

Introduction

The writing of twentieth-century history is still something heavily defined by national categories. It may be said that much of this is natural and appropriate – and even unavoidable. But given that so much of human experience involves the crossing of borders of many kinds it may be proposed that too rigid a distinction between domestic and foreign affairs must deprive scholars of many opportunities and readers of many dimensions of historical reality. In the twentieth century the politics of one country very often became the concern of the citizens in another. That this should be so was almost an axiom of that liberal moral consciousness which extended the boundaries of conventional politics in the age of mass democracy. One historian of religion whose work demonstrated this most often was Owen Chadwick. When he was invited to give the Ford Lectures in English History at the University of Oxford he chose to examine the role of one Englishman whose work was done not in Britain but Italy. This was the remarkable D’Arcy Osborne, the British representative to the Holy See during the Second World War. Chadwick later recalled how ‘one eminent historian’ doubted that this could be a subject of English history at all. Would the creator of the lectureship have approved? ‘But the history of England’, responded Chadwick mildly, but firmly, ‘also happens elsewhere than in England.’¹

When in 1997 I published a collection of sources revealing the views to be found in the Church of England during the first years of the so-called Church Struggle in the Third Reich, a very competent reviewer responded

¹ Owen Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1988), p. viii.

that German affairs had really done little to affect the history of the British Churches themselves. Chadwick saw this review and wrote to me that he did not like it, though he confessed that he was not sure why he did not. But then the judgement of the review was understandable. After all, what kind of a subject was this? It was neither a discussion of politics nor of the church. It was neither British nor German history. It had occurred in the middle of the twentieth century: there was rather little historiography to show the significance of the British Churches altogether in the political age which they then inhabited. Even if the assorted strands – or memoranda, letters and speeches – could be gathered and drawn together into something like a subject, could it be said to matter very much after all? The effect might well be only marginally instructive to the student of British or of German history. At most it might scramble into the footnotes to be found buried inside the works written in both categories.

The purpose of this book is to show that the relationship between British Christianity and the Third Reich is indeed a solid subject and that it is one of significance, not only to the ways in which we write history but to the ways in which we think about its patterns. One reason for this is simply because the matter has again and again attracted serious attention from authoritative historians who have not lacked other subjects on which to devote their time and labour. The beginnings of the present historiography are also striking. As early as 1960 Alfred Wiener published his article ‘Untersuchungen zum Widerhall des deutschen Kirchkampfes in England (1933–38)’ in a collection dedicated to Leonard Montefiore and edited by Max Beloff for the Wiener Library.² A thorough article of such a kind might have been found sufficient treatment in itself, but Wiener had in fact inaugurated a persistent and growing train of historical studies and reflections. Memoirs had also begun to accumulate and the affairs of Nazi Germany were to be found turning up again and again in the foreground of the lives of established British church figures like the eminent Congregationalist, Nathaniel Micklem.³ Often the subject was to be glimpsed in the chapters of ecclesiastical biographies, like those of Ronald Jasper who published studies of the Bishop of Gloucester, Arthur Cayley Headlam, in 1960, and of the

² Max Beloff (ed.), *On the Track of Tyranny: Essays Presented by the Wiener Library to Leonard Montefiore on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (London, 1960), pp. 211–32.

³ Nathaniel Micklem, *The Box and the Puppets (1888–1953)* (London, 1957).

Bishop of Chichester, George Bell, in 1967.⁴ In 1973 Owen Chadwick gave a lecture on ‘The English Bishops and the Nazis’ to the Friends of Lambeth Palace Library.⁵ In such a place the lecture made much sense: the library contained the archives of the archbishops and also collections of other figures at large in the life of the twentieth-century church. Most conspicuous in all this was the immense archive of George Bell himself. In the same year Daphne Hampson submitted an important doctoral thesis on ‘The British Response to the German Church Struggle, 1933–1939’ at the University of Oxford.⁶ This emphasised the realm of diplomatic engagement, denominational and ecumenical, and drew attention to the contents of archives in Britain and Germany. Chadwick returned to these themes when he became the biographer of Bishop Henson in 1983. Another historian who turned to these matters repeatedly was Keith Robbins, whose name had first been made with studies of the Munich settlement and a biography of Sir Edward Grey, and who now examined the German interventions of the Quaker, Dorothy Buxton, and the British response to the arrest and trial of Martin Niemöller in 1937–38.⁷

