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Incarnating the Gospel: Socio-Political Activity in the Ministry of F.B. Meyer

Ian Randall

Frederick Brotherton Meyer (1847-1929) was a leading English Baptist minister, holiness teacher and evangelical social reformer whose unusual combination of ministries had a significant impact in his time. He was especially prominent in the period 1890-1914, an era which represented the heyday of the influence of the Free Churches in England.[1]

Meyer was one of several leading Free Church opinion-makers who occupied strategic positions, most as preachers in well-known London churches.[2] After three years of theological study at Regent's Park College in London, Meyer commenced ordained Baptist ministry in 1870, as assistant minister at Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool. From 1872-74 he was minister of Priory Street Baptist Church, York, where he was influenced by the American evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, who held an extended mission in York. He then had two ministries in Leicester before moving in 1888 to London, which was the scene of his ministry until retirement in 1920.

Many aspects of Meyer's work warrant attention. He was an effective pastor-evangelist, seeing significant church growth in his local ministries. His prolific writing meant that he had a widespread influence on the evangelical constituency. Within Baptist life he was noted for the way he connected with Free Church movements. He was the leading international speaker representing the holiness teaching of the Keswick Convention.[3]

This study concentrates on his socio-political activity, a dimension of

1 James Munson, *The Nonconformists: In Search of a Lost Culture* (London: SPCK, 1991), 2.

2 D.W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 7.

3 These and other aspects are dealt with in Ian M. Randall, *Spirituality and Social Change: The Contribution of F.B. Meyer (1847-1929)* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

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his work which has not been given the same attention as—for example—his contribution to Keswick spirituality.[4] Meyer is an example of someone who espoused an evangelical 'social gospel'.

It was F. B. Meyer's conviction that every local church should help not only to 'save souls'—a vision he had gained especially from D.L. Moody—but also to 'right social wrongs'.[5] His commitment to conversion and its implications led Meyer to search for ways in which the gospel could, as he expressed it in 1902, be 'incarnated again' in the community.[6]

His emphasis on social action emerged particularly during his period in Leicester. His first ministry in the city was at Victoria Road Church, but he found the ethos of the church too restrictive. The church manual reported in 1876 that the 'ordinary routine' of the church was continuing.[7] Meyer resigned in 1878 and although he was expecting to leave Leicester he was prevailed upon to stay and pioneer a new congregation, which became Melbourne Hall. An expansive social vision was expressed in Meyer's initiatives at Melbourne Hall in the 1880s. It then developed even further through the impact which Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road, London, under his leadership, had on the Lambeth district of London in the 1890s and beyond.

But Meyer was not content with local church activity. Through the temperance and 'social purity' movements, his horizons widened until he found himself compelled to confront, at national level, what he referred to as 'grave moral perils'. Meyer's values were those of the socially aware 'Nonconformist Conscience', with its attempt by Nonconformist (Free Church) leaders to apply moral principles to public life.[8]

From 1902 Meyer became more overtly political. He used the medium of the National Free Church Council for his wider socio-political endeavours, especially in the period up to 1914. Even after that date, Meyer was involved in issues of war and peace. In 1912, however, Meyer commented that it was a 'miserable business to be always protesting' and that 'one breath from God would alter in a moment the entire outlook'.[9] The spiritual vision, which was fundamental to every aspect of Meyer's career, meant that his socio-political aims were always subsidiary to his all-embracing goal of seeing individuals and communities transformed by faith in Christ.

4 The present article is a revised version of chapter 6 of *Spirituality and Social Change*.

5 *The Times*, 22 June, 1907, 12. For background, see Kathleen Heasman, *Evangelicals in Action: An Appraisal of their Social Work in the Victorian Era* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962).

6 *Free Church Year Book* (London: National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches [NCEFC], 1902), 94. From an address by Meyer on 'Twentieth Century Evangelism'.

7 *Victorian Road Church Manual* (Leicester: Victoria Road Church, 1876), 6.

8 *The British Weekly* [hereafter *BW*], 17 March 1904, 611. See Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience*, especially 11-17; D.W. Bebbington, 'The Baptist Conscience in the Nineteenth Century', *The Baptist Quarterly* [hereafter *BQ*], Vol. 34, No. 1 (1991), 13-24.

9 Letter from F.B. Meyer to James Mursell, 5 February 1912, quoted by W.Y. Fullerton in *F.B. Meyer: A Biography* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, [1929]), 115. Fullerton remains a valuable biography.

I Caring for 'the masses'

The foundation of Meyer's socio-political activity was his struggle to bridge the gulf between the church and the common people. His own background was upper-middle-class, and in part it was probably as a consequence of this background that he realised the gulf that had to be bridged. His attempt began in earnest at Melbourne Hall, Leicester, from 1881, when the building which had been built to house the growing congregation (which grew to 1,500) became operational.

It was not possible, Meyer argued, to reclaim working men to Christian experience if they were cared for by the church for only two or three hours on a Sunday. A coffee room was therefore opened each evening at Melbourne Hall, and other facilities were used extensively as classrooms or for temperance, social purity and evangelistic agencies.[10]

The concept of a partnership between organised evangelism and social service, with the local church as the hub of these activities, was a creative one. It was generally accepted in Free Church circles that the principles which Meyer developed in the early 1880s influenced the early Methodist Central Halls.[11] This is not to say that Melbourne Hall was among the first of the 'institutional' churches—those churches which operated with a variety of socially-orientated institutions. As early as 1859, John Clifford was talking about the Praed Street Baptist Church in London, where he was the minister, as existing to 'save souls and bodies' and increase 'social good'.[12]

Meyer's strategy at Melbourne Hall, similarly, was to offer virtually non-stop 'wholesome and spiritual fare', as he put it, as an alternative to 'inane and injurious entertainments'. Melbourne Hall organised eighty-three widely varied meetings each week.[13] Influenced as he had been by Moody, Meyer's major objective was conversions, but because he directed his attention specifically to work among the poor, it was a consistent development for him to broaden out from evangelism to social endeavour.[14] Caring for the masses flowed out of evangelistic and spiritual concerns. Meyer's gospel was a social as well as a spiritual one.

Meyer found, however, that social work could not be carried out solely within the church buildings. What became known as his 'prison-gate' ministry in Leicester began when he discovered that men coming out of Leicester prison tended to gravitate to the nearest pub, where they joined their old companions who often drew

10 *BW*, 26 April 1906, 47; F.B. Meyer, *The Bells of Is: Or Voices of Human Need and Sorrow* (London: Morgan & Scott, [1894]), 23-4; M.J. Street, *F B Meyer: His Life and Work* (London: S.W. Partridge, 1902), 53.

11 Fullerton in *The Life of Faith* [*LF]*, 7 February 1912, 141; Fullerton, *Meyer*, 54-5.

12 David Thompson, 'John Clifford's Social Gospel', *BQ* , Vol. 31, No. 5 (1986), 202-3. For Clifford's ministry see E.H. Bonsall, *The Dream of an Ideal City: Westbourne Park, 1877-1977* (London: Westbourne Park Baptist Church, 1978).

13 Fullerton, *Meyer*, 54; *Worship and Work*, October 1885, 2. This was a Melbourne Hall church magazine.

14 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 24, 26. For this continued in Meyer's London ministry see D.J. Tidball, 'Evangelical Nonconformist Home Missions 1796-1901', University of Keele PhD (1981), 168, 309.

them straight back into crime. Meyer decided to do something. With the co-operation of the governor, he visited the prison each morning, taking discharged prisoners to a coffee house for a plate of ham. He estimated that he had provided breakfasts for between 4,500 and 5,000 men and women by the time he left Leicester in 1888.

