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The Nonconformist Conscience

WHAT was the Nonconformist Conscience? The term itself was coined during the controversy which centred round the Irish leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, when he was cited as co-respondent in a divorce case in 1890. Although the term seems to have been used first by a Wesleyan Methodist minister (writing in the correspondence columns of *The Times*)¹ it became one of derision in the hands of opponents of Nonconformity and Free Churchmen do not appear to have been certain at first that they wanted to adopt it. Later, of course, they claimed it with pride. Does it evoke the same response in us today? Those who take it for granted that the Free Churches used to set the nation's moral standards and were a strong, effective force for righteousness in public life will be surprised that the question is even asked. For them the only question is how we can recover the lost vision and influence which our fathers exerted.

But what was the Conscience? Have we been inclined to look at it through rose-coloured spectacles. Was it an "insistence upon the authority of moral principle in all matters of public policy"² or was it the voice of a censorious, pharisaical morality, a corporate Mrs. Grundy? In a recent and most stimulating essay, Dr. J. H. S. Kent asks even more radical questions as to the real nature of the Conscience. Beneath the surface was it not chiefly a way of fighting for social objectives, "a form of social aggression rather than of outraged morality"? In Kent's judgment the Nonconformity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was beset with inward contradictions; he sees it engaged in an attempt to impose its own standards on the rest of British society and explains this as a reaction to the fact that though it was strong and self-confident it nevertheless felt itself to be socially rejected.³

Part of the problem before us lies in the fact that no very clear or precise definition attaches to the term "Nonconformist Conscience". It is commonly employed in reference to Nonconformist attitudes and activities during a period of about seventy-five years from c. 1835 in which they came to exercise a good deal of influence on the country as a whole. For our present purpose it is convenient to accept this restricted usage and it is the more important therefore to observe that as it stands it is a term of general reference which could only be properly expounded in relation to the whole of Nonconformist history. The late Victorian era may have invented the term but it did not create the Conscience. Professor A. H. Dodd's essay on "The Nonconformist Conscience in

Public Life" is, in fact, largely devoted to the seventeenth century.⁴ A similar problem of delimitation arises in regard to the areas of thought and action to be considered. We can feel some sympathy with Henry Allon, the Congregationalist, who disliked the identification of the Conscience with political viewpoints.⁵ Certainly the conscience of Nonconformity has operated significantly (for its own history and the nation's) in matters of theology, worship and mission, as well as in the political and social issues to which discussion is often confined.

The term can also be misleading in its tendency to suggest an over-simplification. Nonconformity is not a monolithic structure. Like Anglicanism, which wisely makes a virtue of its "comprehensiveness", it embraces a considerable variety of emphases. We may speak of its characteristic features but we must not suppose that there was one well-regimented mind among the Free Churches. Subject to such changes as the Ecumenical Movement may accomplish, they have been and still are distinct bodies, each with its own tradition and ethos. Dr. Kent, though sometimes acknowledging that Hugh Price Hughes and the Wesleyan Methodists were not necessarily typical Free Churchmen, tends nevertheless to draw general conclusions from them and this can be misleading. His essay, in fact, demonstrates that much more similar critical work will have to be done before we get the Conscience into true perspective. The present discussion may serve to indicate something of the complexity and variety that belong to this subject and to bring to notice some further evidence bearing upon it. In particular, reference will be made to the minutes of the General Body of the Three Denominations, certain volumes of which have only recently been traced. The General Body is the ministerial counterpart of the lay Dissenting Deputies. Its minutes are useful for our present purpose because, long before the founding of the National Free Church Council in 1892 and the Federal Council of Evangelical Free Churches in 1919, it served as a meeting place and a sounding board for London ministers of the Baptist, Congregationalist and Presbyterian denominations.⁶

An incident which illustrates the emerging influence of Nonconformity as a political force in the nineteenth century took place in Manchester in 1841. In response to the call of Richard Cobden, the Radical, there came together a conference of 645 ministers, nearly all of them Nonconformists, and the subject which enlisted their enthusiasm was the repeal of the Corn Laws. It is probable that other hopes helped to stimulate their zeal for this Free Trade policy (e.g. they believed that they could thereby strike a blow at American slavery)⁷ but we need not pursue that question here. The incident is mentioned because it demonstrates that many Nonconformists had now abandoned that political quietism which had been a characteristic feature of Dissent only twenty years earlier. One

could cite exceptions such as Robert Hall, W. Winterbotham, Benjamin Flower, but the common run of Dissenters in the first two decades of the nineteenth century did not see themselves as having any part in the shaping of national or civic affairs and they looked askance at "disaffection to government". From the 1820s however many began to abandon this passive, quietist viewpoint and the Manchester meeting in 1841 demonstrated that a revolutionary change of attitude towards politics had taken place in one generation.

