

## Unitarian attitudes towards World War 1

ALAN RUSTON

“The War overshadows everyone and everything; and churches and religious societies find themselves faced by problems of life and death for which there is no ready made solution.”

The Executive Committee of the British & Foreign Unitarian Association (B&FUA) could be excused for expressing this note of desperation in their report of 25 October 1916. The War had shaken British society to its foundations and by late 1916 a certain amount of war weariness was apparent. The Nonconformist churches in particular were being forced to face large moral and spiritual issues for which they were ill prepared. These included conscription, conscientious objection, service as combatants by ministers of religion and students and the use by the allies of poison gas, all unforeseen in 1914.

This article attempts to chart the evolving view of the War from published statements by Unitarians, and the stands taken by leading figures on the big issues as it ground on from year to year. The impact of this first and most cathartic of the modern wars on the UK was felt especially by the liberal Christian churches who emphasised a belief in the goodness of man and his God. Some key religious affirmations accepted as valid by the majority of British Unitarians in 1914 were, from the vantage point of 1919, seen to be based on shifting sands, and requiring re-evaluation. Never before or since have social and theological viewpoints changed so quickly; the local church in particular was knocked off its secure social pedestal to which it has never been able to return. Like ministers of religion in general, Unitarian ministers had lost much of their status and influence in society by the 1920s.

### **The Advent of War**

World War 1 (WW1) has been written about very extensively so that it is unnecessary to provide a bibliography. The attitude of churches, their ministers and members towards the War have, in recent years, come under detailed consideration. In particular the stands taken over the treatment of conscientious objectors have been closely examined.<sup>1</sup> However historians of Unitarianism have to date ignored the impact of

## Transactions

the WW1 on the movement, and my article in the *TUHS* in 1993 was the first to attempt to tackle the subject.<sup>2</sup> While Unitarian attitudes towards conscientious objection will be mentioned in what follows, I intend to leave a more detailed evaluation to a later date.

Professor Ronald H. Bainton in his seminal work on Christianity and war, identified three attitudes towards war and peace which have appeared in the Christian ethic: pacifism, the just war, and the crusade. Writing as an American, he concluded, that "in England the mood fluctuated between that of the just war and the crusade."<sup>3</sup> This was also broadly true of Unitarianism, but the moral crusade became blunted as the war progressed so that a small but determined peace group formed to make their witness known.

The columns of the *Inquirer* and, to a lesser extent, the *Christian Life* were full of religious statements and opinions about the War in the last few months of 1914. This period is important in assessing the initial viewpoint of Unitarians in these early stages of the War and to compare it with attitudes adopted towards developments, each seemingly more cataclysmic than the last.

The denominational newspapers are probably the best sources to use to chart the shift in attitude. Time and circumstances fix the view of leading commentator for the historian in the columns of widely available newspapers with a settled readership who reacted to what was printed. Keith Clements used the *Baptist Times* for his important article on Baptist attitudes in 1914 and later. Under the terrible challenges of world war, the sense of shock and quick acceptance of what had hitherto been seen as unacceptable was apparently very similar amongst Baptists and Unitarians, and probably amongst the generality of nonconformists.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Inquirer thunders forth**

Rev W H Drummond (1863-1945) was editor in 1914 and remained so for most of the War. In September 1914 he expressed a widely-felt horror of what had happened:

"Suddenly we have been confronted by a moral ultimatum. 'Choose ye this day who ye will serve' has sounded as clearly for us as ever it did for the Israelites of old. All our fine spun theories have been blown to pieces like spider's webs in a gale."<sup>5</sup>

However he soon became a committed, sometimes almost fanatical,

## Transactions

supporter of the government war effort, a position he shared with Rev Dr L P Jacks whose assertive and clearly expressed message was consistently to be found in its columns. Indeed the paper was seen by the radical pacifist newcomer to Unitarian ministry Rev Basil Martin (1858-1940), as being "as military as the *Daily Mail*."<sup>6</sup>

L P Jacks, who became Principal of Manchester College Oxford in 1916, can be considered as the major and representative voice amongst Unitarians whose affirmations always kept to the patriotic high ground. A brilliant, regularly repeated and insistent presentation of his view in the *Hibbert Journal* and elsewhere had less effect as the war dragged on. He was less heard from by 1918 because, like so many others, he had become rather war weary.

