

Hymnody and Christian War-Resistance: Voices for Peace 1914–1918

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Overview

This paper will consider how several strands of Protestant tradition appear from the perspective of those who resisted war in Europe in 1914–18, some of whom had assembled for a 1914 pan-Protestant peace conference on Lake Constance, 499 years after the death of Jan Hus.

- > Within *Unitas Fratrum*, there were those holding a clear commitment to nonviolence. The anti-militarist writing of Jon Wyclif (c 1330–84), the stand of Jan Hus (c 1371–1415), and the rebuilding of the movement under Petr Chelčický (c 1390–1460), all contributed to a heritage of nonviolence for the emerging Moravian Church. War-resistance and nonviolence are part of the pre-history of the Reformation.
- > Within the British Methodist and Nonconformist traditions, music and hymn-singing provided a means for expressing and bolstering faith and commitment, and for standing firm to one's conscience (cf Luther), including a commitment to war-resistance in the name of Christ
- > Within Lutheranism, this paper examines two individuals whose broad commitment to peace transcended narrow nationalisms.

Wyclif, Hus and Chelčický

Richmond is a small town on the River Swale in North Yorkshire, dominated by an eleventh-century Norman castle. Two miles from Richmond, as the dove flies, is the site of an old chapel, at Hipswell, today at the centre of Catterick Garrison, one of the largest military bases in Europe. John Wyclif was baptised at Hipswell. He and his Lollard followers had no time for the crusades and wars of his day, especially those promoted by the Church. Bishops, he said, ought rather to teach about:

the peril of werris, & namely of wrongful werris, & hou hard it is to fighten in charite, & tellen openly & priuely the goodnesse & profit of pees & reste.

Instead:



thes worldly prelates ben cheef conseilours to werris for pride & coueitise ... & meyntene many men of armes to slee cristene men in body, & thei hem self killen many thousand in soule & bodi.

The Holy See had shamed the peace Gospel of Christ by justifying illegal wars:

Also thei prechen not cristis gospel in word & dede bi whiche cristene men schuld lyue holy lif in charite, but blaberen forthe anticristis bullis to maken cristene men to were eche with othere in hope to wynne heuene bi siche werris.¹

Wyclif even went so far as to say that men of war pray for their own damnation, unabsolved, when they pray in the Lord's Prayer that their debts may be forgiven 'as we forgive them ...'²

Richard II was married to Anne of Bohemia, daughter of Charles IV, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Bohemia. Through her and her entourage, Wyclif and Lollard writing spread across central Europe. One of those influenced by Wyclif was Jan Hus; he was more conservative than Wyclif, but his radicalism was still too much for the leaders of the Catholic Church who executed him at Constance in 1415. Hussite nationalism led to violence and defeat, but the nonviolent strain of his rebellion continued with Petr Chelčický. In an age of crusades and civil wars, long before Erasmus or Menno Simons, Chelčický argued that if men were true to the teachings of Jesus they would refuse to fight, and the lords would be unable to recruit armies. This scripture-led commitment to nonviolence passed through his Chelcice Brethren into *Unitas Fratrum*, the forerunner of the Moravian Church. Moravian heritage, therefore, embraces Scripture-led reform of the Church, rooted in nonviolence.

Plus 499: Constance and Conscience

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a sharp rise in the number of international institutions promoting peace, from the International Court of Arbitration to the first Nobel Peace Prizes. One group was the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches, later incorporated into the World Council of Churches. The World Alliance had brought together English and German Church leaders—Protestant and Catholic—first, at the time of a Universal Peace Congress in London in 1908, and then the following year for a visit to the Kaiser. Over one hundred travelled on each occasion. The movement grew and, with substantial financial backing from Andrew Carnegie for 'uniting the churches of Christendom for peace', two conferences were arranged for August 1914, the first being for Protestants at the start of the month, in Constance, the second for Catholics, in Liège.³ The second conference never happened, and the first broke up early as war was declared. One of the attendees, Moore Ede, commented:

Huss appeared to fail, but the principles he advocated eventually prevailed ... The ideas and principles which we met to advocate will eventually prevail, and perhaps sooner than many expect ... A Conference for Promoting Friendly Relations between the Nations held at the moment when the nations were entering on the greatest and most disastrous war in history may seem to some a ridiculous fiasco.