Three things were mainly responsible for this change. (i) In their considerable service towards the ending of slavery in the British colonies Dissenters had learned that there was a political battle to be fought if the slaves were to be emancipated. Sympathy was not enough. (ii) The repeal (in 1828) of the Test and Corporation Acts, though it still left genuine grievances to be dealt with, removed the legal barriers to public office and seems to have acted as a psychological stimulus to Dissenters. It is true that the Test and Corporation Acts had not been rigorously enforced but their long-continued presence on the Statute Book had imparted the various harmful effects of second-class citizenship. (iii) The Reform Act of 1832, enfranchising as it did a great new section of the population, especially of the middle-class, brought the vote to many Dissenters. No less significant for their future was the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. Hitherto the close corporations of towns and cities had meant "government by a ring of local gentry"⁸ into which no Dissenter or Radical could penetrate. Now 2,000,000 ratepayers got a stake in local affairs and there were those who thought it would mean "government by dissenters".⁹ That was exaggeration but it reflected the fact that the Nonconformists were growing in strength and influence in the community.

Of the different spheres in which the Nonconformist Conscience expressed itself in this period, a rough division may be made as follows: (a) the redress of grievances, (b) concern for the well-being of others, (c) political events and policies. These are not perfectly clear-cut and inevitably tend to overlap at certain points.

(a) *The redress of grievances.* Of these there were five main ones.

(i) For a marriage service Nonconformists were compelled to go to an Anglican priest and to be married by the rite of the Book of Common Prayer. (ii) Unless baptized by a parish priest Dissenters were likely to be left without legal proof of age. (iii) They did not have the right of burial in the parish churchyard (often the only one) according to their own forms. (iv) They were obliged to pay the Church rate and other dues to the Church of England. (v) They were excluded from the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Durham. The first two of these grievances were dealt with in 1836 and 1837 in legislation introduced by Lord John Russell; the third, after prolonged struggles, in the Burial Law Amendment Act of

1880. Admission to the older universities and to full rights within them was won in slow stages, but after the passing of the Universities Tests Act in 1871 Dissenters were only debarred from degrees and chairs in Divinity. As to the compulsory Church rate "no accompaniment of Establishment, not even tithe, was more bitterly and vigorously opposed" says W. G. Addison.¹⁰ In spite of the vehemence of the opposition the rate was not abolished until 1868.

The conflict with Anglicanism was also known in other areas, chief of which was that of primary education. One main reason why Nonconformists, in the first half of the nineteenth century, resisted measures which would have involved the state directly in primary education was the conviction that if the state entered that field, the Church of England would, as though by right, claim a dominant role in whatever plans were made. It was for this reason that Nonconformists opposed Sir James Graham's bill of 1843.¹¹ This provided for a modicum of education for factory children but the "factory schools" which it proposed were to teach religion under close Anglican management.

There is no doubt that the conflict between Anglicanism and Nonconformity on this whole issue retarded educational progress in this country. It is sobering to reflect on the cost to non-combatants when opposing consciences become embattled. The non-combatants in this instance were generations of deprived children. This is not to disparage the positive contribution to education which the Churches made in this period, much of which still remains to be explored. The Free Churches made great efforts in their conviction that education could and must be provided under "the Voluntary Principle". It is all the more regrettable that the conflict with Anglicanism slowed down their recognition of the fact that the educational challenge of the nineteenth century was too big to be met on this basis. The state had to come in.

In 1902, long after the state had assumed its educational responsibilities, there was a severe struggle over the bill introduced by Balfour's government. The voluntary schools were now in financial difficulty and, *inter alia*, the bill provided a measure of aid for them. The Free Churches objected that the bill proposed this assistance from public funds without real public control.¹² This seemed to be a revival of the old claim to privileged treatment and so gravely were Nonconformists affronted by it that some entered upon a Passive Resistance Movement, withholding the relevant portion of the rates. Some suffered imprisonment, many suffered distraint of goods. The Passive Resistance method was not new, as some seem to think; it had certainly been used by individuals in the Church rates struggle. Nevertheless its use in 1902 did not by any means command general consent and it has evoked some criticism since. It needs to be remembered, however, that the protest and the struggle of which it was but one aspect were led and supported by

men of the highest mental and spiritual calibre, including such as John Clifford, P. T. Forsyth, R. F. Horton, A. M. Fairbairn, Rendal Harris, A. S. Peake, J. H. Shakespeare, Sylvester Horne.¹³

Struggles such as those mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs were hardly calculated to improve Church relationships. They heightened Nonconformist antipathy to the establishment of the Church of England and a society was formed (the British Anti-State Church Association, 1844, later the Liberation Society, 1854) which had disestablishment as its main aim. "Whole areas of the Victorian panorama will remain obscure unless it is recognized that to men like Miall and Dale—and their followers were numerous and generous and energetic—the union of Church and State was a superstition, a blasphemy, and an offence against God and man."¹⁴ Disestablishment is a theme which occurs frequently in the minutes of the General Body, and the same minutes also reveal the disquiet within the Free Churches over the "Romeward" trends manifested in certain sections of the state Church.