In 1914 however he made his view very clear. In the *Inquirer* 15 August 1914 page 519 in an article entitled "Our Duty to the State" he set down what became his recognised position and message to the Unitarian public:

"From one point of view this is the wickedest war in the history of the human race. From another point of view it is the most righteous. It is the wickedest on the side of those who have forced it on the world. It is the most righteous on the side of those upon whom it has been forced. So far as England is concerned it is a war against war....Under the circumstances one thought alone should dominate us - the thought of our Duty to the State. All other duties, to God, to humanity, and to ourselves are summed up in that. Let us concentrate our minds upon it and let no nightmare horrors weaken our service...now that (war) has come, let us economise our emotion and indulge neither in speech nor feeling, save so far as it strengthens us for suffering and action. All our moral forces are needed for our duty. Let our hatred of war be a strength and not a weakness, as it was with Cromwell...Would that reason had prevailed! But the Powers which have engineered this thing have shown themselves deaf to Reason - to Humanity, to Religion. All peaceable proposals have only rendered them the more obdurate, the more contemptuous of Right. They have forced upon the world the task of chastising the wicked with their own weapons."

A month later (12 September 1914, pages 566/7) he went further and developed the concept of the moral noble war:

"One of those rare moments in the history of nations has arrived, which reveal the truth hidden in the old saying: 'The Lord is a man of war'...The merely contemplative spirit, however loftily instructed, will either break down in despair or end in affectation unless it is reinforced by the resolution to resist unto death.....The other day I saw a regiment of clean limbed, honest English lads going to the war, and as I looked on the beauty of their self-devotion a ray of God's sunlight seemed to break from the darkness."

## Transactions

The requirement that all individual duties, even religious ones, should be subsumed in duty to the state was new for Unitarians. It did not sit easily with their belief, held since the 18th century, in the right of individual judgement viz.-a -viz. the state. Such however was the tenor of the times that there was little protest. The toast "To civil and religious liberty the world over" was not required for the duration of the War.

Rev Joseph Wood (1843 -1921), the retired Unitarian minister of the Old Meeting House Birmingham, also took an assertive stand on the right commitment to the war effort. He sounded a clarion call in a booklet published by the Lindsey Press in 1916, entitled *Ethical and Religious Problems of the War*. Edited by J Estlin Carpenter it consisted of fourteen essays by leading figures, and managed, interestingly, never to mention Unitarianism. Several sources indicate that the theological standpoint expressed by Unitarians was muted to a considerable degree for the duration of WW1. The chief consideration was seen to be unity in effort, which was not to be disturbed by theological niceties. The following extract is taken from an address given by Wood at an army camp in 1915:

"For never doubt that it is a holy war in which you are engaged. Since it is a war for Freedom and Justice and Righteous dealing between nations, for the plighted word, for the idea of Eternal Right as against the idea that Might is Lord and King...It is a war in which we are all called to bear a part. No man is exempt. No excuses are allowed..It is a war for which we may refuse to fight. It is a war we may decline even as deserters drop out of the firing line. But I am not speaking of cowards."

By this time Jacks' sons were in the armed forces, and he was seeking as the new Principal to close Manchester College for the duration as he enjoined his ministerial students to volunteer to fight in a righteous war. He was not impressed with them on this score, seeing them as "mainly consisting of pacifists." <sup>8</sup>

### Odium theologicum

From at least the mid 19th century, Unitarians had admired German Biblical and theological thinking, and the writings of Adolf von Harnack (1851-1931) and Rudolf Euchen (1846-1926) were much quoted. By September 1914 each were supposed to have supported the German war effort and Drummond was quick to deride them in the *Inquirer*. W Tudor Jones (1866-1946) and J Cyril Flower (1886-1964) attempted to put forward a more balanced view but were slapped down. The latter in particular tried to present a less impassioned viewpoint:

## Transactions

"All the nations have been more or less parties in promoting the militant cause. It is of course very nice for us to think that Germany is the worst - as she maybe - because we are at war with her. I do not believe that God (i.e. Love) has any errand to entrust to a nation which goes out to kill men"<sup>9</sup>

The entry of the minister of Hope Street Chapel Liverpool, Dr Stanley Mellor (1882 - 1926) into the fray was notable in that it was a portent of his lone stand against most of the denomination in 1916 on the subject of the War:

"It is not possible to charge the whole German nation and its literature as without redemption. I will not participate in your boasted intolerance, I will not forget the debt I owe to German thought, the joy I have received from German learning and culture"<sup>10</sup>