Having contacted the ex-prisoners, Meyer's next objective was to find them employment, and when he found manufacturers reluctant to help, he launched out in business as 'F.B. Meyer, Firewood Merchant'. In 1885 he was employing twenty men who were producing and selling 25,000 bundles of firewood each week. He also provided them with accommodation.

Another rehabilitation venture was a window cleaning 'Brigade'. Meyer was at pains to stress—in the face of criticism—that his entrepreneurial efforts were subordinate to his aim of producing devotion to Christ. He set up accommodation and a workshop, with a manager, in premises which he named 'Providence House'. Although the immediate neighbours did not see a settlement of criminals as providential, Meyer persevered, and the project flourished. A minority of men, Meyer admitted, 'turned out very badly', but he claimed that many were converted and the prison population was reduced.[15] Social improvement was undergirded by spiritual change.

Drawing on his Leicester experiences, Meyer constructed the framework for Christ Church, which, as a Christian centre serving a needy neighbourhood, was reckoned by H.G. Turner, Meyer's secretary, to be 'probably the biggest thing of the kind in London'.[16] This was arguably not an exaggeration. Meyer's focus was on the working classes, and by 1905 a *British Weekly* correspondent could remark on the large proportion of working men at a Christ Church evening service.

Most of them were probably initially attracted to Meyer's Sunday afternoon Brotherhood, which he started in 1893 and saw grow to 800 men. He picked up ideas from a Brotherhood meeting at George Street Chapel in Liverpool. Pleasant Sunday Afternoon (PSA) meetings for men, which began in 1875, were, by 1890, as large as 1,000 in some Nonconformist churches.[17] There was some concern expressed within Nonconformity that PSAs were social rather than spiritual, but with Meyer's Brotherhood, evangelism and social action went hand in hand. An influx of some of the 'roughest class of working men' in Lambeth was bound to highlight social needs.[18] Through the Brotherhood Meyer opened an evening

15 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 33-8, 73, 86-90, 102; Street, *Meyer*, 59-65; *Worship and Work*, October 1885, 13-16.

16 Interview with H G Turner, Meyer's Private Secretary, on 19 July 1899: London School of Economics, Booth Collection, B271, 79.

17 *BW*, 25 February 1905, 529; Fullerton, *Meyer*, 108; Turner interview, Booth Collection, 85. K.S. Inglis, *Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 79. See pages 79-84 for background on the PSAs.

18 Turner interview, Booth Collection, B271, 87. Charles Booth said that Christ Church was middle class and touched the poor only through missions: C. Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London; Third Series: Religious Influences*, Vol. 7 (London: Macmillan & Co., 1902), 123. This does not do justice to the Brotherhood.

school for adults, and the HM Inspector assessed this as having the best results in London. As well as being 'an institution for soul-winning', the Brotherhood was also an expression of Meyer's belief in the social reality of brotherhood. The men were his 'brothers', not his 'brethren' (an expression Meyer described as 'cant' used by clergy), and he was the 'skipper'.[19]

Meyer believed that people disliked and were repelled by Christian 'stand-offishness', and on Monday afternoons at Christ Church, when he spoke to women, he measured his success by whether he saw laughter 'on the faces marked by poverty and sorrow'.[20] Such meetings were part of Meyer's way of incarnating the gospel. He was determined, however, not to be confined to the church. Meyer initiated, through Christ Church, what he termed recreations, though he insisted that he did not promote amusements. He rented a tumble-down factory for gymnastics and for carpentry, and decided, because of the level of stealing and rowdiness, that he had 'got hold of the right sort' of young people. Linked with this was a club house.[21]

The Lambeth Chief Constable enlisted Meyer to help control some of the most problematic local youths and, as an indicator of Meyer's clientele, the term 'hooligan' apparently came into common currency from a difficult family called Hooligan, discovered by Meyer's helpers.[22] A huge social network, with all kinds of specialist societies, was spawned by Christ Church, largely through Meyer's determination to put his evangelistic principles to work in society and to seek to enhance human dignity.

II Temperance

A specific issue that Meyer, together with many Nonconformists, took up was temperance. He reflected the trend among Nonconformist leaders of the later nineteenth century towards an increasing stress on the need for total abstinence.[23] Throughout his theological student days at Regent's Park College in the late 1860s Meyer thought it was impossible to get through a Sunday without a glass of sherry. On one occasion, while a student preacher, Meyer was staying with hosts who were total abstainers and as he put on his coat to go to church to his embarrassment a bottle of sherry fell out. But by 1872 he had become teetotal, largely through the influence of W. P. Lockhart, the minister of Liverpool's West Toxteth (Baptist) Tabernacle. Meyer increasingly wanted to support working people, as he rather patronisingly put it, 'against their greatest enemy'.[24]

19 *BW*, 19 October 1905, 37; Street, *Meyer*, 94; Clyde Binfield, *George Williams and the YMCA* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 303.

20 *The Christian World* [hereafter *CW*], 21 January 1909, 11; F.B. Meyer, *Reveries and Realities: Or Life and Work in London* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1896), 74.

21 Street, *Meyer*, 98; J. W. Read, ed., *The Christ Church Souvenir Jubilee Year Book* (London: Christ Church, 1926), 29.

22 J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society: Lambeth, 1870-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 110; Street, *Meyer*, 98.

23 Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 46-7; J.H.Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 329-39.

24 *CW*, 8 May 1906, 24; A. Porritt, *The Best I*

During his Leicester period, Meyer emerged as a fervent upholder of the temperance movement, describing drink as the 'giant evil of our time'. There was a call to undertake a war against this evil. The troops must 'sign the pledge' and wear 'the blue ribbon'. The Gospel Temperance or Blue Ribbon movement began in the 1870s and its revivalist fervour had an overwhelming appeal for the evangelistically-minded Meyer.[25]

Temperance leaders in this period often combined religion and temperance. The techniques Meyer used to promote the joint message were borrowed to a considerable extent from D.L. Moody. Meyer did not in any sense see the pledge or the ribbon as a substitute for Christian witness and the call to conversion. Rather, he could assert, in 1883, that after fifty years the temperance movement was coming to its true fulfilment through the introduction of the gospel element. To sign the pledge, Meyer argued, was a confession of sin and expressed a desire for deliverance. This was the theme which he stressed in Leicester and then in London, at the Christ Church Brotherhood and at the women's meetings.[26]

His social vision was distinctly conversionist. In 1882 there were more than one million blue ribbon people in Britain. The campaign which Meyer had led in the Leicester area resulted, it was claimed, in 100,000 signatures to the pledge.[27] While Meyer pictured temperance as a crusade against sin, Leicester publicans rightly viewed it as an attack on them. Their trade began to decline. Some publicans gave Meyer practical help in his work of reclaiming drunkards, but from other quarters he received threats which meant he had to have personal protection. Meyer wrote pamphlets advocating the pledge and the blue ribbon. The latter he described in rather sentimental terms as a 'beautiful emblem', but his faith saw beyond the emblem to God, who alone could make England 'sober and free'.[28] Temperance was an illustration of Meyer's belief that the gospel was intended to transform social life.

Initially, with a typical evangelical individualistic approach, Meyer concentrated on moral persuasion, one by one, but he became convinced that as well as reclamation at this level, action had to be taken to curtail the drink traffic. One of Meyer's Leicester campaigns was directed against grocers' liquor licences. In retaliation, the grocers tried to secure a boycott of Meyer's firewood merchant business, but the customers knew that Meyer's firewood was better value than that of his competitors

Remember (London: Cassell & Co., 1922), 211; Munson, *The Nonconformists*, 59.

