

## Chapter 4

### Catholicism, Conscription and Conscientious Objection

Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed,  
we entreat.

1 Cor. 4:12-13.

There is more freedom in imprisonment for conscience and liberty than  
in enforced military service; if die violently we must, then better so to  
die against war and slavery than for war and slavery.

E. I. Watkin, *The Crime of Conscription*.<sup>1</sup>

After sixteen months of retaining the voluntary system for military service, the Asquith government finally implemented conscription in January 1916. With the advent of conscription, further problems arose for Catholics in Britain. The state demanded that seminarians and the clergy be eligible for conscription like other civilians. To the Catholic Church this was unacceptable because the clergy was forbidden to shed blood. Thus, it was up to the Catholic hierarchy to negotiate with the government for a solution that was acceptable to both parties. The situation was complicated by the fact that the official position of the British Catholic Church in Britain was decidedly in opposition to pacifism and conscientious objection during the war. This, in turn, did not prevent a small number of Catholics from declaring their absolute convictions against the slaughter that was taking place. This small minority of Catholic conscientious objectors was a potential embarrassment to the Catholic body; leading Catholics denounced the troublesome dissenters and tried to distance themselves from them.

Agitation for the introduction of wartime conscription began soon after the war started, but the Liberal government resisted pressure to implement compulsory military service. On 20 April 1915, Lloyd George was asked in the House of Commons whether the government was satisfied with the rate of volunteering recruitment. He replied that Lord Kitchener was gratified with the country's response to the appeal for voluntary enlistment.<sup>2</sup> Yet nine months later, conscription was implemented. When, towards the end of 1915, voluntary recruitment was judged insufficient to satisfy the demand for men, conscriptionists intensified their campaign for compulsory military service. Asquith, however, was reluctant to take such an unprecedented step without the overwhelming support of the country. He decided to assuage the growing agitation for conscription by appointing Lord Derby as Director of Recruiting on 5 October 1915. Derby's task was to conduct a survey of the country's manpower by seeking attestation from every man between the ages of eighteen and forty-one. The significance of the Derby Scheme, as the plan became known, was to demonstrate that every possibility had been exhausted in order to obtain the necessary number of men under the voluntary system before resorting to conscription. This, it was argued, might make conscription more palatable to the people.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the Derby scheme failed. In his memoirs, Lloyd George estimated that out of a total of 2,179,231 single men who attested and had not enlisted before 23 October 1915, only 343,386 could finally be recruited into the army.<sup>4</sup> This was the setting for Asquith's decision to introduce the first conscription measure on 5 January

---

<sup>1</sup> (London: James Clark, 1939), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 71, col. 173.

<sup>3</sup> D. Hayes, *op. cit.*, p. 194. For a detailed study of conscription in Britain in 1916, see chapters 7 and 8 in R. J. Q. Adams and P. P. Poirier, *op. cit.*

1916.<sup>5</sup> The first Military Service Bill was to apply to single men between the ages of eighteen and forty-one. It exempted ordained ministers from all Christian Churches, munition workers, and the physically unfit and included provisions for those who objected to fighting on grounds of conscience. The bill generated fierce and prolonged debate in the House of Commons and saw some of Asquith's closest supporters oppose the measure.<sup>6</sup> The Military Service (No. 2) Bill became law on 27 January. In April, after a secret House of Commons session, Asquith introduced a second Military Service Bill, in which conscription was extended to married men between eighteen and forty-one.<sup>7</sup> Naturally, the single men were to be called up before the married in the second bill.

Although most of the Roman Catholic leadership in Britain announced their support for compulsory military service once it was implemented, Catholics appear to have had no role in the noisy campaign in favour of its introduction. On the contrary, it is clear that the majority of Catholics opposed conscription between August 1914 and late 1915. Indeed, some publicly maintained their preference for the voluntary system even after the implementation of conscription in 1916. In the early months of the war, the advantages of a voluntary system were defended by some organs of the Catholic press. The *Catholic Herald* was antagonistic to conscription and its advocates from the outset. It applauded Asquith's announcement in November 1914 that the government did not intend to implement conscription. The *Herald* stated that his iteration "will finally

---

<sup>4</sup> *War Memoirs of Lloyd George*, vol. II, (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1923), p. 726. Such figures were criticised by R. Douglas, op. cit., pp. 582-583.

<sup>5</sup> For Asquith's decision to introduce conscription, see R. J. Q. Adams, "Asquith's Choice: The May Coalition and the Coming of Conscription, 1915-1916", *Journal of British Studies*, 25, (July 1986): 243-263.

<sup>6</sup> For the debate on the Military Service Bill, see *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 77, cols. 949-1074.

<sup>7</sup> J. Williams, op. cit., p. 113.

dissipate the conscription scare.”<sup>8</sup> In January 1915, it carried another article in defence of the voluntary system and castigated the Harmsworth press for pushing for the introduction of conscription. The *Herald* contended that if the Harmsworth papers had their way, conscription would be introduced shortly. Fortunately, it reassured its readers, their propaganda would not have much effect on the rest of the more level-headed country.<sup>9</sup> The resolute stance of the *Catholic Herald* was buttressed by that of *The Universe*. In April 1915, *The Universe* answered French queries as to the reason Britain did not introduce conscription. It announced that mandatory service was unnecessary because there was sufficient enlistment in Great Britain to fill the ranks. Besides, the voluntary system made better fighters because those heroes were born, not “made”.<sup>10</sup> Such explanations suggest that it may have been felt that there would be no moral glory in the sacrifices of British men if military service was mandatory.

Not only the press, but eminent Catholics also expressed confidence in the success of voluntary recruitment. In an address given at Longton on 22 April 1915, Bishop William Keating praised the voluntary system as having served the British Empire successfully. He asserted that voluntary recruitment would not be strained if people continued to offer themselves in a spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>11</sup> The success of the voluntary system was also on Belloc’s mind when he wrote to Maurice Baring on 9 November 1914, arguing that Britain was able to get all the men she could possibly want by a voluntary system that was properly implemented. “To talk of conscription in a country organised as England is,” he added, “and untouched as to her soil, is to have

---

<sup>8</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 28 Nov. 1914, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1915, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *The Universe*, 30 Apr. 1915, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Catholic Times*, 30 Apr. 1915, p. 3.

quite lost grip of reality.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike the majority of other Catholics, however, Belloc continued to hold on to such beliefs after conscription was introduced in January 1916. As a matter of fact, privately he opposed conscription all the more vehemently in 1916 because he believed that Asquith had been obliged to introduce compulsory military service under pressure from Lord Northcliffe.<sup>13</sup>

Like Belloc, the *Catholic Times* dismissed the need for compulsion before it was applied and continued to speak against it after it had become a reality. In early June 1915, in common with other secular newspapers that advocated the voluntary system, the *Catholic Times* condemned the “treacherous” Northcliffe for agitating for conscription. It went on to reject the need for it and claimed that the public did not support compulsory military service, because the voluntary system was obtaining the necessary quota for the army.<sup>14</sup> In September, the *Catholic Times* was confident enough to predict that agitation for conscription would collapse in the next few weeks. It went so far as to warn that with compulsion would come revolution.<sup>15</sup> Even as the Derby Scheme was being conducted, the *Catholic Times* was still upholding the voluntary system. It wrote intransigently: “A victory for the voluntary system of recruiting in the British Empire is scarcely of less importance than the victory over Germany and her allies.”<sup>16</sup> As late as 31 December, it was still stubbornly expressing confidence in averting conscription by the success of the Derby Scheme. When the Military Service Bill was introduced, the Catholic weekly carried a scathing attack on conscriptionists in the Cabinet who, it claimed, had enforced

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in R. Speaight, *The Life of Hilaire Belloc*, p. 366.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Catholic Times*, 4 June 1915, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 Sep. 1915, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 26 Nov. 1915, p. 3.

their views on the government. If conscription was carried out, “it will mark the greatest defeat suffered by this country since the war began.”<sup>17</sup>

The Catholic press and leadership’s aversion to conscription before 1916 did not mean that there was no support for it among Catholics. Catholic supporters of compulsion, in small numbers, had raised their voices as soon as the first battles were launched. But these were exceptional. For example, Fr. A. T. McGrath, rector of St. Mary’s church, Radcliffe, wrote a letter to a Manchester newspaper in August 1914 in which he emphasised the importance of applying conscription. He argued that it was important to maintain Britain’s military strength in her time of trial. If the conscripts were needed, they would be called up; if they were not ultimately needed, then, in any case they would have received self-discipline to aid them in their careers.<sup>18</sup> This was temperate in comparison with Bishop Hedley’s warning to those Catholics who defied conscription. In his Advent pastoral of 1914, Hedley explained the citizen’s duty during the conflict. If conscription was implemented, he affirmed, all those affected by the law were bound to obey it. If a man did not do his duty, he was violating “the cardinal precept of justice, and is, to a greater or lesser degree, guilty in the sight of God,” Hedley announced.<sup>19</sup> Hedley’s warning conveyed two messages simultaneously: the first was his support for conscription, and the second was a warning that the Catholic citizen had a duty to obey the state. However, only a handful of Catholics appear to have joined the campaign of agitation in favour of conscription before 1916.