The struggles of the nineteenth century did not leave the participants unscarred. There were Nonconformists who became infected by what Matthew Arnold called "a spirit of watchful jealousy" and, as Canon Charles Smyth once observed, "the clergy of the Establishment were sometimes capable of a degree of pettiness and bigotry which today is almost inconceivable." All things considered it is a remarkable fact of Church history that the Ecumenical Movement came on the heels of a period marked by so much mutual tension and suspicion.

(b) *Concern for the well-being of others.* There is a variety of evidence to prove that Nonconformists in the nineteenth century were far from being absorbed with the redress of their own grievances. One area of public service in which they became active was that of local government, this development being made possible by the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. That reform paved the way for what Lovell Cocks regards as one of the finest chapters in the history of the Nonconformist Conscience. He reckons that in what he calls the second phase of "Political Nonconformity" (from the Reform Bill of 1867 to the disruption of the Liberal Party in 1886) the greatest exploits of Nonconformity were in the sphere of municipal government. He illustrates this from the change that came over Birmingham as new men came to the Town Council and began to think of civic welfare, public health, amenities for leisure, education and culture. "Not every town could boast a Chamberlain and a Dale, but what they did for Birmingham was being done by other nonconformist mayors, councillors and ministers throughout England."¹⁵ Without claiming any monopoly for the service of Nonconformists in this sphere it can be said that once they gained an entry they used it with a sense of social responsibility often conspicuous by its absence in the days of the old close corporations.

Their record in direct care for a vast range of human needs has also been revealed through the researches of K. Heasman.¹⁶ She estimates that three-quarters of the voluntary charitable organisations in the second half of the nineteenth century were evangelical in character and control, and "evangelical" in her discussion very often means Nonconformist. They ranged over the numerous and varied needs of the time such as poverty, education, the orphan, the teenager and the aged, the prostitute and the criminal, the afflicted in body and mind, the armed forces. In certain directions they broke entirely new ground, in others they filled gaps in existing services. Sometimes they were responsible for the introduction of entirely new methods, as in the case of handicapped children. The enlightened quality of their work frequently matched its range and diversity and Heasman finds that they were largely instrumental in the evolution of principles and concrete forms of social work which are followed today.

In common with others, the Free Church missionary societies were taking various forms of aid, in addition to evangelism, to peoples overseas. It is perhaps needless to illustrate either this or the readiness of Free Churchmen to take up the cudgels wherever people were persecuted on religious grounds; for those who seek it there is ample evidence in the minutes of the General Body. The same minutes also reveal considerable vigilance on behalf of native peoples oppressed or exploited for other reasons. The Body denounced the iniquitous export of opium from India to China which created innumerable addicts of the drug. The Indian government was involved and therefore by implication, the British nation shared responsibility for a traffic which, it was held, was injurious to the best interests of the Chinese people and contrary to the principles of international morality. The Body demanded an end to "government patronage of this curse" but it was only in 1913 that the opium trade was suspended.¹⁷ Other matters on which it protested were atrocities in the Congo, Chinese labour in South Africa, slavery in Zanzibar.¹⁸ Coming nearer home, it vehemently opposed "the futile, mischievous and discredited policy of coercion in Ireland" and spoke of the dishonour and shame of adopting "a measure which reproduced some of the worst features of by-gone acts of repression and strikes a blow at the liberty of a whole people."¹⁹

Some would regard as much more debatable the policies which Nonconformists often followed in regard to such matters as Sunday observance, drink and gambling. Kent, for example, is indignant about the attitude of Hugh Price Hughes to gambling, and Hughes was not exceptional. In Kent's eyes the particular point of offence is that Hughes wanted gambling curbed by legal measures. "The demand for legislation seems much more important than its proposed content; it implied an anxiety to get control of the sources of power in late Victorian society and use them in order to compel

everybody to behave as loyal nonconformists were expected to behave."²⁰ The same charge, if valid, would apply to much of Nonconformist activity in regard to the Drink Trade. The members of the General Body returned to this again and again, seeking or giving their approval to restrictive legislation.

It would of course be foolish to insist that Nonconformists were never affected by the kind of motivation which Kent has described and which he sums up in the charge of "social aggression". The taste of power can corrupt the judgment of Christians and tempt them to impose their faith and their standards upon others. What we must question is Kent's readiness to see "social aggression" as the master key to these demands by Nonconformists for legislation on social issues. If we are to enquire as to their motivation must we not also take some account of the seriousness of the social problems which, wisely or not, they sought to mitigate by legislation? G. Kitson Clark has shown how essential this is for a fair assessment of the Temperance movement of the nineteenth century. He is well aware that some of its adherents were "arrogant and intolerant, and heavy with self-righteousness". But to understand them "it is necessary to try and see clearly the world in which they lived and the way in which they saw it." His own view is that the significance of the effect of strong drink in society has been strangely underrated by historians. "Its importance," he says, "stands out from every page of the contemporary record." After providing the evidence for this statement he cites Samuel Morley's view that "the Temperance cause lay at the root of all social and political progress in this country"; and Clark's comment is that Morley's opinion "though excessive was not in fact absurd".²¹