25 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 64. For the revivalist fervour, see L.L. Shiman, *The Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 96.

26 F.B. Meyer, *New Year's Words to Blue Ribbon People* (London: Marshall Bros., [1883]), 2. Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 41-2.

27 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 75; *Catalogue of the Leicester Jubilee Exhibition* (Leicester: Jubilee Exhibition, 1887), 121.

28 F.B. Meyer, *Seven Reasons for Wearing the Blue Ribbon* (Leicester: J Vice, [1882]), 8. The seven reasons for signing the pledge are found in F.B. Meyer, *Why Sign the Pledge?* (Leicester: J Vice, n.d.). Seven reasons represented a typical Meyer approach; he also outlined, for example, seven reasons for believer's baptism.

and the boycott failed.[29] The attack on the firewood business was, of course, an assault on Meyer's prison-gate ministry and for Meyer there was a close link between his work for ex-prisoners and for temperance, since he saw drink as being the usual cause of crime.

Although he conceived of an overall web of social evil, Meyer, like other Nonconformists of this period, targeted specific wrongs. Meyer's methods of agitation were also typical of Nonconformist techniques.[30] Perhaps his most spectacular gesture while at Leicester was a defiant appearance at the races to protest against the gambling and drinking. There was an 'ugly scene' and a badly shaken Meyer was released unharmed only because a shopkeeper explained that he helped those in trouble in prison.[31] Meyer's view of the drink traffic as a spiritual enemy drew him into active social struggle against it.

Increasing involvement in national life from the 1890s sharpened Meyer's political awareness. By 1899 he was accepting municipal control of public houses as a realistic goal for the temperance movement. His ideal, however, was abolition. During his year as President of the National Free Church Council, he urged his hearers at the 1904 annual meetings in Newcastle to get into Parliament or the borough council to secure 'organised action' for the 'curtailment and abolition' of the drink traffic, with no compensation for brewers.

Meyer was in no mood for compromise over the British Conservative government's Licensing Bill of 1904. He supported mass agitation. A 'pro-Beer government' merited absolute opposition.[32] Yet Meyer's style, by contrast with the approach of some campaigners, was never wholly negative. In 1905 he opened, under his own management, the 'Old Nelson Coffee-House' in Lambeth. Opening hours matched pub hours. Meyer's concern was to offer leisure activities which were alternatives to drinking alcohol.[33] But positive measures did not replace denunciation.

Meyer, in 1907, berated publicans, betting touts and brothel-owners, calling them bandits, which the Licensed Victuallers' Defence League described as a 'scurrilous inference'.[34] Meyer was accused of being a bandit who was 'flourishing his spiritual tomahawk … and careering around with the scalps of the publicans in his girdle'.[35] Meyer, for his part, compared public houses with the bandits in the parable of the good Samaritan. Making much of this image, Meyer said in 1909 that he used to pick up mauled travellers (victims of drink) between Jerusalem and Jericho, but his more recent policy was to demand that Pilate 'blow up with dynamite the caves in which the bandits hide'.[36]

29 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 75-6, 90-3; Street, *Meyer*, 65-6.

30 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 41. For targets and techniques see Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 16-17.

31 Meyer, *Bells of Is*, 121.

32 *BW*, 8 June 1899, 140; *CW*, 10 March 1904, 21-2; 26 May 1904, 3.

33 *BW*, 7 September 1905, 509; *CW*, 7 February 1907, 24.

34 *The Times*, 18 October 1907, 13.

35 J.A. Newbold, *The Nonconformist Conscience a Persecuting Force* (Manchester: John Heywood, 1908), 47.

36 *The Times*, 18 October 1907, 13; *Free Church Year Book* (London: National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, 1909), 29, 30.

Meyer's reliance on state action was, in fact, always partial. Even in 1904, at the height of his vilification of the Conservative government, Meyer stated that apart from the renewing grace of God, temperance legislation, although important, was ultimately in vain.[37] Temperance, for Meyer, was a result of grace rather than law. His political faith was always distinctively evangelical.

III Social Purity

Another of Meyer's campaigns concerned what was called social purity. In the 1860s three Contagious Diseases Acts passed into British law, aimed at containing venereal disease through medical checks on prostitutes. By the 1880s these Acts had been repealed, after a concerted campaign. The argument of campaigners such as Josephine Butler (a cousin of C.M. Birrell, minister of Pembroke (Baptist) Chapel, Liverpool, where Meyer had been assistant) was that women were being targeted while the government was turning a blind eye to the sexual immorality of men—the double standard.[38]

The 1880s saw a 'social purity movement', as it came to be known, becoming increasingly influential in matters of public sexual morality in Britain. Prosecutions were brought against, on average, 1,200 brothels each year from 1885 to 1914.'[39] When Meyer went to Christ Church in 1892 he began to plan a 'systematic attack' on the notorious brothels of Lambeth, Southwark and Bermondsey, and achieved the closure of between seven and eight hundred of them during the period 1895 to 1907. The vehicle Meyer used for his 'Vigilance work', as it was called, was the Central South London Free Church Council, which was acknowledged to be 'practically Christ Church'.[40] Meyer and his associates worked hard to achieve a changed moral environment.

The massive battle for social purity took place on three fronts, two of which involved pressure groups. First, Meyer's team of vigilantes, called the Christian Stalwarts, systematically collected facts, and gave evidence at trials when brothel-owners were prosecuted. This work was a drain on Meyer's resources, since the finance came largely from him. His helpers were apparently 'very inadequately remunerated'.

Detailed records were kept of cases in preparation for submissions to local magistrates. For example, at one brothel a woman was seen to enter with twenty-three different men between seven and twelve at night. Information was passed to the police, and constables who rendered Meyer efficient service in the fight against prostitution were recommended, by Meyer, to Scotland Yard for promotion.[41]

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37 *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1904), 33.

38 For Butler see Lisa S. Nolland, *A Victorian Feminist Christian: Josephine Butler, the Prostitutes and God*. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

39 For background, see Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 38-42; P. McHugh, *Prostitution and Victorian Social Reform* (London: Croom Helm, 1980), 28-9.

40 Read, ed., *Christ Church Jubilee Book*, 30; *Free Church Year Book* (London: National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, 1908), 179; Turner interview, Booth Collection, B271, 95.

41 *The Times*, 11 May 1907, 6; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1908), 179; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1910), 167.

Meyer also worked for sympathetic council members in Lambeth and Southwark, and attempted alongside that to mobilise the population at large. Residents were exhorted to 'make it hot for the houses of ill-fame' and to boycott shops with indecent displays.[42] Finally, Meyer encouraged rescue work. Members of his staff, like Sister Margaret, who opened her home for women each night—in fact from one until three in the morning—and brought some to Christ Church, were key to the rescue operation. One prostitute who came to hear Meyer preach was so taken with the sermon that she said to Sister Margaret after the service: 'Ain't he lovely: he wouldn't condemn you!'[43]

For Sister Margaret it was dangerous work. On several occasions she was physically assaulted by gangs. Christ Church persisted, however, in trying to help women in need. Meyer set up a 'Society for Befriending the Unmarried Mother and Child'. Two thousand children were helped, some through 'F. B. Meyer's Children's Home' in Leytonstone. The hope of salvation moulded Meyer's social action.