But with conscription looming large on the horizon, a new difficulty arose with the Derby Scheme for the Catholic Church in Britain. In carrying out his recruiting

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7 Jan. 1916, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in the *Catholic Herald*, 29 Aug. 1914, p. 1.

scheme, Lord Derby also appealed to the clergy, among others, for combatant services. This was problematic because in the Catholic tradition it was forbidden for the clergy to shed blood. St. Thomas Aquinas forbade the clergy from serving in the military for two reasons: the first reason is that it would be inconsistent for the clergy to pursue violent actions and maintain the required peacefulness to contemplate and praise God; the second reason is that it would be inconsistent for the clergy to shed blood and serve at the altar of God. He advised that it would be more appropriate for the clergy to shed their own blood for Christ.<sup>20</sup> They were permitted to tender non-combatant services to the army but to be combatants themselves was incompatible with their vocation as preachers of peace. In 1917, the Code of Canon Law, which was promulgated by Benedict XV on May 27, reinforced this, requiring quite specifically that clerics not volunteer for combatant military service.<sup>21</sup>

Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, had already refused to allow the Anglican clergy to become combatants before conscription was implemented. He argued a strong case, insisting that their task in their parishes was just as important as the soldiers' task on the field.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, Bourne supported this position, suggesting that, if the clergy must be conscripted, then at least they should be conscripted as chaplains and not as combatants. He also noted that if priests were conscripted, the

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in J. A. Wilson, op. cit., p. 361.

<sup>20</sup> K. W. Kemp, "Personal Pacifism", *Theological Studies*, 56, (Mar. 1995), p. 23; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol.35, (London: Blackfriars, 1972), pp. 87, 89; W. Farrell, *A Companion to the Summa*, vol. III: *The Fullness of Life*, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940), pp. 125-126.

<sup>21</sup> Despite all this, the French government conscripted some 25,000 priests as soldiers and officers into the army. By its secular laws, France did not exempt priests from military service. This in fact was thought to have strengthened, rather than weakened, the Catholic religion in France because the soldier-priests had a reputation for devotion and bravery. That French soldier-priests were admired by British Catholics is illustrated by the glowing description of them in an article by an anonymous author, "Religion in the French Army", *Dublin Review*, 157, (Oct. 1915), pp. 295, 303-308. See also A. Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914-1930*, (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1998), p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> G. K. A. Bell, op. cit., p. 764.

Germans would seize the initiative to launch a propaganda campaign against Britain in Spain.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the threat of conscripting Catholic clergy roused the Catholic hierarchy into action. In October 1915, Bishop Casartelli of Salford wrote to Archbishop Whiteside of Liverpool telling him that many priests were receiving letters from Lord Derby enquiring why they were not enlisting. Casartelli seemed alarmed at the prospect of compulsory military service for priests and considered it “highly objectionable” and dangerous. He asked Whiteside what action he was going to take against it.<sup>24</sup>

But Cardinal Bourne was already taking the necessary action to secure the exemption of the clergy. On 26 October, he had an interview with Lord Derby in which he suggested the exemption of priests and theological students who were in their immediate preparation for the priesthood.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the clergy was still being hounded by the recruiting agents in November 1915. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of that month, Bourne wrote an angry letter to Lord Derby complaining that a lot of annoyance was being caused among the clergy “by the over eagerness and, in some cases, positive rudeness of the recruiting canvassers.” He requested that instructions should be issued to leave the clergy in peace before serious discontent arose. Lord Derby apologised for the treatment of the clergy and promised to put the issue before the Parliamentary Recruiting Committee.<sup>26</sup>

Following intense negotiations with the government in January 1916, the Archbishop of Westminster was also able to secure the exemption of seminarians who

---

<sup>23</sup> Memo [by Bourne], undated, untitled, Bo.5/27b, Bourne Papers. It is not clear whether this memorandum was prepared in response to the 1916 conscription bill or that of April 1918. It seems likely that it was prepared before the first Military Service Bill.

<sup>24</sup> Casartelli to Whiteside, 25 Oct. 1915, Box 161, HH, 3301-3400B/3306, Casartelli Copy Letters, Casartelli Papers.

<sup>25</sup> Notes made by Bourne, [Nov.] 1915, Bo.5/27b, Bourne Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Bourne to Lord Derby, 24 Nov. 1915; Derby to Bourne, 26 Nov. 1915, Bo.5/27b, Bourne Papers.

were in their final two years of study. The details of this concession were finally worked out in February – after the Act was passed. There were two categories of seminarians who were eligible for absolute exemption. The first were students who had entered their professional studies, that is, at least Scholastic Philosophy, and were in immediate preparation for Holy Orders. The second were those who had been accepted as members of a recognised religious order or institute and were carrying out religious, educational, or charitable work that would suffer if they were to be withdrawn.<sup>27</sup> After collecting the names of all those seeking complete exemption under these two categories, it was found that there were 170 seminarians under the first category and 400 under the second. As Bourne pointed out to Walter Long, the Conservative minister who was president of the Local Government Board, “the total number for whom complete exemption is asked is not very large. On the other hand, the refusal of such exception would seriously jeopardize important religious, educational and charitable works.”<sup>28</sup> Although Bourne could not obtain total exemption for younger ecclesiastical students, they could still secure partial exemption under the Military Service Act. It is interesting to note that the exemption for seminarians was engineered *after* the Act was passed through special negotiations behind the scenes. It would not be unreasonable if a historian here pauses to ask whether it was an unwritten element in the contract between the government and the Church that the hierarchy would not formally criticise conscription if the government treated them generously. If that was so, then the Catholic clergy, and especially Bourne, honoured their end of the bargain. The Catholic hierarchy did indeed adopt a neutral

---

<sup>27</sup> Instructions Report by Bourne, 26 Jan. 1916, Bo.5/27a, Bourne Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Bourne to W. Long, 23 Jan. 1916, Bo.5/27a, Bourne papers.

position on conscription – perhaps in return for being granted exemptions beyond the terms of the Act.

A year after this arrangement had been settled with the civil authorities, the government once again demanded the conscription of seminarians. This time, however, the threat loomed larger because Cardinal Bourne was on a prolonged visit to Rome in the winter of 1916-17. In his absence, he had left Mgr. Manuel Bidwell, the auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, in charge. In February 1917, Bourne wrote to Archbishop Whiteside from Rome telling him that he was in constant correspondence with Bidwell and that “the Army Council has backed us staunchly against the recruiting element.” Bourne also assured Whiteside that he had written a personal letter to David Lloyd George, who had replaced Asquith as Prime Minister in December 1916. He instructed Whiteside that in case a crisis arose the three archbishops should meet.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, in Bourne’s absence, the one Catholic prelate who had proven to be influential with the government, the chances of securing the exemption of seminarians a second time looked bleak. By March 1917, Archbishop Ilseley of Birmingham was deeply concerned and wrote gloomily to Bishop Keating: “Personally I am afraid our ecclesiastical students are doomed.”<sup>30</sup> Bishop Casartelli complained that the government was depleting classes of ecclesiastical students. Although students had been called up in the previous year, the net was being drawn tighter in the first few months of 1917.<sup>31</sup> In March, however, an arrangement for continuing limited exemption was agreed upon by the War Office. It was proposed that all secular students over eighteen would be called up, but the Army

---

<sup>29</sup> Bourne to Whiteside, 16 Feb. 1917, S2, V, A/72, Whiteside Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Archbishop Ilseley to Bishop Keating, 5 Mar. 1917, Fv.1(h), Keating Papers, DAN.

<sup>31</sup> Church Students and the War: A Pastoral Letter, 25 Apr. 1917, *Acta Salfordiensia*, v. 2.23, Casartelli Papers.