On the matter of legislation in such spheres it is of course true that this involves some degree of interference with the liberty of the subject. Any particular Nonconformist demand for legislation may have been ill-judged in general or mistaken in detail. But that such demands must have been wrong *in principle* is a dubious assertion. The state has a protective duty to perform; it has to safeguard the community at vulnerable points. In so doing it is sometimes obliged to use restrictive measures because vested interests rarely have scruples about exploiting human weakness. The Free Churches for their part have claimed as part of their positive relation to the state "the right and duty of counsel",²² a function which at times must lead to pressure on legislators. Granted the ever-present possibility of mixed or unworthy motivations (such as "social aggression") an objective judgement would surely allow that genuine, disinterested concern has also played its part, and not infrequently been vindicated.

It would seem therefore that the charge of "social aggression" will need to be made with considerable care; it may prove easier to substantiate in the case of particular individuals than in regard to

the Nonconformist Conscience generally. Less hesitation may be felt, however, in asserting that in some areas of reform Nonconformity did not give the wholehearted support which was needed.

Perhaps the outstanding example is that of legislation for the reform of working conditions. On this subject the minutes of the General Body are virtually silent.²³ In the famous strike of 1889 the dockers received help and sympathy from several Christian organizations and individuals, notably Cardinal Manning. Free Churchmen were not entirely absent and men like Carlile of Bermondsey and Cuff of Shoreditch were among those who launched relief funds and tackled dock owners on behalf of the men. But Hugh Price Hughes and John Clifford both felt that the help of the Free Churches had been too little and too late.²⁴ Another strike, this time in South Wales, led to the Taff Vale case in 1901; the courts found the trade union (the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants) legally responsible for the action of its members and ordered it to pay £23,000 compensation to the Taff Vale Railway Company. This verdict seriously weakened the strike weapon and was regarded by the Trade Unions as a major set-back. Individual Welsh ministers may have protested but Welsh Nonconformity as a whole took no action. The minutes of the General Body are silent on the subject. Did its significance not register upon the London ministers or were their sympathies not engaged? And if the latter, must we not assume that their middle-class affiliations and interests had much to do with their inability to respond to the aspirations of the working-class?

Lovell Cocks has expounded the view that nineteenth century Nonconformity became the Established Church of the middle classes, and that Victorian Free Churchmen were well aware of the predominantly middle-class character of their churches.²⁵ What they do not seem to have seen is that this close identification with a particular class could impose on them a bondage no less serious and rather more parochial than that brought about in the Established Church by its ties with the state. More fully than they realized their outlook and their ethic had become conditioned by the interests, economic and otherwise, of a section of society.²⁶

It is by some such means that we have to account for the fact that there were sectors of reform, especially those relating to industry and the working class, in which Nonconformity did not play a full and worthy part. It is important to ensure that this judgment is properly qualified. The Free Churches in general and Methodism in particular, have provided a number of Trade Union leaders on the local and the national level. We have seen that in social and civic service in the great towns and cities Nonconformists often gave the lead. Again, the standards set by people like William Allen and the Cadburys in what we may call "employership" were second to none.

Nevertheless, although through their philanthropic work Nonconformists gained a close first-hand acquaintance with human need and through their propaganda played an important part in *drawing attention* to social problems, they were not always to the fore in the necessary legislation. It was to a minority among them, as it was among Anglicans, that the ideas and experiments of Christian Socialism made any appeal and of course F. D. Maurice's suspect orthodoxy would not encourage the theologically conservative to look closer.²⁷ The blind spots of nineteenth century Nonconformists were real. They worked hard and gave sacrificially to succour the needy but they did not always detect that the cry of need was also a cry for social justice which could only be answered by legislation and by modifications of the social order.

(c) *Political events and policies.* Attention must now be devoted to certain matters of public and national importance regarding which the Nonconformist Conscience has come under criticism.

Few subjects thrust themselves into the politics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries more persistently than that of Ireland. Many Free Churchmen²⁸ were supporters of Gladstone's Home Rule policy and it need not be assumed that in this matter they were just following a political party line. Like the Congregationalists, the Baptists supported an Irish Society (formed in 1814) and, especially during the first half of the century when its activities were greatest, the reports of the society had brought to the constituency in England vivid, first-hand information about life and conditions in Ireland. With this growing knowledge there developed a genuine understanding and sympathy for Ireland at a time when ignorance about it was widespread in England. Points such as this must not be overlooked in explaining the degree of Nonconformist support for Home Rule because there were factors which might have driven them into the opposite camp: their strong Protestant sympathies might have done this if they had listened to the slogan which was used in N. Ireland, "Home Rule means Rome Rule".²⁹

