife who was on holiday there. Clifford, after a nightmare journey (for a man of 78) across Germany, arrived back in London only hours before war was declared. He at once drew up a statement calling for Britain to abstain from the conflict.³³ Everything known about Clifford indicated that he might take a stand such as he had taken in the Boer War. Had his mind not changed, who can speculate on the consequences? Quite when it changed is difficult to decide, but the deciding factor is clear: the German violation of Belgian neutrality, despite British efforts to obtain its guarantee.

Historians may argue over the British Government's presentation of its case. But the point is that for Clifford and his like, a stark and inescapable moral imperative arose out of the facts as they received them. Sir Edward Grey had done his utmost to preserve peace through diplomacy, whereas Germany, said Clifford, had:

"Deliberately and of express purpose . . . broken into Belgium, flung to the winds as veriest chaff her solemn treaty obligations, flouted public law, and trampled underfoot with ineffable scorn the rights of small nationalities as not even the small dust of the balance."³⁴

Clifford from then on supported the war as vigorously as he had opposed the Boer War. He was followed by the great majority of Free Churchmen—and the Government must have been relieved. Would this have happened had Belgian neutrality not been an issue? Here we enter the realm of tantalising if unanswerable speculations. For would the Liberal Cabinet have stayed united to the extent that it did, had not Belgium been an issue? Could Britain have gone to war on

the strength of simply supporting France through the *Entente*? If Lloyd George had resigned, what would have been the effect on Nonconformity? Britain would have been under immense pressure to support France in any circumstances. But whether this alone would have won Clifford, and through him much of Nonconformity, must remain an open question.

The violation of Belgian neutrality was the chief issue which attracted moral opinion in Britain in the autumn of 1914. When, in September, a manifesto appeared from a group of German theologians (many of whom had been involved in the peace exchanges), it was a shock to discover that no mention was made of Belgium. The reply, signed by the Archbishops, with leading Anglican and Free Church figures, dealt at length and in detail with the obligations of the European Powers to Belgium, dating back to the Treaty of London (1839). For the Baptists, John Clifford, J. H. Shakespeare, F. B. Meyer and T. R. Glover were signatories.

But for Baptists such as these, the Belgian issue was not simply a matter of adherence to the formulae of venerable treaties. It was the actual suffering of the small nation which touched the Nonconformist Conscience, and Baptists particularly, on a peculiarly sensitive fibre. Baptists of the time claimed to have an innate sympathy with oppressed peoples. Freedom of thought and worship were sacred, as they zealously proclaimed in the Passive Resistance campaign on the education issue. The memory of social disqualifications was still strong in their tradition, and they were deeply aware of the plight of many of their brethren in the farther reaches of Europe.

The German treatment of Belgium appeared to Baptists to strike at values peculiarly vital to themselves—independency, the right to choose for oneself, despite being numerically small or apparently insignificant. This surely applied to nations as to individuals and religious groups. War was morally abhorrent to the Nonconformist Conscience; but that same conscience was aroused by the plight of Belgium, and could not allow Britain to stand by at such a flagrant violation of liberties.

Now this reaction to the fate of Belgium was but one of a series of incidents since the nineteenth century, in which liberal Christian opinion in Britain was outraged by events abroad. In some cases, British interests were not involved. In other cases (as in South Africa) British policies were criticised. There is evidence, therefore, of a political conscience at least partly independent of patriotic considerations. This would support the view that in reacting as they did in 1914, Baptists and other Free Churchmen were not simply being chauvinistic or anxious for prestige in the eyes of their countrymen.

As examples, we may cite Clifford's opposition to the Boer War, albeit (see above) not the most extreme position taken then. The exploitation of Chinese labour in the Transvaal was another cause for indignation in the years immediately following the Boer War. Turkish oppression in Armenia, and later in Macedonia, likewise called forth

much Nonconformist agitation for British "intervention". One may of course ask whether such issues were pursued partly as diversions from the growing complexities of social justice at home, but the sense of moral responsibility is undeniable.