Council was prepared to permit students to continue in their studies provided they became available to serve as army chaplains before the year was finished.<sup>32</sup> Again, this evidence provides another instance of activity on the part of the clergy to secure exemption. Yet, on the wider issue of conscription they offered very little leadership.

Before the year was out, however, the Catholic Church in Britain witnessed a powerful new advocate openly opposing general conscription. On 28 September 1917, more than a month after the release of the Papal Peace Note, Cardinal Gasparri wrote a letter to Lloyd George in support of the Note and highlighting the Pope's clear opposition to conscription. Gasparri's letter, which was publicly released shortly after it was sent, denounced conscription as the "cause of innumerable evils." He explained how the Pope intended to achieve permanent peace by the reciprocal disarmament of the nations. He repeated Benedict XV's assertion that there was only one practical method of attaining disarmament, namely, "that the civilised nations...should agree upon the simultaneous and mutual abolition of compulsory military service..." Under the Pope's plan, a tribunal of arbitration would need to be created to decide international controversies and the imposition of sanctions should be agreed against any nation that might attempt to re-impose conscription. The letter cited Britain and the U.S. as examples of the fact that "voluntary military service amply suffices to provide the contingent required for the maintenance of public order but does not furnish the enormous armies demanded by modern warfare." Once conscription was suppressed, the letter continued, reciprocal

---

<sup>32</sup> Mgr. Bidwell to Bishop Keating, 3 Mar. 1917, Fv.1(h), Keating Papers, DAN.

disarmament would follow automatically, accompanied by a lasting peace and the restoration “of the exhausted finances of the various states.”<sup>33</sup>

It appears, however, that such recommendations were not to Lloyd George’s taste. The proposals were given little attention and no support by the Foreign Office. According to D. Hayes, even the Catholic hierarchy did not receive the proposals with much enthusiasm. As for the Catholic laity, Hayes observed, “the action of their spiritual Head cut across all the national emotions and prejudices of the time.”<sup>34</sup> *The Universe* was probably one of the very few Catholic sources that supported Gasparri’s letter. On 9 November, it reported that it found the Cardinal’s proposals “invaluable for the instruction of public opinion.” Gasparri’s constructive recommendations, it commented, aspired to restore and secure the world’s civilisation and abolish the “Nation in Arms”.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the Guild of the Pope’s Peace<sup>36</sup> produced a pamphlet entitled “The Pope’s Plan for the Destruction of Militarism”, in which it supported Benedict’s precept for the abolition of conscription. The pamphlet argued that militarism could only be eliminated through general disarmament and the eradication of conscription, emphasising that Britain must first adopt the idea herself and make it one of her principle war aims.<sup>37</sup> But there is nothing in the papers of leading Catholic individuals to suggest that they reacted positively to this initiative from their spiritual leader. In addition to the Papal Peace Note, the letter from Gasparri made it absolutely plain where the Pope stood; he opposed conscription in principle. Yet there were no pastoral letters, interviews or speeches in

---

<sup>33</sup> Cardinal Pietro Gasparri to Lloyd George, 28 Sep. 1917, F.O. 371/3084/17, The War Files (Political), P.R.O. The Letter was also cited by H. W. Flannery (ed.), *Pattern for Peace: Catholic Statements on International Order*, (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1962), pp. 11-12, and D. Hayes, op. cit., p. 283.

<sup>34</sup> D. Hayes, op. cit., p. 283.

<sup>35</sup> *The Universe*, 9 Nov. 1917, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> For the formation and ideas of the Guild of the Pope’s Peace, see chapter 6.

<sup>37</sup> “The Pope’s Plan for the Destruction of Militarism”, [Nov. 1917], Box XXIV, P IV, Morison Papers.

support from the Catholic hierarchy at this decisive moment when the Pope's contribution to plans for the abolition of militarism was made known. The gulf between the Papacy and Catholic leaders in Britain seem to have been absolutely plain.

The spectre of conscription was not, therefore, dissipated and the danger of recruiting the clergy returned in the spring of 1918. The German Spring Offensive of 21 March 1918 breached the Allies' lines and by 5 April they had penetrated the British lines as far as St. Quentin. By 9 April, they had completely breached the British defences south of Ypres. The British were in dire need of manpower. It was then, on April 11, that Field-Marshal Douglas Haig issued his Order of the Day, famously proclaiming: "With our backs to the wall, and believing in the justice of our cause, each one of us must fight on to the end."<sup>38</sup> The desperation of the situation prompted the government to introduce the new Man Power Bill. It raised the military age to fifty and included non-combatant military service for the clergy. Archbishop Davidson, in contrast to his stance on the previous occasion, now favoured the inclusion of the clergy in the bill.<sup>39</sup>

The Catholic hierarchy, led by Bourne, on the other hand, maintained their opposition to clerical military service. On April 8, while the bill was still being composed, Cardinal Bourne had a meeting with Lloyd George. The Cardinal told him that it was up to the bishops to decide the number of priests who could be released for work. The Prime Minister assented and Bourne was asked to write to him after the annual meeting of the bishops,<sup>40</sup> which was to be held the next day. After the meeting on April 9, Bourne wrote to the Prime Minister: "The Bishops desire me to say that...the heads of

---

<sup>38</sup> J. Terraine, *Douglas Haig: The Uneducated Soldier*, (London: Hutchinson, 1963). Quoted on p. 433 of the 2000 edition.

<sup>39</sup> G. K. A. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 887.

<sup>40</sup> Annual Meeting of the Bishops, 9 Apr. 1918, S1, VII, B/1, Whiteside Papers.

denominations, and they alone, should determine what clergy can be released for non-combatant service without detriment to the religious and spiritual needs of the people.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the hierarchy, and not the government, would decide on the number of priests that could be released for non-combatant service. But when the bill was introduced the next day, the conscription of ministers of religion was included within its clauses. This prompted Bourne to send a letter to General Booth, who appears to have had responsibilities in this area, protesting that “Any further withdrawal [of priests] would lead to grave dislocation of the spiritual and religious services of the nation.”<sup>42</sup> Before the bill became law on April 18, the government decided to abandon its plans for conscripting the clergy. It found that, after allowing for a sufficient number of the clergy for the religious service of the country, it would not acquire a large increase of manpower from the ranks of the clergy.<sup>43</sup>

Beyond the impact of conscription on the clergy, it remains for this chapter to examine the Catholic response to the wider issues raised by the conscription of civilians. From the autumn of 1915, there was growing public opposition to the introduction of compulsory military service. The No-Conscription Fellowship (N-C.F.), which had been formed in late 1914 to oppose the implementation of conscription, issued its first manifesto in September 1915. This rallying cry was signed by the Chairman, Clifford Allen, and the Honorary Secretary, Fenner Brockway.<sup>44</sup> These two were eventually

---

<sup>41</sup> Bourne to Lloyd George, 9 Apr. 1918, Bo.5/27b, Bourne Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Bourne to General Booth, 14 Apr. 1918, Bo.5/27b, Bourne Papers. In a statement to *The Times* on 25 April, Bourne pointed out that whereas 24 out of 1,100 Anglican clergy in London were serving as military chaplains, among the Catholic clergy it was 52 out of 300 (p. 2).

<sup>43</sup> D. Hayes, op. cit., p. 308.

<sup>44</sup> T. C. Kennedy offers a thorough history of the Fellowship in *The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship*, (Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1981). The manifesto emphasised

imprisoned for long periods during the war for their opposition to the Military Service Act and their refusal to undertake even non-combatant service under its terms. Francis Meynell, the most prominent Catholic in this movement, also joined the Fellowship at its inception and was made chairman of the London branch.<sup>45</sup> He had already joined the Union of Democratic Control (U.D.C.)<sup>46</sup> soon after it was founded by E. D. Morel, C. P. Trevelyan, Norman Angell and Ramsay MacDonald at the commencement of war. Meynell was among the few Catholics who joined the influential peace movement during the First World War in Britain and thereby declared themselves to be convinced pacifists.