Arising from his grass-roots efforts on behalf of social purity, Meyer devoted energy to this issue as a lecturer, writer and national protagonist. Most of Meyer's books were devotional in character, but he also took up social issues. His book, *A Holy Temple* (1901), is probably typical of his addresses. In this book, which he said was 'For Men Only', he warned against the 'lonely sin' of masturbation and argued that sexual continence produced 'vivacity, muscular strength, manliness and daring' because the unexpended vital power was reabsorbed in the blood. Regardless of any biological proof, Meyer discerned a spiritual link between moral and physical fitness. The remedies Meyer suggested for sexual incontinence included sport, exercise and a hard bed.[44]

Meyer and other purity lecturers directed much of their teaching to men, but Meyer was also concerned to influence the conduct of women. His dream was of women, particularly working-class women, as 'visions of the Madonna'.[45] In 1910 he condemned suggestive cinematographs and the 'tons of filthy literature' which were threatening an epidemic of nastiness. He managed, in the following year, to force a dance about Adam and Eve, 'The Dawn of Love', off the London Palladium stage, on the grounds of its indecency.[46] The White Slave Bill of 1912 was a response to worries that London was becoming an international clearing house for prostitutes. At a meeting of Anglican, Free Church and Jewish leaders, Meyer supported the 1912 Bill and contended that the authorities needed powers to deal with stylish as well as ordinary brothels.[47] When it came to suppressing sexual

42 E.J. Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain since 1700* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977), 167 Street, *Meyer*, 111; Cox, *Lambeth, 1870-1930*, 153.

43 Fullerton, *Meyer*, 151-3; Read, ed., *Christ Church Jubilee Book*, 30.

44 F.B. Meyer, *A Holy Temple* (London: S. W. Partridge, [1901]), 4, 9, 15.

45 Meyer, *Reveries and Realities*, 88, 91.

46 *The Times*, 7 October 1910, 4; Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, 215.

47 *The Times*, 7 October 1912, 2; Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 45.

wrongdoing, Meyer's spiritual ardour was intense and his methods rigorous.

Meyer was not unusual in his stress on social purity. What was striking was his mobilisation of a local church to implement his policies. Meyer's achievements in closing brothels drew widespread admiration, for example, from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, and in some quarters it was the facet of Meyer which was best known.[48]

Why did Meyer work with such ferocity on behalf of this cause? His commitment to personal holiness was offended by 'illicit intercourse' which he pictured in *Holy Temple* as a cancer. Because personal spirituality was central to Meyer's vision, he was inclined to enforce his standards more thoroughly than some other social purity advocates who were not immersed in the holiness movement. Also, although he did give positive teaching on marriage, he stated in *Holy Temple* that if marriage was used simply to indulge passion, offspring could be 'puny and sickly'.[49]

Finally, Meyer was fearful about the 'wreckage' being done to manhood by the activities of prostitutes, the 'siren-sisters'.[50] His recipe for victory was a simple one. 'Pledge yourself to God', he advised young men, 'in all purity and chastity'.[51] Sexual failure would finally be overcome only through individual relationship with God, although the gospel should also cleanse society of sexual sin.

IV The Education Debate

The Conservative government's Education Bill of 1902 drew Meyer into bitter political controversy. It proposed to allow aid from the general rates to schools which were under church rather than public control and in which religious tests ensured that only Anglicans could be appointed as head teachers. Nonconformists saw this as an essentially religious rather than a political question. When the Bill became the Education Act, in 1903, a movement of 'passive resistance' began, in which Nonconformist objectors deducted from their rate payments an amount (normally 3d to 6d in the £) which they estimated was for Church schools.[52] John Clifford was the leader of the crusade.

At first Meyer was reluctant to support passive resistance, since he feared the education crisis would renew old feuds between the Established and Free Churches. He tried to fulfil a reconciling role through discussions involving five Anglican bishops, key Nonconformists, and his Keswick colleague H.W. Webb-Peploe, a supporter of the Bill.[53] The attempt at mediation

48 *The Times*, 22 June 1907, 12; E. H. Jeffs, *Princes of the Modern Pulpit* (London: Sampson Low, 1931), 114.

49 Meyer, *A Holy Temple*, 10, 11, 23.

50 *The Times*, 4 January 1915, 9; 13 October 1915, 9; 12 November 1915, 9.

51 F.B. Meyer, *The Soul's Ascent* (London: H Marshall & Son, 1901), 42.

52 G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1869-1921* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 262; J E B Munson, ' A Study of Nonconformity in Edwardian England as Revealed in the Passive Resistance Movement against the 1902 Education Acts', University of Oxford D Phil (1973), 126, 147-9, 210.

53 *BW*, 15 May 1902, 113. Munson, 'Passive Resistance Movement', 166.

was abortive and Meyer's convictions began to become firmer. He had not previously been known as a 'political parson' and he therefore amazed a meeting of London church leaders in June 1902 by denouncing the government's policy on education as absurd and retrograde.[54]

By the autumn of 1902 Meyer had decided that passive resistance was legitimate. Explaining his thinking, Meyer said that his instincts had been to resist the Church rate, and he had been convinced by discovering, on recent international tours, that the issue was regarded in other countries as 'a great fight for freedom'. He was now sure that religious liberty was at stake and that Free Churchmen were justified in civil disobedience, although they should not be 'threatening or truculent'.[55] The struggle was, in Meyer's eyes, a spiritual one.

The first prosecutions of passive resisters took place in the spring of 1903. In April, Meyer promised that Nonconformists would lobby Liberal MPs (Conservatives were unsympathetic) and would organise themselves in a campaign, but he believed that they would be overpowered in Parliament and would have 'to suffer, to refuse, to resist to the uttermost'. Meyer gave some attention to constructive educational proposals but more energy to fuelling indignation. John Clifford and Meyer were prominent in leading 140,000 people in a demonstration in Hyde Park in London against the Act.

In June 1903 Meyer wrote that he had been able to stand 'with the Nonconformists of every age in protest against wrong'.[56] As far as Meyer was concerned, this was the time for Nonconformists to rise up against their persecutors. He formulated a scheme in the autumn of 1903 to gain power in the sphere of local government in order to nullify the Act. Although this failed, Meyer pursued his cause elsewhere. Considerable controversy broke out in *The Times* in April 1904 over allegations by Meyer that Nonconformist children in village schools were suffering discrimination. Meyer highlighted one case in which, he said, a child had been caned because of the stance made by the child's (Nonconformist) parents on education.[57]

Non-payment of his own rates gave Meyer another opportunity for effective publicity. He had rented a house near Christ Church specifically in order to be liable for rates so that he could refuse to pay them; in September 1904 he made a well-orchestrated appearance before the magistrates as a passive resister. Meyer was the President of the Free Church Council that year and therefore received considerable press coverage.[58] Speaking to his cheering supporters beforehand, Meyer explained, somewhat ingenuously, that in terms of popularity he had nothing to gain by his gesture, but that he had to do everything possible 'to save the

54 *CW*, 12 June 1902, 3.

55 The interview with Meyer is in *BW*, 30 October 1902, 59.

56 *BW*, 23 April 1903, 32; 28 May 1903, 164. Letter from Meyer to J. Mursell, 19 June 1903, quoted in Fullerton, *Meyer*, 115.

57 *The Brixton Free Press*, 6 November 1903, 4-5; *The Times*, 18 April 1904, 12; 28 April 1904, 10.

58 *CW*, 8 September 1904, 14; 15 September 1904, 14.

children of England from the influence of Romanism and High Anglicanism'.

Meyer attempted to continue the religious theme in court, with a speech about Catholic beliefs regarding transubstantiation and the confessional being advocated in schools. This provoked the magistrate to interrupt three times, telling Meyer to keep to the legal point.[59] For Meyer, however, the law existed to right wrongs, and he insisted that he was in court because Free Church people were being wronged. Meyer's political agenda was dictated by his basic religious principles.