From his study of the outcry which arose over the Parnell affair, Kent comes to the conclusion that the Methodist Hugh Price Hughes "obviously set the punishment of Parnell's private immorality above the doing of justice to the Irish people".³⁰ This charge is not levelled against Hughes alone for Kent includes with him "the other leading Nonconformist ministers in London" and his comment is that "From an ethical point of view, the affair showed evangelical pietism at its worst."³¹ But Kent, rather curiously, then switches the direction of his attack, committing himself to the remarkable assertion that "Parnell did not really fall a victim to British puritanism: he fell on the cleaner field of British politics."³² His suggestion is that "the real, if concealed issue in the Parnell case was political power". Nonconformists sought the fall of Parnell in order to remove "yet another obstacle in the way of bringing

about the absolute ascendancy of the nonconformists in the Liberal Party itself".³³

This amounts to a charge of ruthless political gamesmanship. If we challenge it, it needs to be said immediately that we are not questioning for a moment Nonconformity's deep involvement at this period with the Liberal party, nor the fact that such a high degree of involvement (with any party) always brings risk to the free, critical working of the Christian conscience. Dr. E. A. Payne's broad judgement is that "though Nonconformity was closely linked with the Liberal Party... it cannot truthfully be contended that it ever surrendered its independence."³⁴ But he would not contend, nor is it here contended, that no Nonconformist ever fell into that trap. The difficulty with Kent's hypothesis, as cited above, is quite simply that he produces no evidence for it. Nor will he find it easy to discover any. Such unwarranted assertions detract from his otherwise extremely valuable essay.

What then of the other aspect of the charge, that in their demand for Parnell's resignation, Nonconformists were indifferent to the possibility that this might imperil the Home Rule cause? The General Body, which was more representative of Nonconformist ministers in London than was Hughes, approved Gladstone's action in relation to the removal of Parnell but then went on to express the earnest hope that his efforts for Home Rule might be "soon and completely successful".³⁵ It certainly did not set "the punishment of Parnell's private immorality above the doing of justice to the Irish people". Indeed the very opposite attitude was, in fact, reflected in the letter with which J. J. Colman, the Nonconformist manufacturer and a leading Liberal, sought to put Gladstone in the picture concerning the state of Nonconformist opinion. "They will say, 'We will not trust the Irish nation to Mr. Parnell.'" ³⁶ Joseph Parker probably summed up the view of most Nonconformists when he said: "Every argument for Home rule is just as strong as ever; but the better the cause, the cleaner should be the hands that handle it."³⁷

On the matter of Parnell's resignation generally it is important to remember that the Nonconformists did not, as Kent asserts, act alone. Their attitude was representative of much public opinion. The termination of Dilke's promising political career four years earlier showed the price to be paid in Victorian England for being cited as a co-respondent in a divorce case. Parnell must have been aware of this and it is a fact that immediately the result of the O'Shea case was known many voices, besides those of Free Churchmen, insisted that there was only one course open to him. Perhaps the very first Liberal demand for his resignation was that which came on 18 November 1890 from E. T. Cook of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. In his editorial entitled "What Mr. Parnell should do" he stated, "It is Mr. Parnell's clear duty to send in his resignation

to his constituents." The left-wing Irish leader, Michael Davitt, made the same demand two days later, and in *The Times* of 28 November he was reported as deploring the slow reaction of the Irish hierarchy: "... as a Catholic people we are jealous of the moral reputation of our race; we should have been before the Nonconformists in expressing our condemnation." But few Nonconformists were quicker to react than Cardinal Manning who wrote two letters on the subject to Gladstone in the first week.³⁸

Nowhere, however, was the prevailing climate of opinion more clearly expressed than in the editorial of *The Times* on 18 November. The offence of which Parnell had been convicted was regarded, "in this country at least and in these times", as "incapacitating" a man for political leadership. "The popular standard of morality may not be too exalted, but even the least prudish draw the line for public men above the level of a scandalous exposure such as this... This is not a case in which it can be objected that questions of private character are unnecessarily and unfairly dragged into public controversy." Ten days later, willing enough no doubt to embarrass "the Gladstonians", *The Times* editorial returned to the attack with a reference to the Governor of Madras who had recently had "to pay the penalty for gross private immorality". He had "at least recognized the conditions upon which men are allowed to hold high office... by resigning".

In the light of this evidence Kent's suggestions as to the unworthy motivations of Nonconformity in this matter seems to be as unnecessary as they are difficult to substantiate. The Nonconformist approach can be explained as typical of much in the contemporary climate of opinion. This indeed is a point at which Kent might have explored the suggestion made on the opening page of his essay, that in some situations there was nothing very distinctive about the Nonconformist Conscience, "that nonconformists simply shared the conscience of other people." One can sympathize with his reactions against certain of the violent expressions used by Hugh Price Hughes at this juncture and yet feel that they have given him a distorted view of the Conscience. Other leading Free Churchmen were able to express themselves quite soberly on the matter of Parnell's position. But it still needs to be recognized that, rightly or wrongly, many others said what they were saying and that perhaps the only distinctive thing about the Nonconformist voice on this occasion was the influence it had with Gladstone. As to the outcome of the Parnell affair, there is much truth in the view that it was Parnell himself who, by his refusal to resign, wrecked his own cause when, in the whole context of the situation, "commonsense and moderation obviously demanded his resignation".³⁹