Such pacifists, of course, argued that war was not compatible with Christianity. They insisted that war contradicted Christian principles and that if true Christians genuinely believed in Jesus' message of peace, then they must renounce war. War required a Christian to kill, and this in turn formed a spirit diametrically in contrast to Christian love. As A. J. Hoover has pointed out, "War and love are two masters that no man can serve at the same time."<sup>47</sup> As far as can be determined, there seems to have been only one prominent Catholic who, while personally disavowing pacifism, was nevertheless willing to defend the doctrine of pacifism as a sincere, authentic conviction. Fr. Joseph Keating, the editor of *The Month*, certainly rejected the common social-darwinist outlook that regarded war as natural and inevitable. In January 1915, he stressed that such an outlook was not Christian although it was frequently upheld by Christians. Keating expressed amazement that even Catholic writers advocated such a

---

that the Fellowship sought to establish the conscientious objectors' willingness "to sacrifice as much in the cause of the World's peace as our fellows are sacrificing in the cause of the nation's war." Cited in Kennedy, p. 62.

<sup>45</sup> F. Meynell, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>46</sup> For an authoritative study of the U.D.C., see M. Swartz, *The Union of Democratic Control in British Politics during the First World War*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

<sup>47</sup> A. J. Hoover, op. cit., p. 104.

belief on the grounds that some of Jesus' utterances appeared to accept the inevitability of conflict.<sup>48</sup> Keating maintained that "War will cease if a sufficient number of people combine in thinking that it should cease."<sup>49</sup> But at another place, Keating elaborated his argument that this did not mean that pacifism itself was feasible. He argued that this was not a perfect world where everyone followed the teaching of Jesus. In a fallen world, therefore, pacifism could lead to the disintegration of society. For if a domestic criminal may not be resisted and self-defence was unlawful, then how could one defend others? If this policy was pursued, according to Keating, criminal nations and individuals would wreak havoc and the world would descend into a state of lawlessness.<sup>50</sup>

Keating's tolerance and moderation towards pacifism was not shared by many other leading Catholics who were not pacifists themselves. In spite of the activity of the Catholic hierarchy in seeking exemption from conscription for their own seminarians, no guidance or support was offered to Catholic citizens who challenged the state's presumed right to compel vast numbers of ordinary men into military action. The minority of Catholics who joined the peace movement were swimming against the strong current of the rest of Catholic opinion. The pro-war clergy denounced pacifism, even suggesting it was unchristian, and were very hesitant to accept the pacifists' assertion that in essence Jesus endorsed the principle of non-resistance in his preaching. They developed the familiar hypothesis that, in his teachings, Jesus sometimes offered a counsel of perfection and did not intend that we should take all his sermons literally. In using this argument,

---

<sup>48</sup> These utterances included: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the world. No, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34; Luke 12:51) and "You are going to hear the noise of battles close by and the news of battles far away.... Countries will fight each other and kingdoms will attack one another" (Matt. 24:6-7; Mark 13:7-8; Luke 21:10).

<sup>49</sup> J. K[eating], "Into the Way of Peace", p. 52.

<sup>50</sup> J. Keating, "Morality and War", in C. Plater (ed.), *A Primer of Peace and War: The Principles of International Morality*, (London: P. S. King & Sons, 1915), p. 115.

the clergy were drawing upon a long tradition, dating back to the Catholic reaction towards various pacifist sects associated with the Anabaptists from 1525 onwards.<sup>51</sup> In view of this, it is not surprising that George Burton,<sup>52</sup> the Bishop of Clifton, condemned the pacifists in November 1915 as “peacemongers” who did not understand Christianity. He accused them of desiring peace at any price, even at the cost of sacrificing the well being of their country. “This was not Christianity”, he announced. “We want no peace cranks; away with the peacemongers.”<sup>53</sup>

Other ecclesiastics attempted to refute the pacifists’ central belief that life was the greatest good and nothing justified the taking of it. If this could indeed be refuted, then a mortal blow could be struck at pacifist conviction. In 1916, Fr. Adrian Fortescue attempted to disprove that life was the pinnacle of value. If life was so precious that nothing could compensate its loss, Fortescue claimed, only then would the pacifists be right. But since life was not the most precious good, the pacifists must be wrong. To support his argument, he gave the life of the religious martyr as an example. “No Christian could deny that the religious martyr does right, [and] is worthy of praise, when he gives his life for his faith. This shows that human life is not the supreme good.”<sup>54</sup> Even Christ, Fortescue contended, did not consider death the ultimate evil or life the

---

<sup>51</sup> The Anabaptists took the Sermon on the Mount literally. They refused to occupy any government office, to judge, or to rule; because to do this, they reasoned, one “would be forced to behave carnally, to wage war and to kill, whereas Christ on the contrary commanded him to behave spiritually.” They also refused the temporal authorities’ demand for military service. H-J. Goertz, *The Anabaptists*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 98. Their subsequent persecution by Catholics for these beliefs as well as their practice of adult baptism is described in chapter 6 in Goertz. For another example of their persecution by Catholics see G. Strauss, “The Religious Policies of Dukes Wilhelm and Ludwig of Bavaria in the First Decade of the Protestant Era”, *Church History*, 28, (Dec. 1959), pp. 366-370.

<sup>52</sup> George Ambrose Burton, the Doctor of Divinity, was born in Hull, England, in 1852. He attended Ratcliffe College and the English College in Rome. In 1902, he was consecrated bishop of Clifton where he remained until his death in 1931.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in *The Tablet*, 4 Dec. 1915, p. 719.

<sup>54</sup> A. Fortescue, *Pacifism: A Word with Conscientious Objectors*, (London: Catholic Truth Society, [1916]), p. 4.

supreme good. By saying “Greater love than this no man has, that he should lay down his life for his friends”(John 15:13), Jesus also proved that he did not consider life to be the ultimate good.<sup>55</sup> And if human life was not the ultimate good, then the pacifist was necessarily wrong.

Nor did the Catholic clergy denounce the Christian pacifists alone. The left-wing radicals and socialists as a whole were continuously condemned for their “unpatriotic” activities and for allegedly weakening the national war effort through their agitation to end the conflict. In one of his frequent articles to *Nineteenth Century*, for example, William Barry castigated the so-called “Liberals” and “friends of humanity”, by which he meant the various radicals grouped under the banner of the U.D.C and the I.L.P. He expressed his conviction that, if the Allies lost the war, then these “peacemongers” would be to blame. They had unceasingly undermined the people’s “patriotism” since war broke out; they had weakened Britain’s national spirit and resolve by defending German policy and blaming the Allies for the war.<sup>56</sup> Barry went on to charge “those peacemongers” with having “done all they could to whitewash the Teuton criminal and to break our nerve.”<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the clergy, several politically prominent Catholic laymen also did their utmost to discredit the peace movement, insisting that its proposals for ending the war by negotiation would be unfavourable to the Allies and would make impossible a “just and lasting peace”. While some dismissed the pacifists as an insignificant minority, others condemned them in the strongest terms as German sympathizers. Hilaire Belloc was one of those who preferred to dismiss them. In his preface to Cecil Chesterton’s *The Perils of Peace*, Belloc regarded those with pacifist tendencies as “numerically quite

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> W. Barry, “False and True Idealism in the War”, *Nineteenth Century*, 83(495), (May 1918), p. 913.

insignificant and utterly out of tune” with the masses.<sup>58</sup> Shortly, however, he contradicted himself by stating that the “perverted fool who cannot reconcile justice with charity (for he has no creed), has indeed an influence in our society quite out of proportion to his numbers.” He mistakenly attributed this influence to the pacifists’ alleged aristocratic position in society. Because they belonged to the wealthier classes of society, Belloc claimed, the pacifists wielded more power and were protected by the politicians.<sup>59</sup> In fact, a large percentage of the pacifists were from the ranks of the middle class, while others were prominent in the labour movement.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that Cardinal Bourne shared Belloc’s initial basic contention that the pacifists were an insignificant minority who were simply out of tune with the rest of society. Although the rest of the Catholic hierarchy deplored the supposedly baleful influence of the peace movement, Bourne’s lack of any condemnation of pacifists and conscientious objectors during the war was conspicuous. In dismissing them as a minority without influence, it was almost as if he considered them incapable of doing any real harm. In his interview with the *Corriere d’Italia* in early 1917, the Cardinal merely alluded to the pacifists as people who lived “in the world of metaphysics.” He assured the *Corriere* that they had no following either in British society or in parliament and that the British Catholic was in complete solidarity with the government.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 916.

<sup>58</sup> C. Chesterton, *The Perils of Peace*, (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1916), pp. 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, J. Rae, *Conscience and Politics: The British Government and the Conscientious Objector to Military Service, 1916-1919*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 82 and T. C. Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

<sup>61</sup> *The Tablet*, 17 Feb. 1917, p. 218. Cardinal F. A. Bourne, “*Union Sacrée*”: *Great Britain in Wartime*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1917), p. 6.