From 1903 onwards, however, one overseas issue above all others troubled the Nonconformist mind. Ironically, it involved Belgium—not Belgium the oppressed, but Belgium the oppressor. A wave of protest swept the country following reports by missionaries and others in the Congo that Africans were being exploited, tortured and even massacred. The protest reached its pitch during 1908-09. Baptists, having a missionary interest in the Congo, were particularly incensed. The normally mild F. B. Meyer declared:

"Fifteen millions of helpless people are being slowly done to death by the almost incredible cruelty of the officials . . . who are solely responsible to the King of the Belgians in his private capacity. If only one tenth of the outrages perpetrated on men and *women* could be published, Great Britain couldn't sleep for nightmare."³⁵

Clifford of course appeared on the platform of the Albert Hall, and also struck with his pen:

"The King of Belgium has torn up the Berlin Treaty, flouted the Powers, dismissed international obligations as a usurpation, and asserted his personal absolutism in support of this brutal and deadly slave-system in the strongest and most shameful terms."³⁶

And speaking of the Congolese:

"Their rights have been most cruelly trampled underfoot. Leopold and his satellites have never seen it, but they have violently annexed it, and barbarously sacked it."³⁷

This was exactly the language to be used in 1914, when Belgium in turn suffered at the hands of Germany. Substitute "Germany" for "Belgium", "Belgians" for "Congolese", and "Kaiser" for "Leopold" and one has virtually produced an address from the autumn of 1914. (Interestingly, the writer has as yet found only one reference in a war sermon, by F. H. King of Bristol, which ascribed Belgium's sufferings to judgment for her sins in the Congo.) The response of many Churchmen at the outbreak of war, seen in this historical context, was consistent with stands taken earlier when national self-interest was not at stake. There was a real element of genuine ethical decision. Many of the young men who went to fight, and the preachers who encouraged them, and the women who knitted and made up parcels, did so with serious moral purpose. War was genuinely hateful to them; but to allow German militarism to hack its way through was unthinkable. Something was at stake which transcended every other interest—even, ultimately, that of the nation.

But neither the anonymous recruit quoted earlier, or any of the other Baptists who went to war at the dictates of conscience, could have foreseen in the autumn of 1914 just what the war would do to this moral attitude. It was not just the toll taken in the trenches which left

its mark on the Churches. Nor was it simply the belief in "progress" which was hit by the war. (This proved surprisingly resilient throughout the war, and really seems to have suffered in the period of immediate *post-war* disillusionment).³⁸ The tragedy of the drama lay in the fact that the kind of idealism which led to support of the war, was in the end crushed by the harsh realities of the conflict. August 1914 saw the great flourish of Nonconformist moral idealism—which led to its own death.

In those early weeks of the war, Church leaders were impressed, even awed, by the spectacle of young men from all walks of life and from all social classes offering for service. Such a sacrificial self-offering on this scale moved many to hope for a religious and moral revival in its wake. For Baptists, above all, its significance lay in its entirely *voluntary* nature.

In the pre-war era, nothing had chilled the hearts of Baptists more than the possibility of compulsory military service—"that awful curse of the nations, conscription", as Sir George White, President of the Baptist Union in 1903, described it.³⁹ There was a vociferous body of opinion in the country, led by Lord Roberts, in favour of conscription to increase and maintain the standing army. Among Nonconformists, Baptists at least were anxious lest the Asquith government might give ground on this, as it had repeatedly conceded the increased naval budgets.