However by October 1914 the clash of view in the Unitarian press was off the boil. The issue seemed decided by the Yorkshire Unitarian Union who passed a unanimous resolution, "declaring its firm conviction that our participation in the War is at once righteous and inevitable."<sup>11</sup> It was also at this time that deaths of Unitarians in the armed forces were appearing in local, national and denominational newspapers. The list of names was to get ever longer as the years went by. There are numerous examples but that of High Pavement Chapel Nottingham can be taken as representative and amongst the best documented. The chapel committee kept a running total of members, Sunday School members and scholars who went into the forces. The final total was just short of 200 including two women. 29 names are recorded on the memorial window, still in place in the Lace Hall, as having died on war service which included six killed on the first day of the Somme offensive of 1 July 1916. A considerable number of decorations were awarded to those who served including 8 Military Crosses.<sup>12</sup>

### War - a religious act?

Unitarians were not alone amongst nonconformists in their overwhelming support for the War effort and all that it meant. The reasons for this unity of feeling have been well described by Stanley Mews:

"(Attitudes towards) WW1 went through a series of several well-defined stages. At first there was a period of high morale, of flag waving, patriotic songs and high emotion there was a tendency for clergymen to identify the Christian community with the nation in arms...The gap between Church and State which had been widening throughout the Nineteenth century was easily overcome, and the Christian community was extended to cover the whole nation. The barriers

## Transactions

went down. The whole nation was shrouded in a thin veil of Christian sentiment."<sup>13</sup>

Unitarians never went as far as the Bishop of London (A F Winnington-Ingram) who in a published sermon stated that "all are banded in a great crusade - we cannot deny it - to kill Germans; to kill them, not for the sake of killing, but to save the world; to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old...and to kill them lest the civilisation of the world should itself be killed." Nor did they emulate the Bishop of Pretoria (later of St Albans), Dr Michael Furse who stated that Germans are the enemy of God, and Germany "the Devil Incarnate"<sup>14</sup>

However L P Jacks got near to it in his article, which appeared in the *Hibbert Journal* in 1916, entitled "An Interim Religion". At page 468 he stated "the prosecution of the War will be henceforward a religious act." This important article set out his considered view of the religious implications of the War. He argued that Jesus Christ and his teachings need fresh interpretation in changing times, and meanings given to his words will be different in time of war than they will be in times of peace. Drummond in the *Inquirer* expressed himself in rather more sententious terms - "we may dare to say that it is God himself who places the weapon in our hands for the punishment of evil doers."<sup>15</sup>

### Key Issues

There were four key issues arising out of the war which challenged the moral, social and spiritual assertions affirmed by Unitarians and their impact was keenly felt. Each issue divided opinion, loosened the sense of consensus within Unitarianism, and their overall effect was to weaken the position of the movement both at the time and later. What was happening was, at least in part, realised at the time. J Estlin Carpenter, in his preface to *Ethical and Religious Problems of the War* wrote:

"We have been placed in a position in which what appeared to the Government and the vast majority of the nation the only right thing to do, required the use of means in violent conflict with our ideals of peace and goodwill. Duty seemed entangled in a deep-seated ethical contradiction; one law demanded action which trampled on the other. To vindicate the principles of international right it was necessary to sacrifice the conception of human brotherhood, and civilization and Christianity threatened to disappear in a sudden relapse into barbarism. In this dilemma the whole fabric of moral values is threatened."<sup>7</sup>

Most commentators hold that WW1 drastically hastened the decline

## Transactions

in the authority and influence of nonconformity, and that politically it was relegated it to the margins of influence. The war accelerated the decline of the Liberal Party, which deprived Nonconformity of its established access to power and influence through a party of government. Unitarianism never regained its local power and importance, and on the national scene by 1919 it did not have its former prestige again. Its small constituency meant that the War Office never permitted the appointment of a Unitarian chaplain to the forces at the front.<sup>16</sup>

### Conscription

This issue struck at the heart of long cherished positions. Many who believed in the righteous war expected that young men would continuously come forward to defend the cause, holding that the voluntary principle was morally uplifting. The introduction of conscription was seen as a defeat. Others who argued strongly for separation of church and state found it very difficult to accept compulsion in a matter of conscience, which could never be right. Those who affirmed both these standpoints found conscription intolerable, but knew it could not be resisted.