In contrast to Belloc, other leading Catholic laymen castigated the pacifists strongly and accused them of aiding Germany to the detriment of the Allies. One of the most vociferous opponents of pacifism was Cecil Chesterton. He blamed the rise of Prussian militarism on the strengthening of pacifism across Europe in the late nineteenth century. To him, pacifism was not only unchristian, but also “intensely unchristian.”<sup>62</sup> In Chesterton’s opinion, pacifism was a variant of atheism; that is, it had a materialistic basis and, as he insisted “its ultimate appeal is always to dogmas of materialism.” He was not deterred by any evidence which could be presented to the contrary; he rejected the Tolstoyan argument that non-resistance under some circumstances and conditions is a duty that was constantly and undeniably taught by Jesus.<sup>63</sup> Quite the opposite. In his determination to expose pacifism, he attacked the founders of the U.D.C., Ramsay MacDonald, Charles Trevelyan, Norman Angell, E. D. Morel and Arthur Ponsonby, and accused them of fomenting dissent in order to attain a peace that was favourable to Germany. He indicted the U.D.C. leaders as clearly pro-German.<sup>64</sup> Never moderate in his judgements, he criticised Angell’s *The Great Illusion* as an “absurd book” with a mixture of “silly truisms and pestilentially false morals.”<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> C. Chesterton, *The Prussian Hath Said in His Heart*, p. 67.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 68. For a Tolstoyan study regarding non-resistance, see L. Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is within You*, (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1905). For an example of the repudiation of the argument that pacifism is unchristian and that Jesus indirectly condoned war see G. H. C. Macgregor, *The New Testament Basis of Pacifism*, (London: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1936).

<sup>64</sup> C. Chesterton, *The Prussian Hath Said in His Heart*, pp. 196-199. In September 1914, he wrote to Sarolea that MacDonald, Morel and Angell were hatching a conspiracy “to make a dishonourable peace at the expense of both England and Belgium.” C. Chesterton to Sarolea, 17 Sep. 1914, Sar.coll.10, Sarolea Papers.

<sup>65</sup> C. Chesterton, *The Perils of Peace*, p. 91. In *The Great Illusion*, (London: Heinemann, 1911), Norman Angell argued that armed aggression by one economically advanced state against another would not benefit anyone, even should the aggressor win. For a critical analysis of Angell’s theory, see H. Weinroth, “Norman Angell and *The Great Illusion*: An Episode in Pre-1914 Pacifism”, *Historical Journal*, 17(3), (1974): 551-574.

Some Catholic organs supported this position and blamed pacifist organisations for hindering conscription and the war effort. One particularly vehement organ was the *Catholic Federationist*. In its issue of January 1916, just before the onset of conscription, the *Federationist* criticised the N-C.F. for its opposition to compulsory military service. Its basic argument was that “conscription is a term that belongs essentially to conditions of peace, and all the arguments against conscription are arguments against compulsory military service during times of peace.” In its excoriation, the *Catholic Federationist* exclaimed that the members of the N-C.F. were “not even men.” They would not defend their womenfolk in times of peace or war.<sup>66</sup>

After conscription became law, many pacifists became conscientious objectors in refusing military service of any kind. The Military Service Act contained a conscience clause that recognised moral as well as religious objections to the war. It has been suggested that many wavering Liberal Party MPs who had initially been opposed to conscription were reassured by the inclusion of such a clause.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, the insertion of the conscience clause appears to have been overtly a matter of political judgement on the part of the government rather than a sign of its respect for the moral stance of pacifists.<sup>68</sup>

The existence of a conscience clause in the Military Service Act did not necessarily mean that the rest of British society accepted conscientious objectors (C.O.s).

---

<sup>66</sup> *Catholic Federationist*, Jan. 1916, p. 4.

<sup>67</sup> T. C. Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 81-82. In July 1917, Philip Kerr, the private secretary of Lloyd George, wrote that it was a mistake for the government to have included the absolute exemption clause in the Military Service Act. It would have sufficed, in his opinion, to have granted alternative service. See memorandum on The ‘Absolutist’ Conscientious Objectors, 5 July 1917, GD40/17/528, Lothian Papers, National Archives of Scotland.

<sup>68</sup> R. J. Q. Adams & P. P. Poirier, op. cit., p. 140.

In fact, they were looked upon with much undisguised contempt.<sup>69</sup> A psychologist's analysis appearing in the Conservative periodical *Nineteenth Century* in October 1917, for example, labeled absolute C.O.s, that is, those C.O.s who refused to carry out even non-combatant services, as "unstable".<sup>70</sup> Most Christian denominations opposed and rejected them. On 4 May 1916, Charles Gore, the Anglican Bishop of Oxford, denounced the creed and principles of conscientious objectors in the House of Lords. He said: "I am...profoundly out of sympathy with those persons...that is to say, I am not at all in agreement with their principles."<sup>71</sup> Save for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Gore's statement expressed the views of a large number of the Anglican clergy. Randall Davidson, however, did not condemn C.O.s out of hand but maintained a lukewarm detachment. Although he could not fathom, in particular, the convictions of the absolutist, he respected the opposition of those who objected to military service and the spilling of blood.<sup>72</sup>

Similarly, although Cardinal Bourne refrained from either condemning or condoning them, the Catholic clergy in general condemned C.O.s in the strongest terms. An explicit example is shown in the speeches of two parish priests from Tyneside in March 1916. Fr. Byrne deprecated the C.O. as a coward who sheltered himself behind the men who donned the uniform. Fr. Bradley, meanwhile, was still more severe in his condemnation. He held it to be his duty "to honour those who killed Germans" and revealed that if it were up to him, he would eliminate C.O.s. In his opinion, "What had

---

<sup>69</sup> In another memorandum written by Philip Kerr in July 1917, he wrote of conscientious objectors: "they are passive resisters against the policy of the nation as expressed in law." He absolutely opposed compromise with passive resisters as it would bring about the ruin of the state. The 'Absolutist' Conscientious Objectors, 16 July 1917, GD40/17/219, Lothian Papers.

<sup>70</sup> W. R. S. Hunt, "A Psychologist's View of the Objector and His 'Conscience'", *Nineteenth Century*, 82(488), (Oct. 1917), p. 745.

<sup>71</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 21, col. 904.

happened in Belgium would be repeated in our own country in a degree twenty times worse if the conscientious objector had his own way.”<sup>73</sup>

The clergy’s denunciation was matched by hostile speeches on the part of several leading Catholic laymen. Lord Denbigh, for example, poured scorn on C.O.s in the House of Lords in July 1917. Denbigh declared that he regarded C.O.s as “a set of despicable people who have no claim to the ordinary rights of citizens and who do not deserve any consideration whatever.”<sup>74</sup> The same degree of anger was shown by Cecil Chesterton who felt enraged that “these lunatics” were tolerated and permitted to “exhibit their mental diseases to the astonished eyes of England.”<sup>75</sup>

In addition, most of the Catholic press continually attacked conscientious objectors’ beliefs and displayed not an iota of sympathy for their principles. Indeed, when Edward Hicks, the Anglican Bishop of Lincoln, wrote a letter to *The Times* defending the genuine C.O. in April 1916, he came under severe criticism from *The Universe*. In his letter, Hicks asked whether the nation, in its military zeal, was not slipping into the old vices of intolerance and persecution.<sup>76</sup> *The Universe* ridiculed Hicks’ concern for the way C.O.s were being treated and took exception to his regarding the C.O. as a “prophet and a visionary.” The paper claimed that the Bishop had written from hearsay and had not studied the facts; because if he had, “it would have been manifest to him that the arguments of the Conscientious Objector are in some cases enough to make the flesh of any sensitive man creep.”<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> G. K. A. Bell, op. cit., p. 818.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in *The Tablet*, 1 Apr. 1916, p. 428.

<sup>74</sup> *House of Lords Debates*, vol. 25, col. 857.

<sup>75</sup> C. Chesterton, *The Perils of Peace*, p. 82.

<sup>76</sup> *The Times*, 4 Apr. 1916, p. 9.

<sup>77</sup> *The Universe*, 7 Apr. 1916, p. 3.