The Baptist objection to conscription was basically that it overrode individual freedom. C. H. Watkins (who was to join Clifford at Westbourne Park in 1911) wrote while a student at the Midland College in 1906:

"... Compulsory military service means the utter repudiation of the individual conscience, and the branding and persecution of every man who insists on practising the Christian creed."⁴⁰

The voluntary principle seemed well justified by the initial response to Kitchener's appeal in 1914. Sufficient men were enlisting, and a Baptist M.P. wrote:

"... We rejoice to know that Britain is being defended by the intelligent sacrifice of the flower of her people. Conscription could never give us the kind of spirit which has already been seen at Mons and Cambrai, and which will frighten the German conscript again and again before the war is over."⁴¹

Baptists felt that the principle of voluntary commitment, so dear to them socially and at the very core of their churchmanship, was making a decisive contribution to the need of the hour. It was therefore a deadening blow to discover, later in the war, that it was inadequate to a sustained campaign, and in fact had to be overridden if the war effort was to succeed. For towards the end of 1915 it was becoming clear to the War Office that the present recruiting rate would not be enough for the following year. A series of Military Service Bills was brought in, with the end result, by June 1916, that every British male between 18 and 41 was *ipso facto* a soldier. Formal

provision was made for exemptions and conscientious objectors, but the treatment which objectors received at the tribunals and afterwards was often perverse.

The *Baptist Times* accepted the measures, as it had accepted the war in the first place, resignedly:

"We distrust Conscription, but we dread a German victory still more . . ."42 "Whether . . . it was necessary to abandon the voluntary principle for compulsion, it is not for us to say. We have not the means of judgment. All we can do is to accept the decision of those in power who know the facts . . ."43

Nonconformity was losing its confidence, if not its voice as well. But others were not prepared to take this lying down. Clifford denounced the Military Service Acts as fraudulent and imposed against the mature judgment of the people. While firm in support of the war, he was deeply concerned with the plight of conscientious objectors and willingly addressed their gatherings. Meyer, likewise, was concerned and while on a visit to troops in France made a special visit to a group of objectors imprisoned there, who only just escaped the death sentence.⁴⁴

For Clifford, conscription went against the whole aim of the war:

"I have been throughout my long career a fighter on behalf of freedom and liberty . . . Freedom is the breath of a nation's life, and it is only as freedom is granted that it is possible for us to face our difficulties and master them . . . And of all the liberties we should fight for there is no liberty so great and so absolutely essential as liberty of conscience."⁴⁵

The attitude represented by the *Baptist Times* had been forced into the pragmatic opinion that the war had to be won and the men had to be found. But Clifford realised what this meant for the idealism with which he and others had supported the war, and which had been the inspiration of the Nonconformist political stance for so long. A massive contradiction was now presenting itself. The war, begun as a fight for liberty and independence for men and nations, was now to be pursued by illiberal means, methods which seemed to deny these very same values. Idealism seemed faced with a sad choice: on the one hand, to make ineffectual protest; on the other, to bow to the grim realities of power and conflict. Either way, it spelled the end of that Nonconformist idealism which believed that politics in this world could and should be directed by clear moral choices.

All this took place with the Liberals in office—the Liberals, whom Nonconformity had regarded as their political allies for so long. That made the helplessness of Nonconformity all the more apparent, and the realisation all the more bitter. Internationalism had not prevented the war, nor could idealism direct the way it was waged. It was becoming clear how little direct influence the "Nonconformist Conscience" now had on the actual course of events. The twentieth century was proving to be a bleaker place than had been expected. J. H. Shakespeare would continue to be a welcome visitor at No. 10,

Downing Street, but the chilly exile towards the fringes of national life had clearly begun. Shakespeare himself, of course, was one of the few to realise this.

In the autumn of 1914 all this was as yet unknown. That young recruit who had donned uniform had no idea how long the war would last, and that, if he survived, while "still a good Baptist", he would be a somewhat different one. But lest we think that all was loss and tragedy, it should be remembered that the internationalism of the pre-war period, while jejune by hindsight's standards, did not prove worthless. The sense of fellowship with fellow Baptists and others in Germany, while severely strained, was not broken, and was taken up again afterwards. That conference at Constance was not completely abortive. From its hasty decisions grew the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, which was to become an important strand in the later ecumenical movement. While much was being destroyed, many maintained and strengthened their vision of a world-wide community of nations seeking arbitration instead of the sword. Nor can we forget that there is an entirely different story to be discovered and recounted—the full story of those who remained completely loyal to their pacifist convictions during the war, Baptists and other Free Churchmen.