Kent's hypothesis that the achievement or retention of political power had come for Nonconformity to matter more than a concern for moral judgment⁴⁰ is again pursued in his discussion of Hugh

Price Hughes' attitude to the Boer War. Once more he takes his cue from Wesleyan Methodism in a way that suggests that it (or those representatives of it whom he cites), was much more representative of Nonconformity than in fact it was. He convincingly demonstrates the *volte face* in which Hughes himself engaged in regard to the Boer War. From being a vehement anti-militarist Hughes became an ardent champion of the British army; in his journalistic outpourings he now contributed to the jingoism which once he had deplored and condemned. But all this evidence of Hughes' decline does not in itself reveal Nonconformity making an unscrupulous bid for political power. For the latter, Kent's argument seems largely to hinge on his statement concerning three Wesleyan Methodist members of Parliament. Sir Henry Fowler, Sir William McArthur, and R. W. Perks, "remained Liberal Imperialists partly because they saw in the Imperial idea a solution to the problem of working-class discontent and incipient socialism, and partly because they were convinced that the Liberal Party could not win an election on a 'little England' basis".⁴¹ Kent then proceeds to make the motivation of these three Wesleyan Methodist laymen a key to the Nonconformist Conscience in general. "... these political considerations prevailed over any hesitations caused by the nagging of the Conscience, and the South African War, which ought to have been prevented at almost any cost . . . was warmly welcomed in most non-conformist quarters".⁴²

The assertion that the war "was warmly welcomed in most non-conformist quarters" needs modification. It is certainly true that after the war had broken out many Nonconformists got taken up with the tide of patriotic, or perhaps we should say nationalist, fervour. This does not prove, however, that they originally welcomed the war. The committee of the General Body on 21 September 1899 urged the government "to continue to exert the utmost efforts to secure a peaceful settlement of the Transvaal Question". If such efforts were not successful then the committee urged that "instead of having recourse to arms, the disputed points might be referred to arbitration, in harmony with the recommendations of the recent Peace Conference at The Hague". This, on the very threshold of the war, hardly suggests enthusiasm for it. Six months later in March 1900, the resolution was carried "That we deplore the conflict in South Africa, and earnestly pray that it may come to a speedy termination".⁴³

If, however, we reject the statement that the war was "warmly welcomed in most nonconformist quarters" there is no doubt that once it began many Nonconformists went with the tide of public opinion. They included men such as William Robertson Nicholl, editor of the *British Weekly*, and Joseph Parker, and though it is interesting to note that the latter stated that there were many ministers who took the opposite view, he did so in rebuking people who

treated them badly. The differences of view divided families, friends, colleagues and congregations. C. Sylvester Horne, steadfast in his condemnation of the war, felt these strained relationships keenly though in his case, his church remained entirely loyal. His biographer comments that "as time went on it became clear that there was far more sympathy with his position in Nonconformist circles than appeared on the surface."⁴⁴ Against that one may set Horne's concern about what he called "the flabbiness of the Nonconformist Conscience" in this situation,⁴⁵ and the highly critical attitude of W. T. Stead who deplored the lack of support among Nonconformist leaders for his Stop-the-War crusade.⁴⁶ R. Tudur Jones says of the Congregationalists that in general they were "miserably divided on the question of the rightness of the war"⁴⁷ and that description is probably appropriate to Nonconformity as a whole at this time. To say that there was an "overwhelming majority" in support of the war suggests that there was a consensus of opinion about it within Nonconformity. Tudur Jones believes rather that the war "marked a serious extension of the rift which had first appeared in English Nonconformity with the Irish Home Rule dispute in 1886".⁴⁸

The confusion within Nonconformity over this issue stands out the more sharply because throughout the nineteenth century, and earlier than that, there had been within the Free Churches persistent advocates of the necessity for arbitration to replace war as a means of settling disputes. The *Baptist Magazine*, amongst many references which could be cited, made room for a cordial review of an anti-war pamphlet,⁴⁹ for an account of the Society for Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace,⁵⁰ for a "Dialogue on War" between Pacificus and a neighbour in which there was strongly put the case for forming societies to end war.⁵¹ The demand for the use of arbitration rather than war recurs frequently in the minutes of the General Body.⁵² Looking at the later part of the nineteenth century Kitson Clark says that "many of those who had been involved in the Anti-Corn Law Agitation became involved in the Peace Society"⁵³ and here, doubtless we can speak, as Kent does, of the mingling of Evangelical Pietism and Cobdenite Radicalism. But it is important to note that in Nonconformity there was an anti-war tradition older than Cobden; indeed one could trace it back to radical religious groups of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and perhaps beyond them to the Lollard Conclusions of 1395.⁵⁴