Not surprisingly, at least one Catholic newspaper did support the position of the genuine conscientious objector. The *Catholic Times*, having previously opposed the introduction of conscription, maintained its opposition. On 14 April 1916, the *Catholic Times* flew in the face of most Catholic opinion when it boldly declared: “We...can have no sympathy with the opponents of the genuine conscientious objector. To argue against exemption of any kind on that score is equivalent to advocating State tyranny.” It went on to explain that if a man enlightened his conscience by all possible means, and obeyed that conscience even if it was erroneous, then that man deserved support. The *Catholic Times* supported the claim that an individual must return loyalty to the society that protects him. But it saw a difficulty arising when that society, which was the state, insisted that the citizen render services which were opposed to his conscience.<sup>78</sup>

Naturally, this blatant deviation from the rest of Catholic opinion did not go unchallenged. In its very next issue, the *Catholic Federationist* not only dissociated itself from the *Catholic Times*, but also criticised it for holding such views. The *Federationist* expressed amazement that the above statement could have been made by a Catholic paper and insisted that Catholics could have no sympathy with a person who denied the virtue of “patriotism”. It expressed astonishment at the *Catholic Times*’ brutal insensitivity, as it portrayed it, when Catholic blood was pouring forth and Catholic manhood was being sacrificed to defend the country. In a defiant challenge to the *Catholic Times* it stated: “But we are the opponents of the genuine conscientious objector. We are convinced opponents, and we make bold to say that the conscientious objectors will find that Catholics are among their most determined opponents.”<sup>79</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> *Catholic Times*, 14 Apr. 1916, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Catholic Federationist*, May 1916, p. 6.

Opposing non-religious and non-Catholic C.O.s was one thing; but, notwithstanding the zeal of the *Catholic Federationist*, opposing the phenomenon of the Catholic C.O. during the Great War was not such an easy thing for ordinary Catholics. As J. Rae has suggested, a lot of non-Catholic C.O.s (with some exceptions, notably the Quakers and Christadelphians) were in a difficulty: they were not necessarily supported by the traditional interpretations of war as outlined by their Churches. Nor were their religious leaders' attitudes to this war to be an important factor in establishing their cases. These men were more vulnerable because their Churches offered them little guidance. Thus, they had to determine their pacifism almost on their own; that is, on the basis of a "subjective interpretation of the Christian ethic."<sup>80</sup> Catholic C.O.s, on the other hand, had at least the (admittedly ambiguous) support of the teaching of their Church on the "just war" and ought to have felt more comfortable because of the public stance of their Pope on this particular war.<sup>81</sup> As we have seen, the Catholic Church had long maintained that a war could be supported as long as it fulfilled certain conditions that could render it just. Thus, the Church acknowledged, at least implicitly, the possibility of conscientious objection to certain wars. As a result, it was far less arduous in theory for a British Catholic C.O. to establish the merits for his case than it was for, say, an Anglican.<sup>82</sup> In constituting his conditions for the just war, St. Augustine had stressed:

---

<sup>80</sup> J. Rae, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>81</sup> The Pope himself was labeled a pacifist by a number of subsequent historians. For example, F. Stratmann in *The Church and War: A Catholic Study*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1971), has claimed that during the war, Benedict XV "adopted the Programme of Classic Pacifism" and called on a movement in the Catholic Church to promote the programme (pp. 159-160). Stratmann reasoned that "What made the Pope a convinced Pacifist...was his belief in the practicability of the Pacifist aim" (p. 163). R. G. Musto also refers to Benedict as an absolute pacifist in *The Catholic Peace Tradition*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1986), p. 171.

<sup>82</sup> J. Rae, op. cit., p. 80.

As far as the ordinary citizen is concerned, he must obey his country's summons to take up arms unless he is sure that the war is unjust, and in that event *he must refuse to participate in actual combat, even though he would be sentenced to death as a consequence* [my emphasis].<sup>83</sup>

Ultimately, this meant that the Church viewed the individual's conscience as the supreme moral authority in deciding whether a war was just or unjust.

In view of this, a debate ensued between Catholics as to whether such a thing as a Catholic conscientious objector could exist in the present conflict. It was admitted that technically, the teaching of the Catholic Church allowed for conscientious objection in any conflict, but pro-conscriptionists pleaded that surely the present war could not be considered unjust on Britain's part. After setting out the conditions of a just war in *The Month* of July 1916, Sydney F. Smith, to offer just one example, pursued this argument. He advised that the Church's principles of conscience made the British Catholic's position clear: he was bound to fight since Britain's cause was necessary and just. Smith found it difficult to conceive of any person who might believe that the war was not a defensive one on Britain's part.<sup>84</sup> To clarify the Catholic C.O.'s position, *The Month* included another article on Catholic conscientious objection a few months later. In his moderate but icily logical commentary, Joseph Keating distinguished between those C.O.s who considered all wars unjust, and those who looked on the present war as unjust. If a C.O. believed the former, then he must be considered a heretic. If he maintained the latter, according to Keating, then he was "worthy of commendation" as one willing to uphold his principles, even though he was ignorant and ill-informed of the facts.<sup>85</sup> Keating concluded that these kinds of C.O.s must follow their conviction even if that

---

<sup>83</sup> St. Augustine, cited in P. Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1961), p. 79.

<sup>84</sup> S. F. S[mith], "Critical and Historical Notes: Can a Catholic be a Conscientious Objector?", *The Month*, 128, (July 1916), p. 67.

conviction seemed wrong to others. He affirmed that “so long as their conviction is, however erroneous, subjectively certain, so long are they bound to act in accord with it.”<sup>86</sup>

Despite this clarification, many writers in the Catholic press still found it incomprehensible that an individual could at once be a Catholic and a C.O. For instance, in a series of leading articles first appearing in May 1916, just after the extension of conscription to married men, the *Glasgow Observer* dealt “with that oddest of oddities to which these freakish times of ours have given birth, the Catholic ‘Conscientious Objector.’”<sup>87</sup> In the second article of the series, the writer tried to prove that the war was absolutely just and asked rhetorically that if it was unjust, was it likely that the C.O. “would be the only man to perceive it?”<sup>88</sup> *The Tablet*, too, appeared not to be able to fathom the disturbing phenomenon of a Catholic C.O. In April 1916, it lamented the existence in Salford of a person “who claims to be...a Catholic and a conscientious objector.” *The Tablet* wrote that the appearance of this particular C.O. before a tribunal was reported by the *Manchester Guardian*, “which mercifully suppress[ed]” the man’s name.<sup>89</sup> In the same way, the *Catholic Herald* expressed antipathy to Catholic C.O.s, referring to them as queer people and opposing their being granted exemption. It asserted that they knew nothing of religion and that they interpreted scriptures from their own viewpoint, which basically made them akin to Protestants in their religious actions.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> J. K[eating], “Critical and Historical Notes: Catholic Conscientious Objectors”, *The Month*, 129, (Jan. 1917), p. 71.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>87</sup> *Glasgow Observer*, 27 May 1916, p. 2.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 June 1916, p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> *The Tablet*, 1 Apr. 1916, p. 427.

<sup>90</sup> *Catholic Herald*, 22 Apr. 1916, p. 4.

Even though they were often reviled and rejected by their co-religionists, Catholic conscientious objectors *did* exist, albeit in very small numbers. According to a leaflet published at the time by the Friends' Service Committee, only 3 percent of C.O.s were Catholics – the smallest percentage of objectors. Anglicans comprised 7.5 percent, while the figure for atheists was 12 percent – more than Anglicans and Catholics combined.<sup>91</sup> One reason for such a diminutive percentage of Catholic and Anglican C.O.s may well be the lack of sympathy they received from their respective Churches.

One of the most prominent of those Catholic conscientious objectors was Francis Meynell. By 1916, Meynell's strident opposition to the war and conscription was causing his father, Wilfrid Meynell, the manager of Burns & Oates, considerable embarrassment. To extricate his father from this awkward situation, Francis left Burns & Oates and decided to establish his own printing press.<sup>92</sup> After his refusal to answer a summons for conscription in August 1916, he appeared before the Marylebone Local Tribunal.<sup>93</sup> In his autobiography, Meynell intimated that there were several reasons for his conscientious objection. In part, his objection was emotional; he remembered the terrible slaughter of the Boer War and how he wept at the reports of the horrible killing when a little boy. In part, it was religious; "I was...a Roman Catholic and Pope Benedict XV denounced the war." And in part, it was political; he was convinced that the war was between two imperialist powers and that the workers were used as cannon fodder. "Only for what I

---

<sup>91</sup> The figures are quoted in A. Marrin, *The Last Crusade*, p. 147.

<sup>92</sup> J. Dreyfus, *A History of the Nonesuch Press*, (London: Nonesuch Press, 1981), p. 9. The press he established after leaving Burns & Oates was the Pelican Press.