To end this account of Baptist response to the outbreak of war, perhaps there is nothing more fitting than to quote from one who has played a large part in this account; who before the war represented so deeply the internationalist attitude, and who, after the war, was to play a real part in the reconstruction of the links with Europe. Because of his personal situation, his utterance is more eloquent than any other, as an illustration of the spiritual trial brought by the catastrophe, the depths into which faith sank, and from which—in some at least—it emerged again. It is J. H. Rushbrooke, detained with his family in Germany for several weeks after the outbreak of war, writing to his congregation at Hampstead Garden:

"Perhaps the shock of this war has fallen on few as heavily as upon me, who had toiled for years on behalf of friendly relations between two nearly-related peoples, and had believed that the Christian faith was strong enough to overcome the suspicions and jealousies that make for war. All seemed but a few weeks ago to promise so well—and now! My personal faith has almost reeled in the presence of the awful fact; and when I exhort you still to believe in the God of peace and love I am exhorting no less my own heart. It is 'out of the depths' that we must all cry to Him, whose ways are unsearchable, but who is nevertheless "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁶

NOTES

- ¹ *Baptist Times* 3.7.14.
² *Ibid.*
³ *Baptist Times* 25.9.14.
⁴ For an account of the general policy of the Baptist Union during the war, see E. A. Payne, *The Baptist Union; A Short History*, London, 1959, Chapter 10.
⁵ *Baptist Times* 2.10.14.
⁶ *Baptist Times* 6.11.14.
⁷ *Baptist Times* 11.9.14.
⁸ *Baptist Times* 23.10.14.
⁹ *Baptist Times* 27.11.14.
¹⁰ A. Marwick, *The Great Deluge: British Society and the First World War*, London, 1965 (Macmillan Study Edition 1973), p. 27.
¹¹ N. Angell, *The Great Illusion: A study of the relation of military power to national advantage*, London, 1909.
¹² *Baptist Times* 4.9.08.
¹³ *Baptist Times* 20.9.07.
¹⁴ *Baptist Times* 4.9.08.
¹⁵ *Der Friede und die Kirche: Peace and the Churches*, London and Berlin, 1908, p. 202.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 190.
¹⁷ *Baptist Times* 5.6.08.
¹⁸ *Friendly Relations between Great Britain and Germany: Souvenir Volume of the visit to Germany of representatives of the British Churches*, London and Berlin 1909.
¹⁹ *Baptist Times* 20.3.14.
²⁰ *Baptist Times* 24.3.11.
²¹ *Baptist Times* 14.8.14.
²² *Baptist Times* 21.8.14.
²³ *Baptist Times* 11.9.14.
²⁴ *Baptist Times* 28.8.14.
²⁵ *Ibid.*
²⁶ See notes 15 and 18.
²⁷ *Baptist Times* 4.9.08.
²⁸ *Baptist Times* 16.7.09.
²⁹ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, London, n.d. pp. 27-31.
³⁰ *Baptist Times* 31.7.14.
³¹ J. Marchant, *Dr. John Clifford*, London, 1921, pp. 145-154.
³² *Baptist Times* 19.7.01, 30.8.01.
³³ *Baptist Times* 21.8.14.
³⁴ J. Clifford, *Our Fight for Belgium and What It Means*, London, 1917, p. 7.
³⁵ *Baptist Times* 4.5.06.
³⁶ *Baptist Times* 22.10.09.
³⁷ *Ibid.*
³⁸ See especially J. C. Carlile, *My Life's Little Day*, London, 1935, pp. 232-250.
³⁹ *Baptist Times* 1.5.03.
⁴⁰ *Baptist Times* 14.9.06.
⁴¹ *Baptist Times* 18.9.14.
⁴² *Baptist Times* 14.1.16.
⁴³ *Baptist Times* 2.6.16.
⁴⁴ W. Y. Fullerton, *F. B. Meyer: A Biography*, London, 1929.
⁴⁵ Marchant, *op. cit.*, p. 226.
⁴⁶ *Baptist Times* 11.9.14.