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The Necessity of Christian Pacifism

GEOFFREY E. TURNER

This article is written from a personal belief about what should be the attitude of the Christian towards war. It is thus an argument in favour of a particular position. It is not a dispassionate review of the arguments on both sides. Worse still, from the standpoint of scholarly respectability, honesty compels me to admit that the belief was prior to the argument. It comes under the category *fides quaerens intellectum*.

Perhaps this confession will be taken by some to lessen its validity, but I cannot avoid it. Moreover, I cannot see that it can be avoided. Aside from the general problem, that no one is ever free from intellectual presuppositions and emotional predispositions, there is a particular crux with regard to pacifism. It is that pacifism is a committed position. It is not simply a choice out of two reasonable alternatives but is rather the suggestion that the only correct moral choice is to take what can only seem a rather unreasonable stand. (I am using reasonable here as it is used in legal discussions, the point of view of the man on the Clapham omnibus; not in the sense of having to do exclusively or even mainly with logical deduction.) It would seem therefore that detachment in this argument, rather than indicating a position of neutrality, in fact indicates a position contrary to that of the pacifist. The writer on the subject thus cannot avoid coming to it already committed for or against. The best that can be done is to declare an interest, and this I have done.

I have tried to show that, given a framework of ethics which endeavours to be an outworking of the implications of the gospel, one cannot evade the necessity of being a pacifist. I have not laboured in detailed exegesis to prove that the implication is there in the gospel. Anyone who looks honestly at the subject feels it pulling at him. The question is: 'Is the implication irresistible? Does it constitute an unavoidable demand?' I shall hope to show that it does: that pacifism is a necessary corollary of the Christian faith. But first I had better define my terms.

What do I mean by Christian pacifism? The Christian part I have already discussed. It implies that the decision for the pacifism arises out of obedience to Christ. For me it is this alone which gives the aspect of necessity, without which I should not have been driven to be a pacifist. It would be as well to add that while I believe this to be a demand of the Gospel and hence for all Christians, the gospel has

been handed down to me by a tradition which is not merely Christian, but is specifically Protestant, and the article is addressed in the first instance to those of the same tradition. This will inevitably slant my approach. It determines for me whose opinions are important. Moreover it gives me my basis for argument, that reason and revelation can be in conflict. In this article a pacifist is one who is opposed to war to the extent that he can never declare a state to be justified in engaging in it. One must add that if such an opinion means anything it surely commits its holder to refuse conscription into the armed forces of his own nation should it go to war. The problems of what categories of war-work, less direct than military service, he should refuse is obviously a more problematical area. 'War' I am using in the restricted sense of the process whereby one state (or group of states acting in concert) seeks to impose its wishes on another state (or group of states) by the use of armed force.

The problems with this definition I will discuss later. Its use at this point is to make it absolutely clear what I am advocating, and to restrict the discussion to an area which is both reasonably unambiguous and corresponds with that of the other writers I wish to cite. I now turn to a consideration of the main arguments which have been developed in the course of Christian history against the position I am advocating.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms

This is the most influential method within Protestantism of denying part of life to Christ. It has its origin in Augustines's idea of the two cities; it emerged triumphant at the Reformation; and remains active to the present day, in Thielicke, Brunner and Bonhoeffer. It is also the natural doctrine of an existential theology, or any other viewpoint which has been unduly influenced by Kant's distinction between the external and the numinous world. In its general form the argument runs as follows: The word of God is addressed to the heart of man, convicting him of his sinfulness and then offering him forgiveness in Christ. In joyful obedience to this gospel the Christian will thereafter seek to live a holy loving and blameless life. 'I will therefore give myself as Christ to my neighbour just as Christ offered himself to me. I will do nothing in this life except what I see is necessary, profitable and salutary to my neighbour . . .'¹ That is the free way of the Christian. However, the world is not like that. 'Since few believe and still fewer live a Christian life, do not resist the evil, and themselves do no evil, God has provided for non-Christians a different government outside the Christian estate, and God's kingdom, and has subjected them to the sword, so that even though they would do so, they cannot practise their wickedness . . .'² [In Calvin, who has a less rosy view of the sanctifying effect of conversion, the state is also of use in restraining the old Adam within the believer: 'But if it is the