It is of special interest to see this hatred of war in relation to the advance of imperialism as the nineteenth century proceeded. Here again the General Body provides useful evidence. For example, in 1879, the committee denounced, "the present aggressive war in Zululand" in the name of humanity, justice and religion. It was "a war lightly and wantonly declared, disastrously begun and now in danger of being prosecuted in a sanguinary spirit of revenge." The

government was urged to adopt prompt measures of conciliation, "a course the more imperatively binding on England from the magnanimity which should actuate the dealings of the strong with the weak."⁵⁵

It might well be argued that with this strand in its history Nonconformity ought to have been unequivocal in its denunciation of the Boer War but the fact remains that as the war progressed Free-churchmen became very divided about it. As to imperialism generally, even a man like John Clifford became to some extent caught up in the fervour of the age, as can be seen from his *God's Greater Britain* (1889). If it is necessary to question certain of Dr. Kent's suggestions as to the motives animating the Nonconformist Conscience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that does not mean that the Conscience was immune from infiltration by the spirit of the age. The evidence of history is not such that we should abandon our pride in the Nonconformist Conscience, nor such that we should think it invulnerable to criticism.

Dr. E. A. Payne has frequently urged that Church History has more than an academic interest; it can speak to the Church of today if we are wise enough to listen to it and to learn from it. This is certainly the case with the subject and the period here considered. Those who stand today in the tradition of evangelicalism might well consider the creative social concern of their predecessors and ask why it finds comparatively little reflection in their own activities. Those who are calling the Church to immerse itself in secular institutions and action may well reflect on the fact that Christians have done this before, with the highest intentions, and have not infrequently lost their way in the world. The Anglican Henry Scott Holland, deeply concerned to relate Christian principles to the social and economic problems of life, became convinced that the Christian involved in secular institutions must beware lest he finish by taking his colour from them, not giving his colour to them. R. W. Dale who well knew that the Church does not exist "merely for the consolation and salvation" of its individual members and who gave himself unstintingly to social and political reform, was convinced that the Church is and must remain "in its very essence a religious institution established for religious ends."⁵⁶ The story of the Nonconformist Conscience, at its best and its worst, is a reminder that the Church which is to be the Servant of the world must remain first and last the Servant of the Lord. Only under the Lordship of Christ can it retain its spiritual freedom and integrity in the service of men; and only there can its inner life, its vision and its conscience find the renewal which it perpetually needs.

NOTES

1. *The Times*, 28 November 1890. The letter is signed "A Wesleyan Minister". It seems therefore that we must discard as legend the idea that the term "Nonconformist Conscience" originated in quarters hostile to Nonconformity. (For a useful discussion of this point see J. F. Glaser, "Parnell's fall and the nonconformist conscience" in *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xii, No. 46 Sept. 1960.) Possibly the legend originated in the fact that *The Times* editorial, in the same issue, took rather unsympathetic note of the emergence of the term in its correspondence columns. It is interesting to speculate as to the identity of this "Wesleyan Minister". The style and general approach of the letter might suggest Hugh Price Hughes were there not evidence which seems to contradict this identification. See J. H. S. Kent, "Hugh Price Hughes and the Nonconformist Conscience" in *Essays in Modern English Church History in Memory of Norman Sykes*, London, 1966, p. 182, n. 2.
2. H. Lovell Cocks, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, London, 1943, p. 35.
3. Kent, *op. cit.*
4. *The Hibbert Journal*, vol. xxxvii, October 1937–July 1938.
5. *The Times*, 31 December 1890.
6. The minutes, hereinafter referred to as General Body Minutes, are lodged at Dr. Williams's Library, London. The General Body, which has been in existence since 1702 and which, incidentally, enjoys an ancient privilege of access to the Sovereign, has no legislative authority over its constituent denominations and no formal constitutional position in relation to them.
7. See K. R. M. Short, "English Baptists and the Corn Laws", *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. xxi, pp. 309 ff.
8. G. M. Trevelyan, *British History in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1948, p. 243.
9. See E. L. Woodward, *The Age of Reform, 1850–1870*, Oxford, 1958, p. 442.
10. W. G. Addison, *Religious Equality in Modern England*, London, 1944, p. 64.
11. See General Body Minutes, 24 March, 5 May, 10 May 1843.
12. *Ibid.*, 16 September 1902, 26 March 1903.
13. See E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity: A History of the Free Church Council Movement*, London, 1956, p. 80.
14. W. G. Addison, *op. cit.*, p. 92.
15. Lovell Cocks, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
16. K. Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action*, London, 1962.
17. General Body Minutes, 14 April 1891, 29 March 1898, 30 March 1908. Two of the most persistent parliamentary opponents of the opium trade were the Free Churchmen Joseph Pease and H. J. Wilson. See W. S. Fowler, *A Study in Radicalism and Dissent: The Life and Times of Henry Joseph Wilson 1853–1914*, London, 1961.
18. General Body Minutes, 25 March 1907, 3 January 1910, 28 March 1904, 16 April 1895.
19. *Ibid.*, 12 April 1887.
20. Kent, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
21. G. Kitson Clark, *The Making of Victorian England*, London, 1962, pp. 127 ff.
22. See E. A. Payne, *Free Churchmen, Unrepentant and Repentant*, London, 1965, p. 66.
23. In this connection see also R. G. Cowherd, *The Politics of English Dissent*, New York, 1965, ch. xi.
24. See M. R. Watts, *John Clifford and Radical Nonconformity 1836–1923*, unpublished D. Phil. thesis of Oxford University (1966), p. 231. I am also indebted to Dr. Watts for certain other references in this essay.