Opposition to the Education Act gave Nonconformists the motivation to fight for the return of the Liberals in the 1906 British general election. Free Church voters were no longer necessarily Liberal (as had been almost always the case earlier), but many now rallied to the Liberal cause.[60]

Meyer's party political activity reached a peak in this period. His contribution to the election campaign was an eventful motor car tour of the West Country in early 1906 during which, under the guise of talking about moral issues, he adopted a fairly militant political style. One of the stories Meyer enjoyed telling was of a man who had been a Liberal but suffered a fall and cracked his skull, after which he became a Conservative.[61] At the same time as he was ridiculing the Tories at political meetings, Meyer was telling readers in *The Christian*, which was widely read in Keswick circles, that it did not really matter which party won the election as long as 'Righteousness, Peace and Goodwill' were established.

The Keswick constituency was understandably confused. Significant numbers of Meyer's Keswick supporters, many of them Anglicans, felt alienated and stopped buying his books.[62] Meyer admitted that following his West Country tour he had heard of many evangelical Anglican clergymen turning against him, though he maintained that he had never spoken unkindly of the Church.[63] This was special pleading. In 1904 Meyer had described the evangelical party in the Church of England as narrow, contrasting this with the 'free air breathed by Nonconformists'.[64] Yet Meyer functioned as a bridge between Anglicans and Nonconformists and between other-worldly and socially committed evangelicals.

Meyer believed that in the education campaign he was not fighting a political battle so much as opposing Roman Catholic and high Anglican influences—'Rome and Ritualism'.[65] Keswick evangelicals agreed with his theology, even if they might not have wanted to be tainted by his politics. In 1907 Meyer was claiming, in conciliatory style, that he had not allowed party politics to enter the pulpit. Even Meyer's overtly political audiences applauded his 'consecration to his work

59 *BW*, 15 September 1904, 533, 539.

60 *BW*, 18 July 1901, 319; D.A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 311.

61 *The Baptist Times*, 12 January 1906, 30; E.H. Jeffs, *Press, Preachers and Politicians: Reminiscences: 1874 to 1932* (London: Independent Press, 1933), 116.

62 *The Christian* [*C*], 4 January 1906, 11.

63 *CW*, 1 February 1906, 5.

64 *BW*, 17 March 1904, 611.

65 *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1904), 24-5.

of evangelisation'.[66] Even at his most robustly political Meyer was fundamentally an evangelist.

V The Free Church Council

Local Free Church Councils multiplied in England in the 1890s, with social affairs as one of their central concerns. From 1896, when the National Council was formed, political issues became more prominent. The Council became the voice of the Nonconformist Conscience, calling for an infusion of politics with religion. The education debate heightened the Council's political profile. Meyer's presidential address to the Council in 1904, on the duty of the Free Churches, was generally recognised as 'one of the strongest pronouncements ever given from the chair of the National Council'.

Meyer's targets included, naturally, the government's educational stance, but also Britain's foreign policy, and the timidity of magistrates in dealing with publicans. After Meyer's tirade the highly charged atmosphere was relieved only by the civic welcome.[67] Meyer was subsequently questioned about charges that the Free Church Council was becoming too political and replied: 'I cannot understand that criticism.' He lamented that Britain no longer throbbed 'with the general impulses that responded to [William] Gladstone's moral appeals', thus indicating his view of Gladstone as the archetypal godly politician.[68]

Under Meyer's leadership as President, the Free Church Council launched proposals for national education and formulated tactics to be employed in the next election. The National Council meetings were, as *The British Weekly* saw it, becoming like a Parliament of the Free Churches.[69] Although Meyer relished this aspect of Free Church Council gatherings, what he highlighted was something different. There was, he said, a spiritual glow which reminded him of Keswick or Moody's meetings at Northfield.[70] Where that inner quality was present, the political consequences would be worthwhile.

In 1907 the Council was able (largely through the mediation of Thomas Law, the Council Secretary) to prevail on Meyer to give his full time to the organisation. The Council had worked hard for, and contributed towards, the landslide election victory of the Liberals in 1906. But the new government found it hard to deliver what the Free Church constituency wanted on issues like education and temperance. Meyer felt that government proposals met the needs of Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Jews and Nonconformists, but he became aware that the House of Lords was the real problem, with its opposi-

66 *The Times*, 22 June 1907, 12; Jeffs, *Press, Preachers and Politicians*, 116.

67 *BW*, 10 March 1904, 576; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1904), 26-7.

68 *BW*, 17 March 1904, 611; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1904), 26; D.W. Bebbington, 'Gladstone and the Baptists', *BQ*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (1976), 224-39; D.W. Bebbington, ' Gladstone and the Nonconformists: A Religious Affinity in Politics', in D. Baker, ed., *Church, Society and Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), 369-82.

69 *BW*, 10 March 1904, 576; E.K.H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity: A History of the Free Church Council Movement, 1896-1941* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955), 93.

70 *BW*, 17 March 1904, 611.

tion to Liberal legislation.[71]

As a result the political enthusiasm of the Free Church Councils soon began to wane. Meyer was in touch with the new, less political mood. As early as March 1906 he asserted that it was clear to him that a 'balance must be maintained between the spiritualities and the temporalities'. Meyer, however, was not swinging from one extreme to the other. His position was a centrist one. The *Christian World* rightly recognised Meyer's influence in countering the 'Plymouth Brethren limitation of religion to purely spiritual exercises'.[72]

Throughout the period 1907-9, in which Meyer was the itinerant overseer of the Free Churches, he advocated various causes. He urged support for Progressive candidates in London Council elections, told the Free Churches in 1908 to be concerned not only with soup-tickets but also with justice, and, in an address in 1909 on 'The Free Churches and Politics', argued for action over women's wages and housing conditions where people were living 'like pigs in a sty'.[73] But despite his continued interest in the political arena, Meyer was determined that the Council should give attention to the maintenance of a high spiritual tone. His stated mission in this period was to lead Free Churches to their spiritual source.[74]

Thomas Law, who had entered the political fray as Secretary of the Free Church Council, committed suicide while in a state of depression, and Meyer was invited by the General Committee of the Council, meeting on 7 October 1910, to accept the Honorary Secretaryship. He seemed to be the man for the hour.

Meyer was known as an ardent Liberal, but one who would put the religious side first. In his personal manifesto, Meyer intimated that he would tighten the Council's machinery, restore its spiritual priorities, and co-operate with the established Church in seeking moral and spiritual change.[75] The job gave Meyer a unique opportunity to combine his skills as a manager, an evangelist, a social reformer and an ecclesiastical unifier.

One immediate task for Meyer was to prepare for the General Election which was looming. He carefully explained that the Council was not allied to any political party and that although their hopes presently lay with the Liberals, they would not hesitate to support Labour or any other party which adopted Free Church objectives.[76] The enthusiastic Liberal commitment expressed in 1906, seemed, four years later, to be light years away.

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71 *BW*, 22 March 1906, 667; 12 April 1906, 11; 4 October 1906, 629. See Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 78 and S. Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1975), 71, 74.

72 *BW*, 22 March 1906, 667; *CW*, 26 April 1906, 12.

73 *CW*, 28 February 1907, 21; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1908), 34; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1909), 29.

74 *BW*, 22 March 1906, 667; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1907), 82.

75 Minutes of the National Free Church Council General Committee, 7 October 1910; *BW*, 8 September 1910, 539; *CW*, 13 October 1910, 13; Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 81.

76 Meyer produced a Council manifesto for the election. See Free Church Council General Committee Minutes, 28 November 1910. He added a commentary: *CW*, 1 December 1910, 5.