will of God that while we aspire to true piety we are pilgrims upon earth, and if such pilgrimage stands in need of such aids, those who take them away from man rob him of his humanity.'³ The Christian will naturally be a good citizen by virtue of his regenerate nature. But he will also recognize the state for the divinely ordained institution that it is, and obey it as such, and because it exists for the benefit of his fellow men. Romans 13 occurs with predictable regularity as the biblical basis of this viewpoint. The state thus has its own clearly defined role alongside the gospel of Christ, 'the one to produce piety, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds; neither is sufficient in the world without the other.'⁴ In my attitude to the state, I am thus not required to consider my Christian behaviour, indeed I am required not to. 'In what concerns you and yours, you govern yourself by the gospel and suffer injustice for yourself as a true Christian; in what concerns others and belongs to them, you govern yourself according to love, and suffer no injustice for your neighbour's sake.'⁵ The state is thus free to continue in its lawful occasions undisturbed by the gospel, or the existence of Christians within it. Since what is lawful is not to be decided on the basis of New Testament ethics, it may be considered on a simply rational level and found to include the contingent possibility of war. 'Natural equity and duty, therefore, demand that princes be armed not only to repress private crimes by judicial inflictions, but to defend the subjects committed to their guardianship whenever they are hostilely assailed.'⁶ 'And in such a war it is a Christian act, and an act of love confidently to kill, rob and pillage the enemy, and to do everything that can injure him until one has conquered him according to the methods of war.'⁷

To be a pacifist is thus to violate this distinction between the kingdoms. Thielicke⁸ on this basis arraigns pacifism on the charge of five errors which may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Trying to run the world as though it were the kingdom of God;
- 2) Seeking to use an ethics dealing with personal relationships in an institutional situation;
- 3) Anticipating the last judgement;
- 4) Seeking to bring in the kingdom, which is only in the power of God the Lord of history;
- 5) Seeking to make visible what can be found only by faith.

How is the Christian pacifist to deal with these charges and with the doctrine of the two kingdoms? It must be admitted that the charges seem to have a great deal of substance to them. It is perhaps rather more than a coincidence that, at the Reformation, pacifism was associated with the same movement in which millenarianism flourished—the Anabaptists—and today is found among the *parousia*-obsessed adherents of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Yet it is, I think, a false ground of objection. To what other Christian ethical decision could objections 3, 4 and 5 not be applied?

Certainly they could be applied to the abolition of slavery. But could not they also apply to any decision, even for a life of personal holiness or of celibacy? ('In the kingdom of God they neither marry nor are given in marriage.') The essence of the Christian life is surely to show forth the fruits of the Spirit who is the 'earnest of our inheritance' (Eph.1:13). The Christian ethical life, no less than the spiritual life, has a degree of realization in its eschatology.

I presume that, in objection 2, Thielicke is not merely saying that you have no right to press your individual views on an organization to which you belong. Such a view would be a nonsense. If you believe something to be correct, then clearly you have not merely a right but a duty to advance it with every means at your disposal. To do otherwise would be to be false to yourself, even disregarding your duty to God.

Rather, I presume that Thielicke is dealing with the seemingly self-evident point that relationships between and within institutions function differently from personal relationships. Individual ethics are based on love; institutional ethics are based on justice; and love and justice do not correspond to one another in a simple way. Thus, for example, a simple application of love could render the operation of justice in a legal system impossible.

This argument, although it appears weighty, is no more than a special case of Thielicke's two-kingdom presuppositions. If the pacifist position were pressed to a point that no one wishes to press it to, it would of course lead to a nonsense, just as in the limit Thielicke's position can be distorted to render any atrocity justifiable provided only it is classified as 'for the good of the state'. In any case, I have already defined pacifism in a limited way which renders this *reductio ad absurdum* inappropriate.

The question is that of the correlation between love and justice (provided you are naive enough to think that war is a way of producing justice), or more generally between personal and institutional morality.