That is a mistake. The horrors of the war prove the sanity of the ideals of those who met at Constance.⁴

The closing months of 1914 were difficult for those English Christians whose instinct and theology were to work for peace. Most national institutions, including peace movements and the Churches, were fractured, with the majority of members supporting the war, and a minority being left in opposition. Henry Hodgkin, a Quaker who had been at Constance, Richard Roberts, a Presbyterian minister from Hornsey, and one hundred and thirty others gathered together in Cambridge at the end of December and agreed to form the Fellowship of Reconciliation, part of the basis of which was that, '[a]s Christians, we are forbidden to wage war'.

Their resolve was tested further in 1916, when, with the introduction of conscription, young and middle-aged men were compelled to join the armed forces. Those who resisted were termed conscientious objectors (COs), many of whom were imprisoned. Across Britain, there were over seventeen thousand COs. For most of them, any religious affiliation is unknown. Some were socialists refusing to fight in the capitalists' war, or having their greatest solidarity with international (including German) workers; others were humanists refusing to kill other human beings. Among those expressing religious affiliation were members of the Brethren, Christadelphians, and International Bible Scholars (whom we would now call Jehovah's Witnesses); there were members of historic peace churches, principally Quakers; and there were members of mainstream Protestant Churches, largely motivated by their understanding of Jesus as a man of peace, regardless of the generally pro-war teaching of their Church leaders.

Of those COs known to be Methodist, at least 294 were Wesleyans, 137 were Primitive Methodists, 85 COs were described as 'Calvinistic' Methodists—mostly theology students, probably in training as ministers and preachers; 103 others declared themselves to be simply Methodist.

Some individual stories indicate the variety of backgrounds and outcomes for Christian COs. Frederick Hobson from Leeds, probably from Fulneck, and W. B. Greedy, a farmer from Wells, Somerset, were Moravians thought to have accepted civilian Work of National Importance, instead of being conscripted into the army. James Cree Shiels, a Moravian from Glasgow, was arrested as an absentee and handed over to the Non-Combatant Corps. He refused a medical and a court-martial sentenced him to hard labour in Wormwood Scrubbs. From there he was sent to Dartmoor Work Centre, where he was a member of the prison branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He is an example of an 'absolutist', who would not cooperate at all with the war authorities.

The music of Christian war-resistance

One of the best routes into accessing the motivation and beliefs of Protestant COs is by the music that inspired them, the hymns that strengthened them. Hymn-singing is part of the culture of Protestantism. It has been a powerful expression of personal faith at least since the Nonconformists of the seventeenth century, and especially as



part of the eighteenth century Methodism of John and Charles Wesley. For the war-resisters of 1916–18, there are three sources:

- > personal diaries;
- > a booklet in the collection of The Peace Museum, Bradford, *The Conscientious Objector's Song Book*, produced by Manchester No-Conscription Fellowship in 1916;
- > and the cell block at Richmond Castle, Swaledale, Yorkshire. Many of the COs imprisoned there wrote pencil graffiti on the cell walls, including scriptural verses ('Thou shalt not kill', 'Do unto others ...', 'Perfect Love casts out fear', 'Render to no man evil for evil', ...). A Yorkshire Methodist, Bert Brocklesby, noted that 'God is Love for Love is of God'. Others wrote down the hymns that inspired or sustained them. Although extremely fragile, the graffiti remains on those walls today.