Yet politics remained important. Meyer's focus of opposition in 1910 was the House of Lords, which he had described in the previous year as 'warped by class prejudice'. The Upper Chamber had frustrated the aspirations of Nonconformists and it was now essential, Meyer argued, for 'the will of the people' to prevail.[77] The conflict, Meyer insisted, was not part political but was about religious liberty.

From 1910 to 1914, when he handed over the parliamentary portfolio of the Council, Meyer continued to integrate the socio-political and the spiritual. Preachers, he said in 1911, should address issues like women's low wages since unless 'sweated people' received a fair wage they would not worship with their paymasters and there would be no revival.[78]

Meyer took the opportunity of his position among the Free Churches to offer pastoral support to political leaders. In 1911 Ramsay MacDonald, the future Prime Minister, thanked Meyer for his care at a time of bereavement. In the same year Meyer was calling for 'reason, fair play and common-sense' to prevail in industrial relations, and for the payment of decent wages, especially for women. Relief for the miners after their 1912 strike, correspondence with Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, about the education issue, and dealings with the Colonial Secretary were some matters which occupied Meyer in 1911-13.[79]

His vision was always of Free Church spiritual renewal having specific socio-political repercussions.

VI The Issue of Race

In the early twentieth century Meyer took up issues connected with race. His thinking on racial questions contained elitism and egalitarianism. An interest in eugenics—an interest quite widely shared in the early twentieth century—led him to argue in *Religion and Race Regeneration* for 'race-regeneration', to be achieved through families with ability having more children. There was concern in some circles at the time that the birth rate in Britain was declining among the professional classes due to birth control.[80]

Meyer believed that there were differences between black and white people: he suggested that black people were more passionate than whites, but his thinking did not imply a belief in white superiority. In fact Meyer despised the 'brutal insolence' shown to other races by the 'ordinary globe-trotter' from Britain.[81] South Africa gave Meyer the opportunity to fight for justice for non-white races, beginning with the Chinese. South African mine-owners, who badly needed labour, imported thousands of Chinese in conditions of virtual slavery.

77 *CW*, 9 December 1909, 3.

78 *BW*, 28 September 1911, 618. *The Free Church Chronicle*, Vol. 13, No. 153 (1911), 179.

79 *The Free Church Chronicle*, Vol. 13, No. 153 (1911), 179. *The Times*, 9 April 1912, 6. Meyer to Asquith, 27 February 1912; Asquith to Meyer, 1 March 1912: M. S. Asquith 13, 62, 64: Bodleian Library, Oxford.

80 F.B. Meyer, *Religion and Race Regeneration* (London: New Tracts for the Times, 1912), 11, 16; G.R. Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 60-1.

81 *The Times*, 22 September 1911, 6; F.B. Meyer, *Friendly Counsels* (London: Horace Marshall & Son, 1901), 37.

Feelings about this ran high in Britain during 1904. Some British workers felt cheated of jobs, but Meyer and other Nonconformists saw the treatment of the Chinese as a moral wrong. Meyer spoke out strongly. In outlining his policy if he were in charge in South Africa, Meyer said no-one should be allowed to call coloured people 'niggers'. The term, he said, was damnable.[82]

Meyer spent a winter in South Africa in 1908, largely speaking at holiness gatherings. He was appalled by the South African government's policies which, he believed, cast 'an ominous shadow on the future relations between the white, native and coloured races'. When the native races were 'Christianised and educated', said Meyer, comparison between them and whites was wholly in their favour. In the context of white aggression he suggested there should be a forum giving Africans a voice, though with whites retaining 'the right to utter the final word'.[83]

This was very radical—too radical—for conservative white opinion, but it interested Gandhi, who was in South Africa. In Johannesburg Meyer was introduced to Gandhi, recognising in him an important leader in the struggle for Indian rights. They talked about spiritual and political issues and Meyer's comment was that he had never met a man so sincere. Gandhi, for his part, found Meyer's influence and experience valuable in the Indian 'passive resistance' campaign.

Meyer was delighted to be able to help those whom he saw as following in the steps of the English passive resisters.[84] Gandhi was deeply religious, although not a Christian, and Meyer's belief in 1912 was that religion was or at least could be the means of bringing a new kinship to the world.[85] A common concern for spirituality could unite races.

In 1911 a proposed fight at Earl's Court between an American, Jack Johnson (the first black man to take a world boxing title), and a British boxer, Bombardier Wells, brought Meyer into a controversy involving the issue of race. Initially, on 14 September 1911, Meyer objected to the prize-fight as a 'degrading spectacle'. Later he asserted that the match was being regarded as a 'decisive test in the matter of racial superiority'.

This became a major theme. Meyer's view was that those who were keen on the contest—10,000 had booked seats at Earl's Court for 2 October to see the fight—belonged to a 'past age'.[86] Evi-

82 *BW*, 25 February 1904, 529; 3 May 1906, 80. See H. Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 20, and Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 111.

83 F.B. Meyer, *A Winter in South Africa* (London: NCEFC, 1908), 152, 179, 201.

84 *BW*, 16 July 1908, 358; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1909), 90; M.K. Gandhi, *Christian Missions* (Ahmadabad, India: Navajivan, 1941), 284. J.D. Hunt, in *Gandhi and the Nonconformists* (New Delhi: Promilla & Co., 1986), 52-3, 126-7, concludes that passive resistance in England was an important model for Gandhi, although Gandhi appears to have claimed that the idea of passive resistance as a political platform originated with him, aided by Tolstoy: R. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahantma Gandhi*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 25.

85 Meyer, *Race-Regeneration*, 60-2.

86 *CW*, 14 September 1911, 16; *The Times*, 18 September 1911, 5; 22 September 1911, 6.

dence was produced by Meyer showing that in a previous fight Johnson had battered his (white) opponent's head out of all recognition and as a result black people in New York were brutally treated by infuriated whites.

The promoter of the Earl's Court contest, John White, was at first dismissive of Meyer. Within the boxing world Meyer's intervention was seen as the action of a crank. On 22 September, however, White attempted, unsuccessfully, to open negotiations with Meyer, whose week-long campaign had won him influential supporters including Randall Davidson (who found the fight repellent), twenty Anglican bishops, Arthur Conan Doyle and Ramsay MacDonald.[87]

At this stage the wider boxing fraternity decided that Meyer was not a crank whom they could dismiss, and instead he began to be portrayed as a representative of the 'violent wing' of the opposition to the match.[88] Meyer's battle became known in the press as the 'Stop the Fight' campaign. Violent attitudes were not confined to one camp. Regent's Park Chapel, which at the time was the church where Meyer was minister, was surrounded by a mob and Meyer was denounced as a meddler, a Puritan and a kill-joy. Anything savouring of persecution was, of course, stimulus to Meyer. His conviction was that he must 'fight to a finish'.[89]

In the event, the finish came because local freeholders, fearing the fight might endanger the Earl's Court licence and thus adversely affect their property values, obtained an injunction restraining the contest organisers. Mr Justice Lush, who granted the injunction in the High Court, was a member of Regent's Park Chapel. Winston Churchill, who was then the Home Secretary, pronounced that in any case the fight was 'unsporting' and should not take place. 'Mr Meyer's triumph', as it was hailed, resulted in some reaction against prize-fighting. Jack Johnson himself retired from the ring.[90]

Meyer himself was jubilant, convinced that God had been in his victory. Indeed he was so buoyant that he teased Johnson, who had spoken about 'Bishop Meyer', saying that, after a life-time devoted to the Free Churches being called a bishop was worse than 'the choicest term of the boxing ring'.[91] Nonconformity had joined hands with others to act, even if briefly, as the conscience of the nation on an issue connected with race.