The acceptance of conscription, both in theory and practice, revealed the impossibility of this position, and placed many in an extreme moral dilemma. As David M Thompson has pointed out, it was particularly hard for the Nonconformists to accept: "The fact of conscription, despite the important victory for the right of conscientious objection, was a dramatic proof of the inadequacy of the old style voluntaryist assumptions about the state, society and the church."<sup>17</sup>

Unitarians were shocked at the need for conscription but had become so attuned to supporting the Government's war effort that it was accepted almost without demur. The B& FUA Annual Meeting in 1916 passed a resolution not exactly supporting conscription but asking only that the Military Service Act be administered in a way that could not "savour of persecution." Mellor moved: "that this meeting of representatives of churches, historically founded upon and traditionally pledged to the principle of liberty of conscience, views with grave concern the appearance of conscription." His motion was never put as it was ruled out of order by the President.<sup>18</sup>

### Conscientious Objection (COs)

There was deep concern that conscription would entail real

## Transactions

harshness of treatment of those whose conscience told them not to join the forces. This concern was widely expressed although Drummond would have none of it: "the conscientious objector ..the term is a very capacious umbrella, and under it are gathered a rather motley company of people who have very little in common... we know of the genuine CO....he is so deeply convinced that all war is wicked that he would disband our fleet and disarm our soldiers and surrender to Germany tomorrow in order to save England from her sin. A position like this seems to us deeply tinged with fanaticism." <sup>19</sup> But even he accepted that violence should not be done to COs.

From the outset in 1916 the treatment of COs was harsh and unacceptable. If Unitarians were of one mind during WW1 on a war issue it was in its growing opposition to the official punitive treatment of this small group of people. By 1917 the situation had become intolerable. The B&FUA Executive Committee, containing amongst its membership ardent supporters of the war effort, at a meeting on 10 October 1917 made its strongest protest on the conduct of the war effort to the government which included: "We cannot believe that the infliction of these cruel sentences is other than evil, or that it can be excused or condoned." <sup>20</sup>

It was unease over this issue, and the recognition of what Mellor and a few others were saying, which prompted many Unitarians to conclude that a different spiritual and moral message was needed. In 1916 the Unitarian Peace Fellowship was formed, which was briefly reported in the *Inquirer* and *The Christian Life* <sup>21</sup> Its stated basis was that "war and the preparation for war is unreconcilable with the teaching and spirit of Jesus" and its inception was "in line with similar Peace initiatives in other denominations." Led by Mellor and Basil Martin there was a good measure of support but it cannot be claimed that the aims of the Peace Fellowship reflected the majority of opinion with Unitarianism.

The *Christian Life* took a more restrained and balanced view of the conflict than did the *Inquirer* under Drummond. The change in emphasis in the paper came eventually when Drummond resigned in July 1918, under pressure, in order to exercise a form of ministry to the troops in France as he had previously done for a short period in 1915.<sup>22</sup> W G Tarrant returned to the editorship and his more level headed and widely acceptable view of the war reflected the changing mood of the movement.



### The Use of Poison Gas

The use of poison gas in the prosecution of the war was seen by most as a dreadful development. If the British and their allies used it first, how could it be said they were fighting a righteous war on a high moral ground? Use in response was seen by many as placing Britain on the same level of depravity as Germany. There seemed to be no way out of the issues except outright opposition following the first use of mustard gas by Germany in 1915. But many felt they could not follow this course.

The Archbishop of Canterbury publicly stated that he hoped Britain would never use gas. In supporting the Archbishop Rev J H Wicksteed asked in the *Inquirer* in May 1915 "under whose flag do we now stand?", with A Dowson of Melton Mowbray stating that "we must fight with clean hands." Drummond received numerous letters on the subject that month and he supported the governments' right to use poison gas, using his own moral line:

"The use of poison gas was horrible first and foremost because it was a particularly bad offence against honour....That compact exists no longer, Germany has torn it to shreds, and for this war we are in exactly the same position as we should be if it has never been made."<sup>23</sup>

He was not alone in taking this view, Rev J M Lloyd Thomas stating: "All the harmonising rules of warfare having been broken by the enemy, are we not only free but ethically bound to use such similar weapons as will, from the military point of view, most effectively save the lives of our soldiers and the righteousness they defend?"<sup>24</sup> With some notable exceptions, my researches into published material appear to show that many Unitarian ministers were amongst the most vociferous and ardent supporters of the war whatever form it took. The laity in the main took a more level-headed and less fervent view of the situation. WW1 amongst the generality of the Unitarian ministry seems to have struck a strong emotional chord, at least in the period up to 1917. It was an opportunity to preach righteousness, for the sweeping away of a wayward and defective society. A new moral order would emerge after the triumph over Germany. They were not alone in taking this view but several exemplified it in an extreme form, if not going quite as far as some priests and bishops in the Church of England. Never before or since has Unitarianism in Britain been so committed to government policy, much of which did not accord with its traditional principles, as it was during WW1.