The CO's Song Book drew mainly from two popular movements, the Co-operative movement and one that led to the publication in 1909 of the *Fellowship Hymn Book*. The latter related to a working-class, generally Nonconformist constituency that would engage with The Adult School and Brotherhood Movements, together with such wonderfully named groups as the Pleasant Sunday Afternoon Brotherhoods. First in the *Hymn Book* was 'The People's Anthem' ('the people, Lord, the people, Not thrones and crowns, but men'). This had been written by Ebenezer Elliott, 'the Corn Law Rhymer', in the 1830s. It was first included in an American Episcopal hymnbook and went from there into mainstream hymnbooks in Britain. It was jazzed up for the musical *Godspell* in 1971. One conscientious objector under military escort, travelling by train from Kings Cross to a notorious work camp at Dyce, Aberdeen, noted in his diary, '[a]s the train stopped at the larger stations in the Midlands and the North we stood at the corridor windows to sing "wilt thou save the people?"'.⁵

Three themes

1. Patriotism and social justice

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the common themes in hymns selected by COs was patriotism. There was no shortage of love for one's country, but that love was expressed not in fighting the government's wars, but in the pursuit of social justice and decent conditions for all citizens. A true love of country would include a desire to prevent it undertaking unchristian warfare; in that context, to protest was to be patriotic.

Number one in the *CO's Song Book* is an 1880 verse, 'These things shall be a loftier race' (Tune: Jesus shall reign) by Oxford don, John Addington Symonds. Originally a Brethren hymn, it was included in the Methodist Hymn Book, 1901. The third verse included the lines:

Nation with nation, land with land
Unarmed shall live as comrades free;



In every heart and brain shall throb
The pulse of one fraternity.

The *Song Book* includes the anthem, 'England arise', by the maverick clergyman, Edward Carpenter (1844–1930), and on a Richmond cell wall, perhaps surprisingly, is a line from the official National Anthem, a petition to God to 'make the nations see, that men should brothers be'. The original author of that verse was William Hickson, in 1836. Another, unofficial, verse from Hickson might change the sense of national identity if regularly sung as part of the National Anthem:

God bless our native land,
May heaven's protecting hand
Still guard our shore;
May peace her sway extend,
Foe be transformed to friend,
And Britain's power depend
On war no more.

2. Conscience

The most referred-to author in the *CO's Song Book* is also quoted from memory by a Richmond prisoner. An anti-slavery poet and opponent of the US-Mexican war of 1846–48, James Russell Lowell invented a character, Hosea Biglow, who said:

Ez fer war, I call it murder,—
There you hev it plain an' flat;
I don't want to go no fuder
Than my Testyment fer that ...

Lowell put into Biglow's mouth this affirmation of personal responsibility and culpability:

If you take a sword & dror it
to run a fellow through
The government aint to answer for it
God will send the bill to you.

Individuals stand and fall in the sight of God by their own decisions and actions, and cannot be excused by attempting to hand over their conscience to the Government. An individual's informed conscience is the absolute moral authority for that individual. Here was the core of the argument for many First World War COs. It was wrong to take the life of another person and nothing the Government said or did could change that.

Another of Lowell's poems is found both in the *Song Book* and inscribed on a Richmond cell-wall. Often found in hymnbooks, it was a great call to conscience, to choose 'for the good or evil side'. Originally written in 1845, it was a perfect fit for 1916 conscientious objectors. Implicit in it is the belief that society will eventually recognise the validity and truth of what the person of conscience has stood for. For the imprisoned writer of this graffiti, there was clearly no doubt about the justice of



the cause; it was God's work to resist the war. It was a premeditated stand, encouraged by and expressed in Lowell's hymn, learned by heart.

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood,
For the good or evil side; ...

... Then it is the brave man chooses,
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet 'Tis Truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be Wrong;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.

An irony is that the recommended tune in the *Song Book* is 'Austria'. The lasting power of Lowell's writing was shown when Martin Luther King cited the above verse in his first anti-Vietnam War speech in Riverside Church, New York in 1968.