VII Peace and War

The First World War was a devastating

For an account of this episode, see S. Mews, 'Puritanicalism, Sport and Race: A Symbolic Crusade of 1911', in G.J. Cuming and D. Baker, eds., *Popular Belief and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 303-31.

87 *The Times*, 22 September 1911, 6; *CW*, 21 September 1911, 1; 28 September 1911, 2.

88 *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 September 1911, 10. For the reaction of the boxing world in *Boxing* and *The Sportsman* see J.P. Green, 'Boxing and the "Colour Question" in Edwardian Britain: The "White Problem" of 1911', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1988), 115-19.

89 *The Times*, 20 September 1911, 4; 22 September 1911, 6; *CW*, 21 September 1911, 10; *The Daily News*, 22 September 1911, 5.

90 *CW*, 28 September 1911, 2; *The Times*, 29 September 1911, 7; *CW*, 5 October 1911, 1.

91 *The Times*, 20 October 1911, 10; Fullerton, *Meyer*, 122.

blow for many who had drunk deeply at the wells of Victorian optimism. Prior to the First World War, Meyer was very wary of British military strength. World peace and disarmament were his first objectives, although he did applaud the British victory at Khartoum in 1898.[92] During the Boer War he tended towards the pro-Boer position.

Free Churchmen were divided in their response to the Boer War, and Meyer's views were at variance with those of many Free Church leaders. Nevertheless, he produced, in 1901, a peace manifesto from London Free Church ministers which attempted to express a consensus opinion.[93]

For a time, in 1911, Meyer was caught up in the international peace process. As a representative of the Free Churches, he gave his weight to the Anglo-American Treaty of Arbitration, which involved contacts with Asquith and with President Taft, to whom he presented an illuminated address from the Free Churches and the Peace Societies. Taft told Meyer that he valued the support of religious opinion in the cause of peace.[94]

At this stage Meyer identified with the anti-militaristic attitude prevailing among Baptists and other Nonconformists. But he was also one of those who swung with the pendulum when the First World War commenced. By 1 October 1914, Meyer was openly supporting the government's declaration of war. In the following month, at an influential Free Church meeting held in the City Temple, Meyer spoke in favour of committing Nonconformity to the conflict.[95] Soon the matter had become, in Meyer's mind, distinctly religious. The hearts of the Germans were so full of hatred, he claimed, that their prayers—and by implication their military power—could not prevail.

The war was, he suggested, the 'clearest, cleanest and most Christian war' Britain had fought. Increasingly, Meyer perceived the struggle as a clash of spiritual forces. Britain, therefore, had no option but to fight in the cause of humanity and of God.[96]

Meyer's personal contribution to the war concentrated in the first place—in line with his existing concerns—on the sexual purity of military personnel. He was shocked by a report about the 'drunkenness, debauchery and indecency' of soldiers and sailors in London, and complained to *The Times* in January 1915 that the police and military authorities were apparently taking no action. A patriotic correspondent described Meyer's charges as scandalous and challenged him to prove them.[97]

92 F.B. Meyer, ed., *The Free Churchman*, Vol. 1 (1898), 145.

93 *BW*, 1 August 1901, 373; Street, *Meyer*, 154. For Free Church views see *BW*, 18 July 1901, 319; 19 September 1901, 503. The background is in Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, 121-4.

94 *The Times*, 20 March 1911, 6; 24 March 1911, 6; 19 June 1911, 29.

95 *CW*, 1 October 1914, 4. This was a reply to German theologians. K.W. Clements, in 'Baptists and the Outbreak of the First World War', *BQ*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1975), documents the sudden change in attitude displayed by Baptists—see 77, 82.

96 *BW*, 28 January 1915, 349; F.B. Meyer, *Our Sister Death* (London: NCEFC, 1915), 8; *The Times*, 15 December 1915, 11.

97 *The Times*, 4 January 1915, 9; 6 January 1915, 9; 15 December 1915, 11.

Practical response was Meyer's next move. First he increased the pressure over the temperance issue by suggesting a 'King's Pledge Sunday' when the King's abstinence could be held up as an example to be followed from a patriotic point of view.[98] Then Meyer managed to make the YMCA in Waterloo Road available as accommodation for soldiers visiting London who might be exposed to 'serious moral dangers'. In November 1915 he was appealing to the public for funds to extend the premises since demand was so great.

Throughout the war Meyer continued to monitor the moral state of soldiers, many of whom, he asserted in 1917, hardly dared to go into parts of London because of the allurement of prostitutes.[99] Meyer also saw himself as supporting the war effort by his production of the *Service Messenger* which, he claimed in 1917, was the only Christian paper for servicemen and gave them the gospel in readable form. The financing of the paper proved, however, to be a headache for Meyer and the need to attract funds may have forced him to dilute the paper's content to 'love and comfort and Christian cheer' and finally to a message which would keep the soldiers smiling.[100]

Meyer was in touch with the feelings of the troops since Christ Church had 760 men in active service. In 1916 Meyer could pray, at Christ Church, for a crowning victory and for Allied soldiers to trap submarines and 'counterwork the enemy'.[101] Britain's enemies were God's enemies. In all its aspects the war was, and must remain, a holy one.

While supporting the war, Meyer was also working for the rights of conscientious objectors (COs). This was not inconsistent, since he held that all oppression was wrong, whether German or British. Conscience, for Meyer, was paramount. Following the introduction of conscription, in 1916, tribunals began to consider the cases of nearly 14,000 conscientious objectors.

Meyer soon became uneasy about the way some tribunals were treating COs. On 5 May 1916 he addressed the Quaker Meeting for Sufferings on the issue as part of an attempt to mobilise protest.[102] By June 1916, 1,200 non-combatant men were in custody and thirty-four out of a group sent to France had been sentenced to death for resisting military orders. Meyer was approached by the No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF) and he went to see the prisoners in France.[103]

Meyer relayed Free Church concerns

98 *The Times*, 13 April 1915, 4. See also S. Mews, 'Drink and Disestablishment in the First World War', in D. Baker, ed., *The Church in Town and Countryside* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 469.

99 *The Times*, 12 November 1915, 9; 25 November 1915, 9; 9 February 1917, 7.

100 *LF*, 28 March 1917, 318; 16 May 1917, 525; 8 August 1917, 879.

101 *BW*, 6 May 1915, 117; 10 February 1916, 358; 20 April 1916, 49.

102 *The Tribunal*, 20 April 1916, 2; Minutes of the Meeting for Sufferings, 5 May 1916. This Meeting is the Standing Representative Body of Quakers. See also J. Rae, *Conscience and Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 130.

103 *The Times*, 22 June 1916, 7; H.W. Peet, 'The Men Sentenced to Death', in *Troublesome People* (London: NCF, [1940]), 28-9; J. Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 74.

to Asquith and Lord Kitchener, Secretary of War, and Kitchener promised Meyer that no CO would be ill-treated. Death sentences were not carried out. Meyer was proclaiming Britain's past indebtedness to those who had steered by the pole star of conscience and he advocated absolute exemption from civilian as well as military service, an option which was available but was granted by tribunals in only 350 cases.[104] He also proposed to the NCF a scheme—backed by Catherine Marshall, the NCF Honorary Secretary—to help both 'absolutists', who demanded total exemption, and 'alternativists', who would accept non-combatant work.

Marshall urged on Meyer the need for help from Nonconformists over 'the principle of respect for freedom of conscience'. Meyer was willing to help and the climax of his work for COs was his booklet on pacifism, *The Majesty of Conscience*, published in 1917. It seems likely that he used material supplied by Bertrand Russell, although the book has Meyer's stamp.[105] NCF leaders had doubts about Meyer (Russell called him a worm), but regarded his booklet as strategic. The conscientious objector, Meyer proclaimed in *The Majesty of Conscience*, could be the 'Apostle and Prophet' of a future spirit of peace.[106] He had fought a spiritual war for men whose conscience would not allow them to fight a worldly one.

