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TOMORROW'S MAN: J.H. RUSHBROOKE

In *Tomorrow's Man: A Biography of James Henry Rushbrooke*, Bernard Green offers a sympathetic biography which, avoiding hagiography, tells an important story. The title is doubtless meant to pay tribute to Rushbrooke's vision for foreseeing and developing issues before others of lesser perception could focus on them. I have some difficulty with the philosophy of history that lies behind this kind of language, for most of us, not given the experience that Paul refers to in II Corinthians 12, are products of our time, of what we receive of past inheritance and what we make of the opportunities that God in his wisdom affords us.

In this sense I would suggest Rushbrooke was the product of three major influences. First, through membership of John Clifford's Westbourne Park, he entered into the best of the General Baptist tradition with its respect for knowledge and scholarship, its alertness to human need, and its ongoing passion for evangelism. All this was reinforced during his first pastorate at St Mary's Gate, Derby, in the East Midlands heartlands where the New Connexion influence was so profound.

Concern for scholarship brought the second factor into play: his two years of study in Marburg and Berlin only brought him into contact with theologians like

Adolf von Harnack, but also with Dorothea Weber, the daughter of a court portrait painter; she was to become Rushbrooke's second wife, his first wife and son having died tragically after all too short a married life. Thus his sympathies were engaged with the wider world which was to equip him for a career devoted to the needs of the world church. In these very human relationships lay his concern for Anglo-German friendship and understanding leading in turn into his passion for peace.

The third formative experience was his call in 1910 to be the first minister of the new Hampstead Garden Suburb Free Church, a pioneering venture in ecumenical partnership. Attempts to found the church on a genuinely Free-Church basis failed and so the initiative was left to the London Baptist Association who, with Herbert Marnham, then treasurer of the Baptist Union, provided the finance so that the opportunity of securing a church in this vital area should not be lost. Membership was to be open and both believers' and infant baptism practised, though the latter services were to be conducted by visiting Congregational clergy. The original intention had been to reserve the pastorate to an accredited minister of the Baptist Union but in the event that clause was omitted from the trust deed and the church advanced in ecumenical openness through legal carelessness. The church had Lutyens as its architect and one of the foundation stones, laid by Mrs Henrietta Barnett, the originator of the vision of the Garden Suburb, had inscribed on it 'God is larger than the creeds'. Those, I would suggest, are the input factors.

The output, for more than a quarter of a century, was to be to the benefit of Baptist global fellowship through his tireless labours for the recently-founded Baptist World Alliance, first as European Commissioner, later as Secretary and President. He had already gained some experience dealing with political authorities when he and his family, caught in Germany in 1914 after attending a Protestant Peace Conference at Constance, were interned. His links with the Baptist World Alliance were already developing: he spoke at the first European Baptist Conference in Berlin, and at the second BWA Congress in Philadelphia. He made two visits to Budapest to try and help the Hungarian Baptists overcome local divisions and was organizer of the second European Baptist Conference in Stockholm in 1913.

After the First World War he was asked by the Alliance to undertake, with Dr Charles Brookes of the Southern Baptist Convention in the USA, a three-month investigatory tour of Europe to assess post-war needs, reporting back to a Conference in London which brought together the leaders of the continental churches together with representatives from Britain, USA, Canada and Australia. It was this conference that issued the invitation to Rushbrooke to take up the post of European Commissioner. This enabled him to use to the full his many gifts: of encouragement of those who were in difficulties, of negotiation with civil authorities, of persuasion towards those who in North America had access to the necessary funds, and of effective administration and communication.

From 1905 until 1928 the Alliance worked with two honorary secretaries, one in North America and J.H. Shakespeare in London until his retirement in 1925,

when Rushbrooke added the Eastern Secretaryship to his work as Commissioner. Three years later he was appointed the first full-time General Secretary of the Alliance. Eleven further years of distinguished service followed until in 1939, on the eve of his seventieth birthday he became President, only the second British Baptist in that office, the very first not inappropriately having been John Clifford. Because of the war, Dr W.O. Lewis, his successor, was confined in North America, and the new President looked remarkably like the old Secretary in terms of the responsibilities Rushbrooke, ever the peacemaker and reconciler, still had to carry.

As General Secretary, Rushbrooke had become the human face of Baptists worldwide. As champion of religious freedom and encourager of Baptists in their missionary task, he gave himself tirelessly to detailed administration and costly advocacy of evangelical minorities, especially in Eastern and Latin Europe.

Baptist participation in ecumenical conversations developed at a different pace on different sides of the Atlantic: there was considerable suspicion of British attitudes to the Lambeth invitation of 1920, although British Baptists yielded nothing in reply to a gracious initiative which of itself was testimony to very changed inter-church relationships. Rushbrooke was torn in different directions: the pioneer of the Hampstead initiative had now to heed a wider constituency. Thus in 1927 on Rushbrooke's initiative British Baptists declined to be represented at the Lausanne meeting of Faith and Order, sending only a greeting. Bernard Green repeats E.A. Payne's assessment that Rushbrooke was concerned about losing the confidence and considerable support of the Southern Baptist Convention which would have meant financial disaster for the Alliance. To hold Baptists together in world-wide fellowship was for Rushbrooke in the second half of his life a sufficient goal in itself. As yet it is difficult to tell whether such a strategy was right for 'tomorrow' or not.

BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY: SUMMER SCHOOL 1998

Westminster College, Cambridge, 16-19 July 1998

**Speakers include: Dr R.E. Clements, Dr John Coffey, Revd Kenneth Dix,
Revd Ruth Gouldbourne, Revd Peter Shepherd, Dr Brian Stanley,
and Dr David Thompson,**

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