But the evolution of the historiography of the Church Struggle in Germany itself was also beginning to insist on the significance of British church leaders in that crisis. The two volumes of Armin Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene*, presented solid proof that the international ecumenical movement had the potential to inspire a consistent historiographical tradition which might begin to influence the writing of international history itself – a potential not yet fulfilled.⁸ Through the growing work of Eberhard Bethge the reputation of the figure of Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasised the importance of the British Churches, and of

⁴ R.C.D. Jasper, *Arthur Cayley Headlam* (London, 1960) and *George Bell, Bishop of Chichester* (London, 1967).

⁵ Owen Chadwick, ‘The English Bishops and the Nazis’, in *Friends of Lambeth Palace Library Annual Report 1973*, pp. 9–28.

⁶ Daphne Hampson, ‘The British Response to the German Church Struggle, 1933–1939’, Oxford DPhil Thesis, 1973.

⁷ Keith Robbins, ‘Martin Niemöller, The German Church Struggle, and English Opinion’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1970, pp. 149–70; ‘Dorothy Buxton and the German Church Struggle’, in W.J. Shiels (ed.), *Church, Society and Politics: Studies in Church History Vol. 13* (Oxford, 1975). Robbins maintained these themes in his later survey, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church 1900–2000* (Oxford, 2008).

⁸ Armin Boyens, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene 1933–1939: Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Munich, 1969); *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene 1939–1945: Darstellung und Dokumentation* (Munich, 1973).

Bishop Bell in particular.⁹ Much the same occurred in other studies of the German resistance against Hitler which combined to show how challenging the policies of Nazi Germany had come to involve the policies of the British state, and how men like Adam von Trott zu Solz and Helmuth James von Moltke had not been merely German figures, but Europeans and internationalists busily and courageously at work in myriad international networks.¹⁰ Indeed, the early historiography of the German resistance to Hitler owed much to Bishop Bell, who had been, in effect, a participant in the story and became one of its first chroniclers.¹¹ If few British historians knew what importance to attach to provincial English bishops, German historians appeared to have little doubt.

For all this, it is the quality and quantity of the primary source material, much of it archival, which most impressively establishes the claims of the subject of this book. This was a great age for correspondence and for the typed memorandum. The collections of two archbishops (Lang and Temple) and three bishops (Bell, Henson and Headlam) present the intricacies of private communication with considerations of a wider picture at every juncture. The extent to which the historian can reconstruct the attitudes, relationships and exchanges which underlay all manner of activities is very considerable and it is possible to combine them with public interventions, in Parliament or in Convocation or Church Assembly. Although the archive of Cardinal Hinsley is barely a shadow of these Anglican archives, what remains is often valuable. For those in the Free Churches we are left not with archives but with the records of assemblies and autobiographical writing. The world of the published word, particularly rich and vigorous in the British middle twentieth century, shows Christian opinion at large to have been loudly expressive, not only in theological publications but in the lists of the secular press, its journals, weeklies and polemical ventures. One argument of this book

⁹ Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christen, Theologe, Zeitgenosse* (Munich, 1967); in English first published as *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Contemporary* (London, 1970). It was Bishop Bell who, shortly before his death in 1958, initiated the publication of this edition of 1970. The chairmanship of the translation team was undertaken by Edwin Robertson, a Baptist minister who had worked in Germany and had known Bell.

¹⁰ See, for example, Eberhard Zeller, *Geist der Freiheit – Der Zwanzigste Juli* (Munich, 1963); also Michael Balfour and Julian Frisby, *Helmuth James von Moltke: A Leader against Hitler* (London, 1972).

¹¹ See G.K.A. Bell, 'The Background of the Hitler Plot', first published in the *Contemporary Review* in October 1945 and reprinted in Bell, *The Church and Humanity, 1939–1946* (London, 1946), pp. 165–76.

will be to show how that world of publishing developed in these years and how Christian argument spread across the face of British society. Already in the 1933–45 period there were some who were creating their own private collections of articles, pamphlets and books, sometimes to translate and pass on to others for practical use. The collections of the Anglican priest Richard Gutteridge and the Congregationalist Nathaniel Micklem were later united and deposited in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The bibliography at the close of the book is, I hope, something more comprehensive than indicative. But it is very far from definitive.