VIII Socialism and the Social Gospel

Although much of Meyer's socio-political activity was social rather than directly political, it is difficult to draw a clear boundary line. Meyer had a utopian view of politics as an effort to 'illuminate the public mind with the ideals of Christ's kingdom', but he never pinned his hopes entirely on one political system. His goal was to see the mass of the people 'hail the religion of Jesus Christ', which he believed could happen as the Christian faith was linked with 'liberty and righteousness and truth'.[107]

For much of his career Meyer happily supported the Liberal Party. For a time, however, in the 1890s and for a few years afterwards, he expressed more radical political views. In 1898 he supported Fred Smith, an Independent Labour Party candidate for North Lambeth, at a time when few Baptists would have given much credence to the ILP, and in the following year he was described as 'practically a Christian Socialist'.[108] In fact Meyer's affinity was with the New Liberalism

104 *The Times*, 9 June 1916, 9; 22 June 1916, 7; 7 July 1916, 10; Sir Wyndham Childs, *Episodes and Reflections* (London: Cassell & Co., 1930), 152-3; M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 39; P.R. Dekar, 'Twentieth-Century British Baptist Conscientious Objectors', *BQ*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1993), 38.

105 F.B. Meyer, *The Majesty of Conscience* (London: National Labour Press, [1917], 5;Velacott, *Pacifists*, 102-3, 213. For material in this section I am indebted to R.A. Rempel of McMaster University, Canada.

106 Vellacott, *Pacifists*, 213; Meyer, *Majesty of Conscience*, 16, 19.

107 *Free Church Year Book* (London, 1897), 159; *BT*, 27 April 1906, 309.

108 *London Leader*, 26 February 1898, 4; Turner interview, Booth Collection, B 271, 91. See W.C.R. Hancock, 'No Compromise: Nonconformity and Politics 1893-1914', *BQ*, Vol. 36, No 2 (1995), 65.

which accepted humanitarian collectivism and which stimulated Liberals to take social reform more seriously. He aligned himself with some of the radical Liberal thinking of this period. *The Christian World*, in 1906, discerned an evolutionary process in Meyer's thinking over about twelve years.[109]

As we have seen, Meyer's social concerns were very much present in the 1880s, but it is true that the years before and immediately after 1906 saw him at his most publicly political. In 1906 he warned that old party lines were becoming blurred, praised Labour for its concept of the brotherhood of man and argued that collectivism was looking over the shoulder of individualism.[110] A *Christian World* correspondent in 1907 spoke of 'Comrade Meyer', but this was to overstate Meyer's sympathy for socialism. Yet Meyer admitted two years later, in 1909, that because of what he had said in 1906-7 he had fallen from his position as 'a sort of sky-pilot', who was confined solely to spiritual matters. He was unrepentant and used the common argument that the causes rather than the cases (the symptoms) demanded attention.[111]

His willingness to continue to affirm aspects of the Labour agenda is seen by the fact that his 1917 book on pacifism was published by the National Labour Press. Even in the 1920s, when members of the premillennial circle with which Meyer was by then associated were abandoning hope of social progress, he contended that the 'axioms of the Labour Party were uttered by the Founder of Christianity' and that to do charitable work without removing the root causes of destitution was inadequate.[112] But Meyer's faith in political remedies was always limited. As he put it in 1914 in *The Times*, to deal with the external circumstances only, without the 'new heart', was absurd.[113]

Did Meyer, then, espouse a social gospel? Certainly he argued in 1904 that every great revival of religion issued in social and political reconstruction. He had no sympathy, he insisted, with Christians who spoke only of heaven while the wrongs of earth were not redressed.[114]

For evangelicals like Meyer, the social gospel was the application of the gospel to society. Meyer saw this social dimension as the concomitant of evangelism. The social gospel had been clearly articulated by John Clifford (as early as 1888), but Meyer later became a prominent advocate. Baptists, asserted Meyer in an address given to the Baptist Union autumn assembly at Huddersfield in 1906, shared with so-

109 *CW*, 26 April 1906, 11. See H.V. Emy, *Liberals, Radicals and Social Politics, 1892-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 117; G.L. Bernstein, *Liberalism and Liberal Politics in Edwardian England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 11,48.

110 *BW*, 4 October 1906, 629.

111 *CW*, 7 February 1907, 24; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1909), 30.

112 *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1920), 14; F.B. Meyer, *The Church and After-War Problems* (London: National Free Church Council, [1922]), 5.

113 *The Times*, 29 April 1914, 6.

114 *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1904), 33; *BW*, 17 March 1904, 611. See D.M. Thompson, 'The Emergence of the Nonconformist Social Gospel in England', in K. Robbins, ed., *Protestant Evangelicalism: Britain, Ireland, Germany and America c1750—c1950: Essays in Honour of W.R. Ward* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 255-80.

cialists a desire for peace, for old age pensions and for better housing, and this would come as the gospel created, in its own revolutionary way, 'a kingdom of social justice'.[115]

The kingdom was a key concept. Against the background of the coming kingdom Meyer hoped to achieve 'the redemption of the State', with a consequent righting of the wrongs which made the few rich and the many poor.[116] He saw a historical inevitability about the passing of power from the aristocracy to the middle classes and then to the people.[117]

In 1907 Meyer confessed that some of his previous ideas about the work of the church had been too restricted. Although he always believed that the pulpit should major on the central doctrines of the faith rather than social issues, he was able to rejoice in 1908 that the 'humanitarian side' of the gospel was coming to the fore.[118] Meyer attempted to widen the scope of the gospel without losing its essential spiritual core.

IX Conclusion

F. B. Meyer's understanding of the social implications of the gospel clarified during his period at Melbourne Hall, Leicester. Meyer set himself the question, in Leicester and in London, of whether working people could be reached and integrated into church life, and his efforts to reach the point where he could say 'yes' meant active social involvement. Institutional churches had, as he put it in 1902, to work night after night for the neighbourhood. An evangelistic church should be an engine for good, confronting social evils.

This he sought to do through creative initiatives in Leicester and in Christ Church, with the prison ministry in Leicester and the massive Brotherhood meetings in London as examples. More widely, he became involved in national and international issues of temperance, social purity, equality in education, race and peace. In some respects Meyer was seeking to create the seeds of a new society. He argued in 1907 that the agenda of the church must be wide enough to include such issues as the election of members of Parliament as well as the subtle problems of the inner life—to which he gave much attention.[119]

Meyer's spiritual and conversionist priorities directed him throughout many years of his ministry towards a gospel which called for a personal relationship with Christ and which also applied itself to social wrongs. The hoped-for new society, said Meyer in 1907, expressed the human quest for brotherhood, but with this there must be spiritual recognition of the Fatherhood of God and of Jesus Christ as Saviour and 'Eternal Brother'.[120] Meyer's multi-dimensional social strategy was spiritually grounded and evangelistically shaped. It challenges any approach which draws back from the task of incarnating the gospel.

115 *BW*, 4 October 1906, 611, 630. See D.M. Thompson, 'John Clifford's Social Gospel', *BQ*, Vol. 31, No. 5 (1986), 204.

116 *BW*, 26 April 1906, 70.

117 *BW*, 4 October 1906, 629.

118 *CW*, 7 February 1907, 24; *BW*, 1 June 1905, 195; *Free Church Year Book* (London: NCEFC, 1908), 33.

119 *CW*, 7 February 1907, 24.

120 *CW*, 26 September 1907, 6.