**Ministers and students as combatants**

However the subject which most disturbed the denomination, causing bitter dispute and recrimination, concerned the service of ministers and ministerial students in the armed forces.

The Military Service Act 1916 (Chapter 104), at item 4 of the First Schedule, exempted from military service "men in holy orders or regular ministers of any religious denomination." However the moral problem had arisen before conscription came as several ministers had pointed out the dilemma of encouraging others to enlist but doing nothing themselves. The *Inquirer* again gave the clarion call in May 1915:

"What about accredited ministers?... (some argue that they should not go because of) "inconsistency between the life of a soldier and the sacred calling of a minister. Is this attitude either reasonable or right?... Let the young minister of military age consider these things, and if he feels that he would be alienated from his holy calling if he shared the vigil of the camp and the life of the trenches, let him cease from all words of public admiration for those who lay down their lives for their friends." Loss to the congregation which he served was no more than "indulgence in nice scruples and arguments."<sup>25</sup>

It was the position of the ministerial student which produced the most ire. "There is unfortunately no satisfactory evidence that the theological colleges have done their duty in this matter. They ought to have contributed at least as high a percentage of men to the cause of honour and freedom as Oxford and Cambridge. We do not envy the young men who stay at home in peaceful haunts to study the Greek Testament, or to read philosophy, or to dream of preaching the gospel of self sacrifice in crowded churches, while their comrades are risking their lives for their country."<sup>25</sup>

These comments caused a storm of response. Whilst in 1917 Jacks attempted to empty Manchester College on this basis, the Unitarian Home Missionary College, Manchester, had not called on its students to enlist but left it to their consciences.<sup>26</sup> Mortimer Rowe, the minister at Norwich, who subsequently joined the ambulance corps, was wounded and awarded the Military Medal, "protested most strongly against the sweeping generalisation of your articles, and against the facile way in which you offer a single ruling for practically every minister of enlistment age."<sup>27</sup> The Unitarian Ministerial Fellowship deplored the attempt to bring pressure to bear in this way, as it was a matter to be left to individual conscience.<sup>28</sup>

## Transactions

The position of theological students was uncertain and, led by the Church of England, there was resistance after the passing of the 1916 Act to their joining the armed forces. By early 1917 the War Office had rescinded its earlier decision that these students should not have to serve in the forces which put those about to graduate and enter the ministry in a difficult position.<sup>29</sup>

The pressure at Manchester College became intense as recalled by Rev W M Long in 1979:

"In 1917 the College Council decided that the College should be closed and the students, of whom there were 15, should be released for war work. LP Jacks had us all in his room together and asked us in turn what we were going to do. All except three said they would leave. I had already clashed with Jacks over my supposed pacifist views and I said I could do no other but stay at the College and become a minister because it was my vocation. Jacks replied, "What, you want to be a parasite on your country!"

The three would not leave (one later entered the Church of England, and the other was Edward E Wrigley). Eventually only I was left, and Jacks called me in to tell me that I would be given a leaving certificate, and recommended to any pulpit for which I applied. He kept his word and I became minister at Loughborough and Christ Church Nottingham in 1918. The Sustentation Fund refused to give me a stipend grant as 'Long was a pacifist and would close the churches in no time.' This of course did not happen."<sup>8</sup>

The B&FUA Executive was a bastion of sane thinking during this period, its Civil Rights Committee stating that if any student wished to gain exemption as a CO it would give help and support.<sup>30</sup> The Secretary, Rev W Copeland Bowie was clearly helpful to many on this score including those who were not ministerial students at the Colleges.<sup>31</sup>

### A different witness

While the majority of Unitarians fully supported the war effort particularly up to mid 1917, some echoing the old adage "my country, right or wrong", there was a notable section who took a more critical stand. Stanley Mellor has already been mentioned, and he in the early stages of the war was a signal voice. Those who supported his stand increased as the war went on, though mainly amongst the laity. At the B&FUA Anniversary meetings in May 1915, Mellor delivered a speech "which emphasised a totally different point of view and revealed a wide cleavage of opinion in the audience, some of which uttered words of protest from time to time...He would ask them to bear with him...for the attitude he was bound to take, although it had exposed him to violent criticism...It had been said that this crisis had deepened the religious

