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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

## JOURNAL OF THE BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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VOLUME XXXVIII    OCTOBER 1999

No.4

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### VALUES AND SOCIAL CHANGE\*

This symposium, collected and edited by Marjorie Reeves, represents much of her own personal experience in offering a prophetic voice in the midst of a world of constant social change, ninety-four years of which have been within her own experience. Other writers helpfully introduce similar autobiographical reflections for, though written by scholars, many of the contributors to this fascinating study were active in the movements they describe. The starting point for the story is the fertile net-working patiently but urgently developed by J.H. Oldham, especially in a high-

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\* *Christian Thinking and Social Order: Conviction Politics from the 1930s to the Present Day*, ed. Marjorie Reeves, Cassell, 1999, 238pp, £45hb; £16.99pb.

powered discussion group called 'The Moot'. Oldham's concern was to ensure that there was both a Christian analysis of what was happening in society, plus a bank of proposals as to how society might be bettered, even if such proposals never commanded the support of the whole network.

The analysis begins with Percy Dearmer's 'Christianity and Crisis' of 1933. This sense of crisis - world-wide economic depression, political destabilisation of both left and right with the rising forces of both communism and totalitarianism, issues of war and peace, uncertainties about empire, the rising influence of science - all challenged the received orthodoxy of *laissez-faire*. Prophetic commentary came from J.H. Oldham (1874-1969), with his constant concern to translate thought into action. From John Macmurray (1891-1976), with his insistence that beneath economic problems lay spiritual concerns. And from Reinhold Niebuhr, (1892-1971), with the language of 'the relevance of an impossible possible', arising from his view that human sinfulness should not prevent the search for justice in society, even a society dominated by all the ambiguities of the possession and manipulation of power.

From 1938-47, the Moot provided a forum in which leading Christian thinkers, and those who shared a sense of the importance of values for the welfare of British society, met for lively debate. The success of this important agency was found in both its openness, enabling the participation of men of the calibre of Karl Mannheim and Michael Polanyi, and the care with which its work was prepared by Oldham. The inadequacies of received patterns of education were very clear to its members, but there was much less certainty as to what structure would best serve the coming society. They did, however, begin to grapple with some of the problems of Lifelong Learning which are at the heart of present-day educational concerns. A vehicle for disseminating the many ideas developed within such thought-provoking networks was found in the publication of the *Christian Newsletter*. Published for ten years from 1939, this helped to focus the minds of many leaders in church and state 'on the really significant issues'.

From within the subscribers of the CNL came Sir Walter Moberley's initiative in 1942 to promote Christian action in the secular world through the founding of an organization he christened the Christian Frontier Council. Working hand in hand, publication and face-to-face meetings advanced the exploration of 'frontier activity', that is a Christian concern for the secular at a high level of intellectual rigour.

Education was particularly high on the agenda of this group of Christian intellectuals, many of whom had first formed friendships through membership of the SCM. This bred in them a critical international awareness which led not only to concerns about Europe but also to serious questioning of British institutions, not least those they knew best, namely their churches and universities. Out of their fertile minds numerous educational initiatives were taken and institutions nurtured into being. Examples include the Institute of Christian Education, with its influential journal *Religion in Education*, Cumberland Lodge to provide residential experience for staff and students from London and the redbrick universities, and what became

the University Teachers' Group (now the Higher Education Foundation). Through all these agencies a network of influence was created which embraced either policy-makers or those who would become policy makers, putting before them both the value source for action and realistic blue-prints for possible changes.

The last section of the book looks at the significance of the story for the present day. The changes in social context are obvious. In the earlier discussions, the deployment of the concept of Christendom to denote a society which still represented some kind of Christian hegemony in intellect and culture, was widespread. Globalization and secularization both now make such thinking seem very dated, arguing rather for a Christian appreciation of what it means to live in a pluralist society. Prophetic witness may perhaps be more difficult on the eve of a new millennium, but the need for a championing of clearly-articulated values as determining motives for human action in a world governed by a New Utilitarianism, where technological and managerial solutions dominate, is everywhere apparent.

In the last full chapter Keith Clements, my predecessor in editing this journal, warns about undue nostalgia for a past age of influence. Instead he calls on Christian leaders today to recapture the innovative and risk-taking venturing into new territory which marked those here described, together with the patient development of mutual trust in developing effective collaborative modes of working together. This volume is both an important contribution to the intellectual history of our century and a challenge to engagement today.

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### THE PAYNE MEMORIAL ESSAY COMPETITION 1996 REVIVAL AND RENEWAL IN BAPTIST LIFE

The Baptist Historical Society offers a prize of £100 for an essay on this theme. The essay may be an historical or contemporary study, and essays which are theological as well as historical treatments of the theme will be welcome.

The essay should be an original, unpublished composition, based on personal research, that has not already been awarded another prize. The text should not exceed 10,000 words, but the submission should also include whatever footnotes and bibliography are considered necessary. It should be in typescript or clear computer print-out.

There is no restriction of academic qualification, place of residence or religious profession on candidates. The winning essay, and any other deemed worthy, will be published in the Society's journal, *The Baptist Quarterly*. The Society reserves the right to make no award if an essay of sufficient merit is not submitted.

Candidates should send their essays to arrive on or before 31 December 1996, in envelopes marked 'Payne Memorial Essay Competition' and addressed to the Secretary, Baptist Historical Society, Bristol Baptist College, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UN.

*The Payne Memorial Essay Competition commemorates the life and work of the Revd Dr E. A. Payne CH (1902-80), General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, a Vice-President of the World Council of Churches and President of the Baptist Historical Society.*