25. Lovell Cocks, *op. cit.*, ch. xi.
26. A. H. Dodd (*op. cit.*) maintained that the process by which the Non-conformist conscience became "very much the conscience of a class" was already apparent by the end of the eighteenth century though he went on to assert that when the nineteenth century brought it back into public life it showed, in some fields if not in all, a greatness transcending such limitations.
27. By the end of the century, however, Maurice's influence was gaining ground, notably among a number of Congregationalists. See J. W. Grant, *Free Churchmanship in England, 1870-1940*, London, n.d., p. 173.
28. It has to be remembered, however, that the Liberal Unionists who followed Chamberlain in opposing Gladstone on this included some Non-conformists. Among those who rejected the Home Rule policy were leading ministers such as R. W. Dale, C. H. Spurgeon, Newman Hall and Henry Allon.
29. J. F. Glaser states that support for Home Rule was given by the bulk of Nonconformists "despite protestant fears of a catholic-dominated Ireland and despite the necessity of sacrificing disestablishment and other cherished causes . . ." *op. cit.*, p. 120.
30. J. H. S. Kent, *op. cit.*, p. 193.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 192. This is not the only point at which Dr Kent seems to be less than just towards evangelical pietism. In an earlier part of his essay, he says that its "essential characteristic" was "to set up a barrier of prohibitions and customs . . . between the withdrawn religious group and society in general" (p. 185). That this was one of the traits of evangelical pietism is not in question but to suggest that this was its "essential characteristic" is unjust to the positive emphases of the evangelicals.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England*, London, rev. ed. 1965, p. 115.
35. General Body Minutes, 14 April 1891. In the following year the Body again affirmed its conviction of "the justice and necessity of Home Rule for Ireland" (28 June 1892).
36. Cited by J. F. Glaser, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
37. As reported in *The Times*, 19 November 1890.
38. Glaser, *op. cit.*, p. 125.
39. A. Wood, *Nineteenth Century Britain, 1815-1914*, London, 1960, pp. 351-2.
40. *Op. cit.*, p. 204.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 199 f.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 200.
43. General Body Minutes, Annual General Meeting, 27 March 1900.
44. W. B. Selbie, *The Life of Charles Sylvester Horne*, London, 1920, pp. 115-16.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
46. See M. Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 298.
47. R. Tudur Jones, *Congregationalism in England, 1662-1962*, London, 1962, p. 335.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
49. *Baptist Magazine*, 1816, p. 389.
50. *Ibid.*, 1817, p. 445.
51. *Ibid.*, 1818, p. 47.
52. General Body Minutes. See, e.g., 15 April 1890, 14 April 1896, 29 March 1898.
53. G. Kitson Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 198.
54. See Gee and Hardy, *Documents Illustrative of English Church History*,

London, 1896, p. 131, for item 10 of the Conclusions in which it was laid down "That manslaughter in war, or by pretended law of justice for a temporal cause, without spiritual revelation, is expressly contrary to the New Testament . . ."

55. General Body Minutes, 22 April 1879.

56. A. W. W. Dale, *The Life of R. W. Dale of Birmingham*, London, 1899, pp. 608, 648.

G. W. RUSLING

Dr. Fritz Blanke

We regret to have to inform our readers of the death of Dr. Fritz Blanke, Professor of Church History in the University of Zürich. Dr. Blanke, who was 67, taught in Zürich for nearly 40 years, having been appointed in 1929 when he was only 29. His great contribution to Free Church history was his deep and sympathetic interest in the Anabaptists. Amongst Church Historians on the continent of Europe, Professor Blanke led the research into the origins of Anabaptism in Switzerland and helped to free the whole Anabaptist movement from being condemned by the excesses of a small group at Münster. He showed how the Zürich Anabaptists moved on from their original allegiance to Zwingli along what they believed to be a Biblical path to the concepts of believers' baptism and the gathered church. Professor Blanke helped to get a memorial plaque erected to the Zürich Anabaptists and was always courageous in defending them, even to the extent of suggesting that the great Zürich hero Zwingli was not always right. Although Dr. Blanke did not write many books, his account of the origins of Zürich Anabaptism *Brüder in Christo* is a definitive work. As a man, Dr. Blanke, was deeply pious and wonderfully kind to all his students. In all he did he revealed a pastoral heart. He was overjoyed when his only son decided to enter the Christian ministry. After a long and painful illness he died as he had lived—bravely and in Christ.

W. M. S. W.