## Transactions

feeling in this country; the same thing was said in Germany. It was not for him to express an opinion as to that, but he felt that there was something wrong with their ideas of religion when they contemplated the spectacle of the great belligerent nations each praying to the same God for the defeat of the enemy.”<sup>32</sup>

His witness, which by the standards of other times, was a moderate and considered one, attracted the attention of the state. The following startling report appeared in the *Christian Life* 22 September 1917 page 297, about which the Unitarian movement (including the *Inquirer*) in the UK was silent:

“Dr Stanley A Mellor of Hope Street Chapel Liverpool was invited to deliver the opening sermon at the biennial session of the General Unitarian Conference of the USA and Canada to be held in Montreal next week. The British Government has, however, refused to grant him the necessary passports - presumably on account of his activities as a pacifist.”

Considering the majority Unitarian support for the war it is perhaps surprising that it was the Unitarian Members of Parliament who helped provide a critical view of the excesses of the government's war machine. In particular R D Holt, MP for Hexham and H G Chancellor, MP for Haggerston maintained a radical critique of the government that in the press of events tended to forget the rights of the individual. Classed among the Independent Liberals, they were part of the group of over thirty MPs “who, through good report and evil, and amid increasing hatred and deepening isolation, stood up for peace and for the victims of conscription in the last Parliament.”<sup>33</sup>

These few MPs had much to protest about as the following Parliamentary exchange makes clear:

“On 31 July 1917, H G Chancellor asked the Home Secretary whether any complaints had been recorded about the conduct of the Chaplain at Winchester Prison; whether he was aware that he sneers at the beliefs of COs and of Nonconformists in particular; whether he is aware that he told a CO that Christ would spit at him, and that he refers to COs as vermin and lice, and if he would make enquiries as to this person's conduct from COs to whose spiritual needs he has ministered?

Sir G Cave: I have received no complaints against the Chaplain at Winchester, and I am satisfied that the allegations made in the question grossly misrepresent the language used by the reverend gentleman.

Mr Chancellor: Has the Rt Hon gentleman enquired of any of the prisoners to who this Christian gentleman addressed himself, or of the Nonconformist Chaplain?

## Transactions

Sir G Cave: I have made no enquiries

Mr Chancellor: Made no enquiries, and yet you deny the statements!"<sup>34</sup>

Henry Chancellor (1863-1945) was "by conviction an eager and enthusiastic Unitarian, and faithful attender at Highgate Church, of which he became a member when it opened."<sup>35</sup> He was the founder (in 1913) and president of the National Unitarian Lay Preachers Association, and had been on the Executive Committee of the B&FUA since 1902. He was the chief avenue through which the B&FUA made representations to the government. He consistently maintained the radical witness of civil and religious liberty, both inside and out of Unitarianism, in a time when these were not judged to be very necessary qualities.

As an MP and well known Unitarian he was not to be silenced and got himself in a great deal of controversy. "A good deal of foolish comment has been made in the newspapers upon Mr Chancellor's remark at Essex Hall last week (May 1915) that 'we can still love those who for the time being appear to be our enemies.'<sup>36</sup>

At Mexborough in November 1915 he told the local church: "The War has lowered the standard not only of national honour and good faith, but also of personal conduct...The futility of this orgy of bloodshed cannot fail to impress itself even on men who have the governing of nations." These reports appear of course in the *Christian Life* and not the *Inquirer*, the former journal summing up the atmosphere at the B&FUA May 1915 meetings:

"The one insistent and all-embracing topic was the War. Some of the orators, even such as were equally vehement as pacifists, gave one the impression that they gloried in war; while daring prophecies as to what is going to happen after it is all over, whenever that may be, were fully indulged."<sup>37</sup>

### Towards an evaluation

My researches lead me to conclude that the position and attitude of Unitarians to WW1 differed little from that of Baptists, however different their theological outlook. Keith Clements points out that in 1914 a real element of moral decision was seen to be at stake. Many of the young men who went to fight, and the preachers who encouraged them, and the women who knitted and made up the parcels, did so with serious moral purpose. War was hateful, but to allow German militarism to win through was unthinkable.