3. *Stand firm in one's faith*

Cell wall graffiti includes reference to 'Yield not to temptation', written by Horatio Richmond Palmer in 1868. This was a temperance hymn, found in many Methodist hymn books. In the Richmond context it was a warning against succumbing to the battle rather than the bottle. The imprisoned CO would resist yielding to the temptation to follow the crowd, to obey the state, to accept the way of war, for that way would be sin.

Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin;
Each vict'ry will help you some other to win;
Fight manfully onward, dark passions subdue;
Look ever to Jesus, He'll carry you through.

Ask the Saviour to help you,
Comfort, strengthen, and keep you;
He is willing to aid you,
He will carry you through.

Singing in extremis

Jack Foister, a 22-year-old Primitive Methodist teacher from Peterborough, was imprisoned in Landguard Fort, Felixstowe, and then in Harwich Redoubt. He and



other absolutists were told they would be sent to France, and handed over to the military at the Front, with severe consequences for disobedience. They held a Friends' Meeting in the Felixstowe guard room and Jack 'particularly enjoyed the hymn singing that followed'.⁶

After brutal treatment at army camps in northern France - including Field punishment No 1, known as crucifixion—the Harwich cohort met up in Boulogne with other absolutist COs who had been sent from Richmond Castle, including Bert Brocklesby. Their route to Boulogne had been just as brutal, but they had been sustained by their hymn-singing. It started as soon as they left Richmond on 29 May 1916, while they were waiting on Darlington station, guarded, bizarrely, by men in the Non-Combatant Corps. Forming a square of four benches, Norman Gaudie recalled, 'We indulged in hymn singing, which was joined in by the Non-Combatants with much zest'.⁷ Having been bussed from Kings Cross to Waterloo, they started hymn singing again on arrival, "Simply trusting" being a prime favourite'.⁸ At Southampton docks the group boarded a boat to Le Havre together with NCC men and other absolutists from Seaford:

The spirit manifest now was beyond description and we, although being a very mixed gathering Agnostics - Artists - Christians of different sects joined in our hymn singing with great fervour.⁹

Reference was made to the morale-boosting 'Simply Trusting', written by Edgar Stites, a lay worker at the Methodist Church, Cape May, New Jersey. Ira Sankey wrote the tune. It was often used at Moody and Sankey evangelistic services.

Simply trusting every day,
Trusting through a stormy way;
Even when my faith is small,
Trusting Jesus, that is all.

When the Harwich and Richmond groups met up in Boulogne, they were all fearful of their fate. The Richmond group brought their practice of hymn-singing. One of the Harwich group recorded that, at the most tense time,

we settled down into a [Quaker] meeting for worship - one of the most memorable in my experience. In the course of it we sang two hymns, Matheson's 'O Love that will not let me go', and Whittier's 'Dear Lord and father of Mankind'. It was the first time since our arrest that we had had an opportunity of singing together, and at this critical moment in our lives we sang the words with conviction, gaining strength and inspiration from them.¹⁰

Both of these are standard hymns. Matheson's words spoke to the fearful COs, as they faced up to the worst, 'I give thee back the life I owe', knowing that God would not let them go.

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,



That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

The COs were taken into a huge parade-ground of soldiers and, one by one, sentenced to death. The adjutant reading the sentence paused, before adding, reluctantly, 'commuted to ten years hard labour'.¹¹ Under political pressure at home, not least from the churches, the army pulled back from carrying out death sentences on Christians standing firm for their faith.

Lutheran voices for peace

Even military imagery had the power to uphold COs in their stand against militarism, as is seen from one CO who pencilled 'Luther's Hymn' on his cell wall. Even for those resisting war, there was spiritual strength to be gained from singing 'A mighty fortress is our God' ('Ein feste Berg'). Reflection on Luther's mythical 'Here I stand ...' could also have been a source of strength. In practice, the strong theological affirmation of the nation state within Lutheranism meant that Lutheran voices for peace in this era were even rarer than those from other Churches. Two voices, however, stood out.