This book is in many ways a culmination of an ongoing reflection of thirty years. I first wrote a study of the Church of England and Nazi Germany as a research student, working under David Thompson at Cambridge. This first exploration possessed at least something of the character of a youthful blast and in certain respects the boundaries within which it worked were limited ones. In the present book I have embraced gladly the opportunity to write of Christians across the denominations and have done so with intellectual conviction. That an emphasis on the Church of England remains is inescapable given the nature of the extant material, but it is also appropriate. For the most part Free Church opinion did look to the Anglicans to take a lead, and not simply because of the peculiarities of its status as the established church. Bishop Bell, in particular, was very soon acknowledged as a leading authority on German matters, particularly when they were ecclesiastical or concerned with persecution and refuge.

In my doctoral thesis I also decided to write in thematic chapters, first exploring the debate over the political state and then examining the Church Struggle, the persecution of the Jews and then the arguments and interventions of the war, each in turn. I have approached the subject differently in this book and must lay myself open to the suspicion that a blandly chronological approach must concede too much to description and depress the possibilities of framing a sharp overall analysis. Yet I am prepared to justify this on a number of grounds. First, to some extent this is a history of development. Chronological precision remains indispensable in the tracing of changing attitudes and ideas over time. Second, at any given point particular issues interwove densely and they were often viewed in connection with each other. Indeed, in seeking to intervene in one dimension of the German crisis British Christians often had to calculate what was going on in others. This naturally affected their sense of emphasis, approach or timing. It could even enforce silence. Although many Christians placed the German church struggle in the foreground of their picture of Germany at large (something that many British journalists

at work in Germany between 1933 and 1939 also did), it is by no means the case that they considered ecclesiastical affairs more important than others. Often, they believed that in these things they had not only a more obvious claim but a genuine prospect of influence. Such things are all too easy to misunderstand. At any given moment we must hold the whole picture together and place every specific detail within it if we are to understand what was said and done. Finally, it has become far clearer to me that a study that is too rigidly governed by a single, firm concept or argument will almost inevitably subordinate the material to its demands and come to misrepresent not what happened but what lay behind it.¹² There is a place for polemical discussions, no doubt. To say that British Christians in these years were, by the lights of a later age, right or wrong, would seem to me to set the subject on quite the wrong foundation. Indeed, the essential purpose of this book is something different. I have chosen to work closely with my material, sometimes presenting it at length, with the intention not only of showing its essential qualities but allowing it to emerge on its own terms. This is not in any way to suggest that I have abandoned a responsibility for critical analysis – far from it. Many of the interpretive debates which have come to define the themes at work in this book have emphasised the intricacies of the language that was used, or even not used.

This book presents an opportunity to revise some enduring assumptions which have long informed our historiographical emphases and perspectives. There is still a tendency among historians of twentieth-century Britain to regard almost any aspect of its religious life as something perched on the periphery of social and political experience. This seems to me profoundly mistaken. The study of British Christians and the Third Reich turns out to be not a brief inspection of a remote ecclesiastical cul-de-sac, but an evocation of the patterns and myriad connections which lay at the heart of a complex, open society. In such things we see much of the language, life and character of British mass democracy in what was arguably its richest age. Furthermore, a conventional perception that what was essential to the trajectories of British history was generated only within the British Isles has often reinforced a sense of national detachment from the narratives of European history. Yet British people did not merely look at themselves, and their understanding of what went on in other, neighbouring societies was often far more

¹² See Tom Lawson, *The Church of England and the Holocaust: Christianity, Memory and Nazism* (Woodbridge, 2006).

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serious and sophisticated than we have allowed. Such national perspectives have also come to define too much in the writing of religious history. Because of this many historians of British Christianity have struggled to know quite where to place the activities of a figure like Bishop George Bell. That such a formidable contribution, though often briefly acknowledged, should so often be pushed to the fringe of what has become, essentially, a domestic subject must raise doubts. Do we need a new picture in which to place him? Perhaps Bell is a figure more convincingly at home not in an ecclesiastical category but in a still-young historiography of liberal internationalism? At all events, we may acknowledge that while the spheres of church and state were so widely united in the lives of their members, so liberal internationalism and international Christian ecumenism communed together. It is a principle of this book that all these patterns and configurations might now be viewed afresh in order to achieve a new image of this complex, restless age. I hope that it will give these men and women a new place in contemporary historiography, and a new voice too.