## Transactions

How could they have foreseen what the war would do to this moral attitude as it was exemplified, for example, by Jacks? It was not the tragic losses in the trenches, or the denting of the belief in progress, but the defeat of moral idealism that was the deadening blow. "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." <sup>4</sup>

Conscription apparently was a greater shock to Baptists than to Unitarians, judging from comment made by leading figures, but again for both denominations its arrival was seen as the defeat of a moral principle - voluntaryism. Voluntary commitment based on the moral crusade that German militaryism must not win drove them to exhort all who could to go to fight. That by 1916 this ideal did not produce sufficient men to win the war meant that conscription was necessary. Henceforth British men aged between 18 and 41 were forced into the war effort which showed Nonconformist social affirmations, so firmly held in 1914, were in tatters. "The war, beginning 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."<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult for those writing in the 1990s to place themselves in the mindset of most Unitarians in 1914 - the moral fervour, the belief in progress, enlightened patriotism with clear distinctions between right and wrong, the certainty that the world would be a better place after the purging of war. All this seems, for good or ill, to be remote now as it was to nonconformists at the outset of World War 2. The view in 1939 was very different to that of 1914. Determination to defeat Hitler was there but not the moral fervour.

The impact of WW1 so seriously undermined the basis of British Unitarian confidence that it has not subsequently recovered its dynamism nor theological assurance. While numerical decline in Unitarian church membership can be identified from the 1890s onwards, it was the impact of WW1 which greatly accelerated the trend. By 1919 the theological affirmations inherent in the last two of the Five Precepts (salvation by character, and onward and upward for ever), almost universally accepted in 1914, were under attack, and reservations about salvation by character in particular were being expressed in the denominational press.

## Transactions

It was the generation who fought in the war, and the one that followed, who felt most keenly about the attitudes adopted by many well known Unitarians in 1914-1915 to the "war that was to end all wars." There was a degree of pain and incomprehension which was perhaps most vividly expressed by E G Lee ( a Unitarian minister who studied under Jacks in the 1920s and had served in the trenches) in his autobiographical work, *The Minute Particular*, London, 1966. He tells of the attitude of Charles Hargrove and L P Jacks to WW1:

"These two men were devoted to the Unitarian ministry, and to religious and philosophical speculation. They were tender and sensitive in their personal relationships. They were able to judge passing historic events in terms of realism as most other men, yet they shared in a most passionate manner the conventional ideas of the 1914 War. Here is what Dr Jacks says about his friend, as the friend approached his end:

'Alas! he was not to live to see the end of the Great War, which he regarded as holy on our side, ever maintaining with perfervid conviction that we must fight on until the evil thing had been utterly and finally overthrown.'

That is how the First World War appeared to a couple of the best of Englishmen. That is not as it appears fifty years after. They were, with all their wisdom and moral sensitivities, living in an historic illusion as seen from the present.....When two deeply religious men, in the best possible sense, describe the First World War as holy, something has gone wrong - and some of the noblest men of the period thought of it in that sense, and a heart-breaking generation of youth and courage gave their lives because they believed it."<sup>38</sup>

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Examples include Paul R Dekar, Twentieth Century British Baptists Objectors, *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol 25, January 1993 and Peter Ackers, The Great War and Conscientious Objection in the Churches of Christ, *Journal of the URC Historical Society*, Vol 5, October 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> Alan Ruston, Killed Fighting in WW1, *TUHS*, Vol 20 No 3, 1993, pages 151-160
- <sup>3</sup> Ronald H Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards Peace and War*, New York, 1960 pages 13/15, 204/210. Bainton concludes on the USA and WW1 - "American churchman of all faiths were never so united with each other and with the mind of the country. This was a holy war. Jesus was dressed in khaki and portrayed sighting down a gun barrel." (page 209)
- <sup>4</sup> Keith W Clements, Baptists and the Outbreak of the First World War, *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol.26, pages 74/91.
- <sup>5</sup> *Inquirer (Inq.)*, 5 Sept.1914 page 553.
- <sup>6</sup> Basil Martin, *An Impossible Parson*, London, 1935, page 143.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ethical and Religious Problems of the War*, Fourteen Addresses, Edited and Preface by J Estlin Carpenter, Lindsey Press 1916. Joseph Wood, The Warfare from which there is no discharge, page 205. The B&FUA sent a copy of this book to all Unitarian ministers
- <sup>8</sup> LP Jacks, *Confessions of an Octogenarian*, London, 1942, page 176. Personal recollections given to the author by the late Rev W M Long, a student at the College 1916-1918, on 3 June 1979.