It must be conceded that this correlation is not simple; but can it be that the one can be the flat contradiction of the other? When something departs as totally from our normally accepted standard of morality as does war, is it not correctly described as institutional immorality? War is itself the extreme, the limit case, in which the pretence that the state is acting in a moral manner must be discarded as ridiculous (albeit that God can bring good out of this evil), and it must be spoken against.

In war, the normal factors which make the state 'a minister of God for good' are absent. In no other activity can the state act with unrestrained violence. The essence of the state is law, equity and impartiality, or at least some attempt at these. But war is simply international anarchy. Christian pacifism is not based on disrespect of

the state. If it were so, then it would itself be anarchical and against the meaning of Romans 13. On the contrary, it is most conscious of what the state is about within God's economy but it refuses to accept the double-think that claims to find these purposes fulfilled in war.

The Christian must demand that his 'No' be heard by the state, when it makes war, because this 'No' is the Word of God in that situation; it is the law, without which there can be no call to repentance and hence no forgiveness.

Objection 1 is replied to along the lines of the two answers already given.

Of the underlying doctrine of the two kingdoms, we can only say that it is a denial of the cross of Christ, and a failure to acknowledge the reality of the Incarnation.

By the reality of the Incarnation I mean the fact that Christ entered the real world, in all its facets and manifestations. He came not just to the world of man's personal 'I-thou' response to him, but to a real world of men in all their interactions. He encountered men in all their situations with the words 'Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.' To assert that, in some way, man is free from his call when he is organized as a state, is to deny the completeness of the Incarnation, and to be guilty of a form of ethical docetism.

The doctrine of the two kingdoms denies the offence of the cross. It turns its back on the definitive confrontation of Christ with the world, with the fact that it crucified Christ. It rejects the fact that the cross shows the way in which God seeks to be triumphant in the history of *real-politik*. The cross denies to those who would follow Christ the possibility of saying that justice can be done in the world by means of armed might; it proclaims the way of self-denial and death as the way of God with the world. The offence of the cross is just this, that it denies in the midst of the real world the common sense view that might is right, that victory belongs to the strong. The doctrine of the two kingdoms denies this: it allows the world to move and to be governed by 'reasonableness', without the possibility of its being reproached by the cross.

I cannot deny the existence of the state. I do not even deny that within limits it can be an instrument of God for the restraint of evil. Nor do I conceive that it is of itself capable of becoming the kingdom of God. But I do deny that it can be separated from the power of Christ to subject all things to himself. Man as man is called to repentance by Christ, and to sanctification. Not just as a private soul is he called, not just in his personal holiness is he challenged, but in his whole life, in his political no less than his sexual morality he is addressed by the demand 'Be ye holy even as I am holy.'

Bonhoeffer appears to be moving in this direction when he discusses the possibility of 'the word of the church to the world'. When he says, 'In word and action the congregation is to bear witness

before the world to the faith in Christ, it is to prevent offence or scandal, and it is to make room for the gospel in the world',⁹ and draws from this the conclusion that 'It is never the task of the church to preach the natural instinct of self-preservation to the state but only obedience to the right of God',¹⁰ then he has moved as far away from the rigid two kingdoms doctrine as it is necessary to go to provide a legitimate ground for the Christian pacifist to stand upon. In fact the pacifist can only be denied if it can be shown that in some way the gospel does not demand a pacifist response. There is an apparent historical objection here, in Bonhoeffer's involvement in the July bomb plot. However, the objection is not real. Tyrannicide is not war, as I have defined it. In practical terms it has neither the scale of devastation nor the incalculability of war. Furthermore, it has what war lacks: an underlying stratum of altruism. What is revealed by this incident is not Bonhoeffer's rejection of pacifism, but this total rejection of the doctrine of the two kingdoms. This rejection is so clearly spelt out in the Barmen Declaration: 'We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of our life in which we belong not to Jesus Christ but another lord, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him.'¹¹