<sup>93</sup> Local tribunals were district tribunals who heard and determined the cases of local conscientious objectors. Appeal Tribunals in specified areas decided the cases of those rejected by the Local Tribunals. Finally, the Central Tribunal was the highest authority in deciding appeals. An appeal to the Central Tribunal required the permission of the Appeal Tribunal concerned.

considered overwhelmingly good ends – and that for me then would have meant social revolution – would I have supported war and killing.”<sup>94</sup>

When he appeared before the tribunal, Meynell cited his politics but emphasised his religion as his chief motive because it was one of the few reasons generally accepted by the tribunals weighing claims for conscientious objection. After explaining that the vast majority of fighting soldiers were conscripted and, therefore, not guilty of the war, and that as a soldier he would refuse certain orders, he cited his religious reasons. He told the chairman that as a Catholic, he heeded the Pope’s utterances, and from his central moral position, Benedict XV had clearly said that the war was “dishonouring humanity.” He had appealed to the belligerents to settle the dispute by some other means, as war did not solve problems. Meynell went on to illustrate this, arguing that “Roman Catholics have a definite system of moral theology...which enables us to look up any point and find what must be considered an authoritative answer.” To corroborate his point, he read two statements from Catholic text-books that confirmed an individual’s duty not to fight if that individual was not certain that the war in which he was to fight was just.<sup>95</sup> When the chairman objected to him citing the Pope and pointed out that popes had waged war themselves, Meynell was quick to point out that he was only referring to the current war, which the Pope definitely opposed.

Meynell then produced three written references supporting his claim that he was a sincere C.O. These letters were from prominent Liberal politicians and publicists: James Douglas, the editor of the *Star*, Charles Masterman, then a junior minister in the government, and Eddie Marsh, a personal assistant to Asquith. Marsh wrote:

---

<sup>94</sup> F. Meynell, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 95.

I can testify that, though in my opinion wrong-headed, [Meynell] is a man of unimpeachable courage and complete sincerity. His attitude as a conscientious objector is of a piece with all his opinions and conduct. But for this kink he would make an excellent soldier. As it is, he would be worse than useless.

Masterman also declared:

I am sure that if there is a genuine conscientious objector in England you are one of the most obdurate kind, and I certainly can testify that these beliefs and determinations of yours are not the creation of a desire to shirk or the results of a natural cowardice.<sup>96</sup>

Even though Meynell was exempted from non-combatant service, he did not receive absolute exemption.<sup>97</sup> He appealed to the national tribunal against the decision in September 1916. In his appeal, Meynell produced two more letters: one from H. G. Wells and the other from Lord Lytton. They both disagreed with the defendant's opinions but insisted that he was an honest and upright character. However, in the same manner as the Local Tribunal, the Appeal Tribunal exempted him from military service but compelled him to do non-combatant work. This he again refused and, on 29 January 1917, he surrendered himself to the authorities and was imprisoned.<sup>98</sup> In prison, he went on a hunger and thirst strike. On the morning of the twelfth day, he collapsed and was promptly taken to the military hospital where he was told that if he accepted nourishment,

---

<sup>96</sup> C. E. Playne, *Society at War, 1914-1916*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), pp. 278-279. See also Charles H. Masterman to F. Meynell, 15 Aug. 1916, Box XXIV, C.O. Letters – 1916-1917, Morison Papers.

<sup>97</sup> Local tribunals came under increasing criticism for not granting exemptions. On 29 February 1916, Philip Snowden, a member of the I.L.P., condemned the way local tribunals were treating C.O.s. He cited the case of a man who had gone before the tribunals and defended his case convincingly, yet was not exempted from military service. "I want to know what would satisfy a tribunal that the man had a conscientious objection." *House of Commons Debates*, vol. 80, col. 947. Likewise, in his introduction to *I Appeal Unto Caesar*, Gilbert Murray cited two faults in local tribunals: 1) they did not have the necessary qualifications to deal with the minds of intellectual and religious men; and 2) they were eager to satisfy the War Office and the press. M. Hobhouse, *I Appeal Unto Caesar*, (London: Allen & Unwin, [1917], p. vii. Tribunal proceedings are described in chapter 5 of D. Boulton, *Objection Overruled*, (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1967).

<sup>98</sup> F. Meynell, op. cit., p. 99.

he would be discharged unconditionally. He “nodded and accepted the sweetest drink of my life – a spoonful of peptonised milk.”<sup>99</sup>

Publicly, Francis’ family disavowed any agreement with his actions. Just a few days after he was imprisoned, *The Times* reported that Alice Meynell, Francis’ mother, had written on behalf of herself and her family to disclaim “any agreement whatsoever with her son....” Although she respected Francis’ conscience, she held the war to be most just, “and Germany’s crime the greatest crime in history.”<sup>100</sup> Privately, however, Meynell’s family could not but sympathise with his plight. It was around this time that his mother sent him a letter in which she told him that she thought him the happiest of her sons, for he was “so sure and certain.”<sup>101</sup>

The ambivalence of the Meynell family reflected the division in Catholic thought and outlook regarding pacifism and nationalism. A yawning abyss separated the Catholic pacifist mind from that of the non-pacifist. This is most clearly visible in a letter from Stanley Morison,<sup>102</sup> another Catholic C.O., to W. A. S. Hewins from Wakefield prison in October 1917. Morison had applied for total exemption in February 1916 and on 5 April he appeared before the Middlesex County Tribunal. In contrast to Meynell, whose objection was both political and religious, Morison’s objection was purely religious. In his hearing before the tribunal, he expanded on the moral and religious reasons for his

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 102. Meynell later wrote a lengthy article about his experience as a C.O. in prison. It was to be published in the *Daily Herald* but this never eventuated. A draft of the article is in Box XXIV, C.O. Letters – 1917-1918, Morison Papers.

<sup>100</sup> *The Times*, 1 Feb. 1917, p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> Alice Meynell to Francis Meynell, undated [Feb. 1917], Box XXIV, C.O. Letters – 1916-1917, Morison Papers.

<sup>102</sup> Morison was born in Wanstead, Essex, in May 1889. He converted to Catholicism in December 1908 and in 1913 he was introduced to Wilfrid Meynell and employed in Burns & Oates. He was placed with Francis Meynell who was in charge of book design. Morison became Francis’ assistant and friend and they both refused enlistment for military service in 1916. For a biographical sketch, see *Stanley Morison: A Portrait*, (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1971).

objection which were, in his view, implicit in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>103</sup> As with Meynell, he was granted conditional exemption which he rejected. He was then arrested and refused to obey orders. In his subsequent court martial, he was sentenced to two months hard labour in Winchester prison.<sup>104</sup>

The object of Morison's letter to Hewins was to entreat him, as a Catholic, to assist him and some of his fellow C.O.s obtain a sympathetic hearing of their cases by the government. In writing the letter, Morison expressed penetrating insight into the ideals which separated Catholic pacifists from Catholic imperialists. It is worth quoting a large portion of the letter to illustrate these conflicting ideologies. After thanking Hewins for a letter he had sent to him, and acknowledging the sincerity of his conscientious objection, he wrote:

I am not of course as sure of my c.o. position as of my Catholicism – in the nature of the case there is the difference that I have in the former case only my individual conscience to prescribe my course of action – the Church itself can give me no advice....<sup>105</sup> Willy nilly I am an individualist – all conscientious men are. You, for example don't approve the war *because* Mr. Bonar Law and Lord Lansdowne urged you to stand by France; you approve it because your own conscience and reason move you: you are an individualist therefore. So am I. The difference is this – you have the vast majority of other individualists with you while I am in a very small minority indeed. But the fact of your majority does not legitimise your conscience or illegitimise mine.... [W]hen you ask me to die – and you say 'meritoriously' – for my country I fear I am obliged to demur because I am sure that the death you would at the present moment consider meritorious would be no real use to that country which I am as anxious as you to serve. On the other hand were I to lay down my life for the principle of pacifism...I do consider that would be 'meritorious' while you would think it waste. Why so? Because we have opposing ideals – yours is the prospect of a prosperous and flourishing British Empire living happily after the present war forced upon it by a wicked competitor. Mine is not this but the prospect of being able to live with a firm purpose to live by what I know to be God's truth. Lest I be led astray by a false or freakish conscience I as a loyal Catholic confer not with the great British public or with his Majesty's Government but with the Catholic Church. I say *not* with the Government because I am not now a Nationalist or Imperialist.... I learnt to hate national pride and Nationalism, Imperialism and all that love of self because of self which begets the more vulgar forms of patriotism – a longing to see more red on the map. So, the great society to which you truly say I belong, is, for me, the Catholic Church and for you the British Empire and thus you will understand and not think me a prig if I say I should welcome the privilege of dying for the Church or think me a coward if I say I should regard it as a waste to die for the Empire.... Do you not see that unless we do make our consciences our own