## Transactions

- <sup>9</sup> *Inq.* 19 September 1914 page 581.
- <sup>10</sup> *Inq.* 12 September 1914 page 568.
- <sup>11</sup> *Inq.* 10 October 1914 page 619.
- <sup>12</sup> Letter of 12 February 1994 to the author from Eric Cooper, citing the "High Pavement Chronicle" of the period. By January 1918, 203 men associated with Bank Street Chapel Bury had served in the forces, with 22 killed. (*Inq.* 5 January 1918 page 6). Estimates of the number of Unitarians who served and were killed in WW1 are to be found in a note by Alan Ruston, *TUHS*, Vol 20 No 4, 1994 pages 304/305.
- <sup>13</sup> Stuart Mews, *Spiritual Mobilization in the First World War*, *Theology* Vol LXXIV, June 1971, pages 259/260.
- <sup>14</sup> Mews, *op.cit.*, page 263.
- <sup>15</sup> *Inq.* 20 February 1915 page 89.
- <sup>16</sup> Minutes B&FUA, 10 January 1917, 14 February 1917, 14 March 1917. (Dr William's Library). However Rev T P Spedding was officially recognised by the War Office as the Association's missionary agent at military camps and hospitals in the UK, around which he travelled extensively.
- <sup>17</sup> David M Thompson, Book Review, *Social History* Vol 5 No 3 page 470.
- <sup>18</sup> *Inq.* 17 June 1916 page 298.
- <sup>19</sup> *Inq.* 15 January 1916 page 28.
- <sup>20</sup> *Christian Life* (CL), 20 October 1917 page 330.
- <sup>21</sup> *Inq.* 10 June 1916 page 288 (advertisement for the Liberal Christian Peace Fellowship), 1 July 1916 page 322. The Minute books and papers of the Unitarian Peace Fellowship 1916-1960 are at Harris Manchester College Oxford (MS Misc 5, folios 209-298, 322-447)
- <sup>22</sup> *Inq.* 20 July 1918 page 230, and 3 August 1918 page 248. "I have only resigned in order to do other work in the same sense as a soldier resigns his civilian occupation in order to take part in the defence of his country. When it became clear to me where my duty lay I applied for leave of absence for the duration of the war, and as an alternative offered my resignation. The Directors felt unable to grant this leave of absence and I have accordingly resigned. I believe..I am not only accepting my plain duty as a citizen but am also serving the highest interests of religion and freedom to the best of my powers."
- <sup>23</sup> *Inq.* 22 May 1915 pages 244 and 246.
- <sup>24</sup> *Inq.* 5 June 1915 page 276.
- <sup>25</sup> *Inq.* 29 May 1915 pages 257/8.
- <sup>26</sup> *Inq.* 3 July 1915 page 329.
- <sup>27</sup> *Inq.* 12 June 1915 pages 291/292.
- <sup>28</sup> *Inq.* 10 July 1915 page 343; 18 December 1915 page 633.
- <sup>29</sup> B&FUA Executive Committee Minutes 14 March 1917 page 7.
- <sup>30</sup> B&FUA Civil Rights Committee Minutes 9 February 1916 page 216
- <sup>31</sup> Letter: Bowie to Rev T P Spedding 25 July 1916 advising on the means by which the Pioneer Preachers might gain exemption from conscription (Pearson Papers, Dr Williams's Library)
- <sup>32</sup> *Inq.* 29 May 1915 page 266.
- <sup>33</sup> JW Graham, *Conscription and Conscience*, a history 1916/1919, London, 1922 pages 58/59.
- <sup>34</sup> JW Graham, *op.cit.*, page 14, quoting *Hansard*.
- <sup>35</sup> Obituary, *Inq.*, 24 March 1945 page 86.
- <sup>36</sup> *CL* 5 June 1915 page 265.
- <sup>37</sup> *CL* 29 May 1915 page 253.
- <sup>38</sup> Quoted in P D A Harvey, *The Goodness of Dr Verwoerd*, *Faith & Freedom*, Vol 21 part 3 No 63, Summer 1968, page 133. The quotation from LP Jacks is to be found in his book, *From Authority to Freedom : The Spiritual Pilgrimage of Charles Hargrove*, London, 1920, page 359.