The denial of the Gospels' pacifist content

This is a second line of defence, often found in conjunction with the doctrine of the two kingdoms but also in some cases found alone. We do not in this day and age have to deal with the problem of the wars and murders of the Old Testament, but these have not been neglected in the past in the search for a way to deny the manifest teaching of Christ. Thus Augustine can defend military service: 'Do not think it is impossible for anyone to please God while engaged in active military service. Among such persons was the holy David to whom God gave so great a testimony; among them also were many righteous men of that time.'¹² At least we are spared that line of argument. However, the advice of John the Baptist in Luke 3:14, which is also cited by Augustine, crops up again in Luther, as does the example of Cornelius¹³. Even in the present day both can be referred to by Thielicke¹⁴, apparently as a permit for 'Christian' military activity; while he can follow it with the sentence 'None of the other passages which deal with the use of force, love of enemies, and patient endurance ("Do not resist evil") has anything to do with the theme of war'! The subject seems to have the power to perpetuate a rigidly literalistic type of exegesis that has perished without trace in almost all other fields of discussion. Jesus does after all come after his fore-runner, the last representative of the old covenant prophets. Jesus may be represented as commending the centurion's faith¹⁵, but have we learned nothing about the structure of the gospel narratives, that we can argue from his silence about the profession of war? And can

one make no inferences from his explicit teaching on non-violence? The early church may well have accepted Cornelius, but it much more explicitly accepts slavery, and we have come to realize that it is none the less incompatible with the law of Christ. The passages which accept soldiery are so much passing incidentals of the New Testament, and the message of peace, reconciliation, of the positive power of good is so central, that it could seem that only the most biased exegesis would decide against the pacifist implications of the gospel. It is not after all a matter of text chopping, but the message of the cross itself. Christ's rejection of the Zealots' way of serving God, his refusal to resist, and his acceptance of death, as I have cited them above, provide a solid basis on which to demand that the church at last state clearly that it is not lawful for a Christian man to bear arms.

Still I have to face the objection that the tradition of the church, in all the main denominations, has refused to draw the conclusion which I have advocated. The fault, I am afraid, is not mine—it belongs to Constantine. But in case I might seem to stand in total isolation from all Christian tradition, let me point to the fact that in pre-Nicene theology there is a strong tradition of pacifism. To consider the two poles of patristic theology, the philosophical easterner Origen and the rigorist westerner Tertullian, and to find in them an identical recognition of the incompatibility of the Lordship of Christ and the realm of war, is to find a very strong patristic base indeed for the pacifist position. Thus Origen claims that Christians are 'children of peace' and cannot take part in war. He demands for Christians the special position in the state with regard to war that is in the Old Testament accorded to priests. It cannot be argued that the fathers objected merely to the pagan cultus of military service. They certainly did object to this, but they also object to war itself: 'But how will [a Christian man] war, nay how will he serve even in peace without a sword which the Lord has taken away. For albeit soldiers had come unto John and had received the formula of their rules. Albeit likewise a centurion had believed; the Lord afterward in disarming Peter unbelted every soldier.'¹⁶ The Fathers before Nicaea are against soldiery as such, not because of its trappings: 'Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?'¹⁷ It is not until the church had come under the thrall and protection of the state that theology saw fit to baptize war as well as to baptize soldiers.

The subjection of the gospel to natural law

This is the line taken by Roman Catholic theology. The natural law argument is also a necessary second step in any two-kingdom treatment of the subject. It has to be shown that war can serve a moral

purpose. The two-kingdom theology has been discussed above. The Roman approach is somewhat different, and corresponds with their different approach to revelation. Just as Aquinas allows two sources of doctrine, nature and revelation, so also he allows for natural as well as revealed law. The two are not set in opposition, but the second supplements the first. So the existence of God is naturally known, but his trinitarian nature is a revealed doctrine. In a parallel way, war is allowed as something natural and proper; moral theology seeks only to modify and delimit its form. The argument is simple: the state has the right to exist; it is ordained by God to preserve law and order. Therefore it has the right to defend itself. Catholic theology then seeks to define the circumstances under which it may justifiably do so. Aquinas cites three necessary conditions: 1) War must be declared by the competent authorities. 2) There must have been some wrong done to the state; the war must be a response to some unjust act against the state. 3) 'A right intention on the belligerents' part is required: either to promote some good or to avoid some evil.'¹⁸