These themes certainly create a broad picture for the historian, but its reality and richness is revealed by details; above all by the myriad relationships which occurred in such contexts and by the emerging commitments of individual experience. I have reflected a good deal on the title of the book. Why write of British Christians when one might instead write of the British Churches? And how should one draw lines of distinction between religion and society? For there were many church people busily at work in the realm of Anglo–German relations who were, like the educationalist Amy Buller, practising Christians. But work of such a kind often lay outside, or alongside, the various networks and arguments which this study explores. It is certainly arguable that a focus on personalities proves to be the most revealing and rewarding approach to the subject. Not least is this so in showing the many forums which British Christians had by now developed.

Naturally, the significance of individual vision and agency does not define everything: the historian must configure a variety of elements in seeking to create a credible picture, and these include a study of oligarchies and alliances, the wider movements of opinion, resolutions passed by majorities in conference and the formalities of financial policy too. The extent to which the experience of individuals revealed the nature of such things, and tried to set them to work, remains fundamental.

This book proposes a particular approach to what historians tend to call, inelegantly, periodisation. Conventionally the 1939–45 war has dominated our sense of narrative developments, not least in creating

‘pre-war’ and ‘post-war’ eras. This is certainly natural, but it may not always prove helpful, or even appropriate. For the most part, British Christians had no very clear sense that they were living in a pre-war world, at least until late in 1938. An apprehension that war could indeed come did not, for the greater part, influence their reactions to German domestic policy, and in conflating these two dimensions of domestic and foreign policy some writers have created the impression that Christian support for the diplomacy of Appeasement implied a failure to see the phenomenon of Nazism clearly and credibly until very late in the day. It has come to seem strange that a protesting figure like Bishop Bell could be so supportive of the Munich settlement – but it was not strange at all. In the past I have considered, too readily, that military victory in May 1945 brought an effective close to the history of National Socialism, allowing, of course, for the lengthy legal processes at Nuremberg and elsewhere, but assuming that their proper place lay in the new landscapes of the post-war world, of Allied occupation and the evolving Cold War. I now, more than ever, feel the limits of such an understanding: after all, the realities brought by the Third Reich outlived its masters. Although the guns stopped firing, the international crisis which National Socialism provoked continued, entering yet another phase, defined by ongoing debates about guilt and responsibility and the realities of mass upheaval and migration across the face of the continent.

Accordingly, I have framed my subject in five distinct, but interrelating, eras. (1) The era 1933–34 announced the age of a German national revolution in which British Christians, for the most part, came to a decided view of National Socialism itself and began to explore avenues of response. (2) The era 1935–37 presented the very real possibility that British opinion might be reconciled to a German regime which was clearly here to stay. British organisations of many kinds now looked to cultivate links, often in the name of Anglo–German friendship. Very much of this was resisted by a movement of critical opinion in which British Christians were conspicuous and influential. (3) The era 1938–39 was heavily defined by the urgent crisis in international diplomacy, defined by German expansion and western Appeasement. In these two years the narratives of German occupation which we usually locate in the context of the Second World War were established in Austria and in the state of Czechoslovakia, while the November 1938 anti-Jewish pogrom intensified earlier persecution but also announced forms of state-directed violence which would grow in the conditions of war. (4) The era 1939–43 reconfigured almost all of the contextual realities which British Christians

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knew, transforming Britain itself into a final bastion of belligerent European democracy and converting most of the continent into something very like a National Socialist prison, removed from international society and confined within a terrible new paradigm. In these years the British discussion of National Socialism itself was decisively recast by the themes of collaboration, complicity and resistance which had changed the political (and one might say moral) face of Europe, while arguments about the relationship between the National Socialist state and its citizens now crystallised in the questions of military strategy and the new trajectories of international diplomacy. Finally, (5) the era 1943–49 saw a deepening discussion of the demands of justice and judgement, arguments which the prospect of eventual victory brought clearly into sight. These were subsequently applied in the contexts of the occupation of Germany and of the vast humanitarian crisis in which the ‘condition’ of that nation merged, almost entirely, with the crisis faced by Europe itself.