Friedrich Siegmund-Schültze (1885–1969) was Chaplain to the Kaiser in 1908 and heavily involved in promoting the Anglo-German exchanges of Church dignitaries around that time. Committed to peace through ecumenism, and to the work of the World Alliance, he attended the 1914 conference in Constance. The peace movement myth is that Siegmund-Schültze and Henry Hodgkin returned by train to Cologne, where they parted saying, 'We are one in Christ, and can never be at war'.¹² In Germany, Siegmund-Schültze organised pastoral visits for prisoners of war and worked with Quakers to provide meals for schoolchildren in Berlin. At the same time, the World Alliance provided a forum for trans-national conversations of Christians from opposing nations, with Siegmund-Schültze and others meeting in neutral venues even during the war. After the war, he and Hodgkin were among the founding group of what later came to be known as the International Fellowship of Reconciliation. Siegmund-Schültze was committed to all three strands of international ecumenism: Life and Work, Faith and Order, and the World Alliance, for whom he was the International Secretary. It was with a heavy heart that, in 1929, he prophetically told the World Alliance that, 'This war educated our German people to peace, this peace educated it to war'.¹³

The other outstanding Lutheran figure was Nathan Söderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala in the Church of Sweden. Söderblom was an ecumenical pioneer committed to reconciliation, having friends and contacts in the Churches on both sides of the war. His first appeal for peace came in 1914, but it was not what the Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to hear. Surely, argued Söderblom, the Churches had sufficient influence in the warring nations to be able to put an early end to this disastrous new conflict? He wanted to bring respected Church leaders together, building on the newly-laid ecumenical structures. In December 1917 he did manage to gather representatives of Churches from neutral states together at Uppsala. His efforts



during and after the war, when he was a giant of the international ecumenical movement, were finally recognised in 1930, when he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his advocacy of ecumenism. In his Nobel lecture that year, he reflected on how deeply aware they had been in 1917 'of the incompatibility between war and the spirit of Christ'.¹⁴

Along with his many other attributes, Söderblom was both a hymn-writer and a hymn-translator. In 1911, he translated into Swedish the words of William Walsham How's, 'For all the saints'.¹⁵ For all its militaristic imagery, it commemorates all who stayed faithful to Christ in testing times. It is only one hundred years since Christians in Britain were being imprisoned and tortured for holding fast to the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence. Yet Lowell was right: their scaffold swayed the future. We recognise today their conscience, their courage, and their faithfulness to Christ.

Notes

- 1 Wyclif, John, *Of Prelates*, p 2.
- 2 Brock, Peter, *Studies in Peace History*, York, Sessions, 1991, p 1.
- 3 Wallis, Jill, *Valiant for Peace* (London: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1991), p 3.
- 4 Barrett, Clive, *Subversive Peacemakers: War-Resistance 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014), p 29.
- 5 Stanton, Harry, *Will You March Too?* (Liddle Collection, University of Leeds, unpublished manuscript, CO092), p 190.
- 6 Barber, Jill, *Jack Foister, one of the 35 'Frenchmen'*, online text available at http://www.myprimitivemethodists.org.uk/page/jack_foister_one_of_the_35_frenchmen?path=0p4p136p168p.
- 7 Gaudie, Norman, *Diary* (Liddle Collection, University of Leeds unpublished manuscript, CO038), p 12.
- 8 Gaudie, *Diary*, p 13.
- 9 Gaudie, *Diary*, p 14.
- 10 Stanton, *Will You March Too?*, p 133
- 11 Stanton, *Will You March Too?*, pp 135–6.
- 12 Wallis, *Valiant for Peace*, p 4.
- 13 Bethge, Eberhard, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1970), p 106.
- 14 Söderblom, Nathan, Nobel Lecture: 'The Role of the Church in Promoting Peace', online lecture available at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1930/soderblom-lecture.html.
- 15 Jonson, Jonas, *Nathan Söderblom: Called to Serve* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), p 170.