Against this it must be asked: 'Why has it never worked?' Or rather, 'How can it ever work?' The essence of war is that both parties feel themselves aggrieved. Clause 1 is never violated. Clause 2 can never be decided upon. Clause 3 is pure naivety. Furthermore, there is a confusion here as to what it means to say that 'the state must exist'. It is not the same as saying that 'this particular state must exist', which is how it is regarded in Aquinas' argument. It need only mean that there must be a state in existence. In which case, why is it not allowable for one state to annex another, as long as it has the power to maintain order when it does so? A state will still exist and the biblical requirement is still maintained. In particular, a state surely has the natural right, even duty, to annex a troubled and rebellious province of a neighbour state. Cannot some of Hitler's annexations be justified on these grounds?

Also, do not all wars on this basis cease to be just as soon as the wronged party starts to win? A war cannot be stopped easily, and no state having gone to war—say in response to an aggression—will be content merely to repel the aggressor. If it has the power, it will always seek to inflict a decisive defeat, to secure a position in which aggression can never again occur: that is to harm the opposing state, to leave it less well off than it was before, and in general to inflict a wrong in return for the wrong done. Does not the Christian definition of a just war therefore preclude a victorious war? In particular, does it not condemn the Allied demand for the unconditional surrender of Germany? As O'Donovan remarks: 'Just war theory demands that war should be conducted in a frame of mind that everybody knows to be impossible.'¹⁹

War has its own logic, its own necessities; but I cannot see that these can ever coincide with the logic of traditional moral theology.

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Over and above these objections there lies another one. Is this not in fact very close to the two-kingdom theory? It would seem that natural law is not merely being allowed its place, but is being allowed virtual autonomy. What if, as I maintain, natural law allows of a just war but God's law as revealed in Jesus Christ forbids war *in toto*? It would seem here that the gospel is being sacrificed on the altar of 'reasonableness'. It is in line with the Catholic view that grace does not destroy nature, but rather completes it. But it is the plea of this article that obedience to the gospel in this case demands a negation of our natural inclination. One need not go the whole way with Barth and retort to the Catholics that grace is *always* the contradiction of the sinner. But it is sometimes. I do not know of a serious Christian who does not feel this contradiction in the case of war: the rending pull of the demand of Christ on the one side, and the natural feelings that your country must surely have a right to defend itself on the other. This surely is a case where natural and revealed are in conflict. In this case nature is contradicted by grace, but the contradiction is ignored and ridden under by the whole concept of the just war, which thus becomes the soporific of troubled souls.

Conclusion

I have been at pains to restrict the scope of this discussion to a fairly narrow moral question (although a regrettably common one): what should be the attitude of the Christian to war between the states? I think this restriction is essential. Far too often discussion in this field is fogged with examples and questions which do not properly lie within its scope. I believe war, as I have defined it, is a special case. It is distinct from questions such as the rule of law and even the question of internal resistance to tyranny. War is an event *sui generis*. It is set aside from all other human activities, not merely because of the scale of devastation which is involved, (although is this not surely reason enough?) but in the fact that it involves man's whole status as God's creature.

Certainly this is true if one joins with Calvin in seeing the image of God in man as constituted by the will. The classical definition of victory is to have imposed your will on the enemy. But even if you take a more general view of man's creatureliness, modern war involves the utmost sacrifice of all man's abilities. I cannot think of a single human ability or faculty which was not between 1939-45 employed and heightened in pursuit of the god 'victory'. War is no longer a matter of brute force; it involves the whole man. War, moreover, has a unique property in human affairs: it is entirely autonomous. It has its own rules. A state cannot go to war with reservations unless, that is, it goes to war saying 'we would rather be defeated than do . . .' Such a view is impossibly romantic and nineteenth-century. War is not a matter of morality; it is a matter of calculation.