---

<sup>103</sup> N. Barker, *Stanley Morison*, (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 68.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>105</sup> Presumably, Morison is here referring to the British Catholic hierarchy, for the Pope clearly *had* given advice.

and not the King's we are back to Luther's *cuius regio eius religio* [each region has its own religion]? [emphasis in original].<sup>106</sup>

Although Morison seemed to have forgotten that the war was, in the judgement of many contemporaries, as much a Liberal cause as anything else, his letter nevertheless demonstrated that a wide ideological gulf separated Catholic pacifists from Catholic imperialists, while also revealing the essential consideration that maintained this gulf. Morison's direct moral appeal was to individual conscience. The letter indicated that whereas Catholic pacifists held, in conscience, that the war as an imperialist struggle between two equally aggressive empires, Catholic imperialists considered the preservation of the British Empire to be of paramount importance. Morison's concern, as a Catholic C.O., was for an international order in which peace was based on justice and love as taught by the Church. Hewins, however, as a British Catholic imperialist, preferred to rely rather on military might to maintain the Empire which he regarded as the supremely beneficent force in the world.

Although such passionate debates between Catholics did not surface frequently in public, they did transpire from time to time. One telling debate took place in the pages of *The Universe* just as conscription was being implemented, in April-May 1916. It started when an anonymous letter to the editor accused the founders of the newly formed Guild of the Pope's Peace of fomenting a dangerous Catholic pacifist movement which aimed to work in league with other peace movements.<sup>107</sup> This evoked a response from E. I. Watkin,<sup>108</sup> in the following issue of *The Universe*. Watkin, who courageously supplied

---

<sup>106</sup> Stanley A. Morison to Hewins, 19 Oct. 1917, Hewins 66/107, Hewins Papers.

<sup>107</sup> *The Universe*, 28 Apr. 1916, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> E. I. Watkin was born near Manchester, England, in 1888 and was educated at St. Paul's School, London, and at New College, Oxford. He converted to Catholicism in 1908 and in the inter-war period became a pacifist. In *The Crime of Conscription*, a booklet published in 1939, he denounced all modern wars and the clergy of almost all denominations for encouraging conscription. A biographical sketch on his

his name – unlike his detractors – denied emphatically that the Guild was in any way associated with such movements as the N-C.F. or the U.D.C. He asserted that, although he did not agree with the C.O.’s principles, he had nothing but intense admiration for those C.O.s who were suffering for their conscience.<sup>109</sup> His response in turn drew a reply from another correspondent, calling himself “Conscientious Fighter”. He castigated C.O.s with bitter vehemence and, alluding to Watkin’s letter, said that if a man should “conscientiously object to a duty binding in conscience,” then he must be guided by a perverted conscience. Far from being admired, he was to be pitied. He felt sure that in the majority of cases, conscientious objection was merely a euphemism for selfishness and cowardice.<sup>110</sup>

The debate persisted when, in the following week, Watkin replied to “Conscientious Fighter” in four key points. Firstly, just as “Conscientious Fighter” was obeying his conscience to fight, he must leave the C.O. the liberty of objecting because his conscience so willed. Secondly, Catholic theology permitted everyone to follow their conscience, “and when this involves the endurance of suffering [they are] entitled to our admiration.” Thirdly, the persecution of C.O.s proved that they were not selfish, because going to jail and facing numerous hardships was no easier than being a soldier. Fourthly, regarding the sacredness of Britain’s cause, a “fighter” had no right to impose his views on a C.O. Watkin concluded his letter by reaffirming his admiration for C.O.s whether their conscience was right or wrong.<sup>111</sup>

---

thoughts and works is provided in M. Hoehn (ed.), *Catholic Authors*, (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981), pp. 775-777.

<sup>109</sup> *The Universe*, 5 May 1916, p. 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 May 1916, p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 19 May 1916, p. 4.

Such a stout defence of the C.O.'s position by a Catholic was sure to draw a response, and sure enough, another letter appeared in the next issue refuting Watkin's view. The unnamed respondent conceded that Watkin might admire a C.O., but could on no condition admire a Catholic C.O. For "The status of the C[atholic] C.O., from points of view both moral and logical, is an impossible one." The argument ran that if a Catholic C.O. considered it immoral to fight in defence of King and country, then it must be immoral for thousands of other Catholic soldiers. The letter stated that nobody knew better than a Catholic did what conscience really was. Hence, a Catholic could not be a C.O.<sup>112</sup> This line of argument was unacceptable to Watkin who countered that a Catholic may be a C.O. on several grounds: firstly, through conviction that the current war was unjust; and secondly, through conviction that all modern wars were unjust, since they involved more harm than good. To support his assertion, he cited the Pope's words, "The war has cost too much."<sup>113</sup> The exchange between Watkin and the other correspondents, however, demonstrates that the differences between Catholic pacifists and non-pacifists on the matter of liberty of conscience were immense. In the Catholic sense, pacifists believed that ultimately, they had to follow their conscience, which was guided partly by the Pope's utterances. But while Catholic pacifists constantly alluded to the Pope's attitude to the war to support their stance, Catholic conscriptionists avoided all reference to Benedict's position. It was as if the Pope had not made any utterance concerning the war.

This is not to say that all non-pacifist Catholics abhorred their fellow Catholic C.O.s. Morison's letters from prison indicate that there were some, chiefly among the

---

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 26 May 1916, p. 4.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 9 June, 1916, p. 4.

Jesuit Fathers, who harboured some sympathy for the conscientious objector. In October 1917, for example, Morison sent a letter to the Jesuit Fr. Herbert Thurston from the work center in Wakefield prison. He told Thurston that he would have liked to have made contact with the Jesuit Fathers who provided Catholic masses in the prison chapel. As he explained, he knew none of them “and my ‘conscientious objections’ make me very nervous of first meetings even of S.J.’s – they may be – well – Bernard Vaughans.”<sup>114</sup> Thurston immediately wrote to a number of his fellow Jesuit Fathers, telling them about Morison and urging friendly contact with him. A few days later, Morison sent another letter to Thurston in which he expressed appreciation for Thurston’s writing to his Jesuit brothers and for introducing him to them.<sup>115</sup> It appears that at the very least, Morison was put in contact with those Jesuits visiting the prison.

The majority of Catholics in Britain objected to the introduction of conscription before it was introduced in 1916. Once it was implemented, however, the Catholic hierarchy fought with vigour in order to gain exemption for the clergy and for seminarians who were in their final years of study. All this might lead one to think that the Catholic hierarchy would not have been harsh on those Catholics who maintained a steadfast opposition to conscription. But the hierarchy’s decision to endorse compulsory military service and appear as “patriotic” as possible not only silenced the bishops as a body, but led them to denounce those Catholics who opposed conscription. By this action, they may have left themselves open to the charge of hypocrisy. To his credit, Bourne was not so inconsistent as, on the one hand, to have negotiated secretly the

---

<sup>114</sup> Morison to Thurston, 2 Oct. 1917, 39/3/4/8, Thurston Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Morison to Thurston, 6 Oct. 1917, 39/3/4/8, Thurston Papers.

exemption of as many seminarians as he could, whilst, on the other, to have endorsed conscription and condemned the anti-conscriptionists. But once conscription had been carried through parliament, most Catholics condemned those who rejected it and opposed the war. The Catholic body formed a phalanx of opposition to pacifists and conscientious objectors. The steadfastness of this opposition was truly remarkable. For since Roman Catholic teaching allowed a theology distinguishing just and unjust war, then obviously there could be unjust wars. Thus, implicitly, it was a matter of religious judgement, and the loyal Catholic was free to decide on the strength of the issues whether a war was just or unjust. This, in turn, implied that there could be sincere Catholic conscientious objectors. But sadly, the majority of Catholics favouring the war simply insisted that the current war was just and even made the startling accusation that the Catholic C.O.'s conscience was erroneous or misinformed or even perverted. Consequently, those few Catholics who dared defy the "patriotic" outlook of their co-religionists had to contend with an onslaught of Catholic criticism.