Once you have admitted the allowability of war, you must accept any step which that implies. What can be done will be done, if it seems probable that it will increase the chances of victory, or maybe simply because the enemy did it first. For this reason I cannot accept the compromise position advocated by O'Donovan²⁰. It is not simply that the just war theorist and the pacifist disagree as to the point to which a Christian can go before he must say, 'This is wrong I will have no part in it.' Rather there is from the pacifist point of view a failure on the part of the just war theorists. 'You have not sufficiently considered the great weight of sin.' More precisely, they have not grasped the fact that the difference between war and other activities of the state is not merely quantitative but is qualitative. War is not merely 'the extension of diplomacy by other means'; war is something new. It is as discontinuous with (and inimical to) the proper behaviour of the state as torture is to the process of law. To adopt O'Donovan's terminology: there is only one conceivable place at which the 'cut-off-point' can come.

I believe that the failure to recognise the clear-cut nature of the decision is due to a failure to clearly define terms. Time and again the question is begged by the introduction of a battery of other issues: revolution, terrorism, subversion, United Nations action, tyrannicide, even the death penalty. All these issues are separate from the question of the Christian response to war as I have defined it. That is not to dismiss them as unimportant. Indeed they pose major international moral questions for our time. We desperately need a 'theology of low intensity operations'. But they are different questions. Once this is seen, I believe there is no longer any room for doubt. For the Christian, pacifism is a necessity. Moreover, once this necessity has been grasped it provides a basis from which these separate issues can be approached.

Christian pacifism is the recognition that God's Word applies to even the most exalted of institutions, that their power and authority are not absolute but derivative. As such it stands in the line of the Old Testament prophets. That is not necessarily a comfortable tradition to which to belong, but neither was the cross comfortable.

GEOFFREY E. TURNER is assistant curate of St Chad's, Coventry.

NOTES

Quotations from Luther are taken from *Martin Luther, Selections from his Writings* ed. John Dillenberger, (Anchor Books: 1961) and are referred to by their page number in that book thus (D---).

Patristic quotations are from the Library of Ante-Nicene Fathers.

- 1 Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian Man* (D75).
- 2 id., *Secular Authority*: To what extent it should be obeyed part I section IV (D370).
- 3 Calvin, *Institutes* IV, 20, 2.
- 4 Luther, *Secular Authority* part I section IV (D371).

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- 5 *ibid.* part 1 section VI (D375).
 - 6 Calvin, *op. cit.* IV,20,11.
 - 7 Luther, *Secular Authority* part 3 section III (D398).
 - 8 Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* vol.2 (A & C Black: 1966).
 - 9 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (SCM Press: 1955) p321.
 - 10 *ibid.* p323.
 - 11 The Barmen Declaration, section 2 from J. H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Anchor Books: 1973) p520.
 - 12 Augustine, *Letter 189 To Boniface*, in Thielicke *op.cit.* p458.
 - 13 Luther, *Secular Authority* part 1 section VI (D377).
 - 14 Thielicke, *op.cit.* p353f.
 - 15 Luke 7:1ff. Matthew 8:5ff.
 - 16 Tertullian, *On Idolatry* chapter 19.
 - 17 *id.*, *The Chaplet* chapter 11.
 - 18 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theol.* II-II q40,a1.
 - 19 Oliver O'Donovan, *In pursuit of a Christian View of War* (Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 15 : 1977) p 16.
 - 20 *ibid.* p 23.
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Opinion

Series 3 Communion

The general tenor of your remarks seems to advocate the continuance of Series 3 Holy Communion as 'a unifying force in Anglicanism', although perhaps for a much shorter period of time than the 300 years of 1662; and yet the arguments you employ, from Michael Moreton's book, and your own conclusions drawn from that book, appear to destroy your own hypothesis.

We, the so-called 'East End Five', have used the same arguments to support our own contentions about Series 3: that *unaltered* it is unsatisfactory to both Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics; that 1662 was itself the beginning of the slide away from the Reformed position and that it is time to call a halt to that slide; and that we have no contemporary evangelical service in the Alternative Services Book. Series 1 (or 1½ as it has come to be known) shows negative thrust towards a pre-Reformation position for Anglo-Catholics; so why are Evangelicals so slow to push for positive progress towards a Protestant Reformed doctrine in contemporary language, both as an answer to Anglo-Catholicism and for the more biblical worship of our Reformed Church of England?

I believe, sir, that we could be most helped by men such as yourself leading us in our evangelical faith, rather than advocating compromise and half-truth.

PETER H. RONAYNE
Hoxton, London N1