BRITISH METHODISTS AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Methodists across the world have for centuries found themselves divided on the difficult question of war and peace. Bishop C. Dale White has rightly noted that members of The United Methodist Church "have been ambivalent about war from our beginnings," seeking both to "counsel to men and women who believe it is their duty to participate in the military, while at the same time supporting conscientious objectors in their plea to do alternative service." The whole issue of the correct response to the challenge of war was subject to vigorous debate at the recent 2000 United Methodist General Conference. The war in Afghanistan that followed the tragic events in New York and Washington last September has forced Methodists both in the United States and beyond to think carefully once again about issues of international violence.

Methodist across the world may be committed to building a just peace, but differences undoubtedly exist between those who accept the possibility of a "just war" and others who believe that a commitment to absolute pacifism is the only possible response to the teachings of Christ. These differences about war and peace have deep roots in the Methodist tradition. The rest of this article examines how British Methodists responded to the horrors of the First World War that broke out in 1914. It will be seen that the debates about the rights and wrongs of war that took place in the main Methodist churches in Britain during the 1914-1918 war revolved around many of the issues that still prove so painful for the Christian conscience in the contemporary world.

British Methodism never really developed a coherent doctrine of war during the hundred years or so following the death of John Wesley in 1791. Wesley himself was certainly no pacifist, although he was quick to condemn war as the product of human depravity. While it is not clear that he ever articulated a coherent "just war" theory of his own, he was certainly ready to commit himself to the thirty-seventh of the Thirty-Nine articles of the Church of England, which roundly declared that, "It is lawful for Christian men at the commandment of their magistrate to wear weapons and serve in wars." There

2This article is based on material in the Methodist Archives and Record Centre (henceforth MARC) at the John Rylands Library Manchester. I am indebted to Peter Nockles and Gareth Lloyd of MARC for their help.
were, however, always those in 18th century Methodist circles, most notably the itinerant Yorkshire preacher John Nelson, who rejected the use of armed force on the grounds that, "I cannot bow my knee before the Lord to pray for a man, and get up and kill him when I have done." This tension remained visible throughout the 19th century.

The Peace Society, established in London in 1816, counted a number of Methodist ministers among its supporters throughout the following decades. Most leading British Methodists were, though, reluctant to endorse the Society’s view that war could never be justified under any circumstances. When the long-standing Eastern Question came to a boil in the late 1870s, an editorial in the Wesleyan Methodist Recorder observed that there was no prospect of ending war in a world that was not yet permeated by the spirit of Christ. Indeed, by the 1890s, the Methodist press was full of demands for the British government to take forceful action to prevent the Turkish slaughter of Christians in Armenia, along with numerous condemnations of the Salisbury administration’s desire to avoid any form of intervention in the region. The "Nonconformist Conscience,” at least in its Methodist guise, appeared ready to accept that war could sometimes represent the lesser of two evils. The outbreak of the Boer War in the autumn 1899 showed, though, that the whole question of war still had the potential to create sharp divisions within the various Methodist connexions.

Most Wesleyan ministers and their congregations were happy to subscribe to the view that the struggle which took place in South Africa during 1899-1902 was a justified one, since the British empire represented a force for civilization and tolerance in the face of Boer aggression. A minority strongly dissented from this view. The Rev. Samuel Keeble was so incensed by the trenchant views articulate by Hugh Price Hughes’ Methodist Times in support of British policy that he established a new weekly newspaper, the Methodist Weekly, to provide a forum for those who were critical of the war.

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6 Methodist Recorder, March 9, 1878.
7 See, for example, the editorial in the Methodist Times, September 17, 1896. For a more general discussion of The Nonconformist Conscience and Britain’s international role, see D.W. Bebbington, The Nonconformist Conscience (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982), 106-126.
8 Before the formation of a single Methodist Church in Britain in 1932, British Methodists were divided in a number of different bodies (the largest of which were the Wesleyans, the Primitive Methodists and the United Methodists.)
9 For a useful discussion of Wesleyan attitudes towards Empire, see Stephen Koss, "Wesleyanism and Empire," Historical Journal, 18, 1 (1975): 105-118.
10 See, for example, the editorial by Keeble in Methodist Weekly, November 8, 1900.
Opposition to the war was even more pronounced in the smaller Methodist churches. One former President of the Primitive Methodist Church strongly denounced British policy in South Africa,11 while the Primitive Methodist Leader and the Primitive Methodist World were willing to print at least some articles and letter attacking the war. The debate that erupted within Methodism over the Boer War focused for the most part on the objectives for which it was fought. Critics of the war usually condemned British policy on the grounds that it was dictated by a small number of financiers seeking to gain better access to the gold mines of the Transvaal; they did not, in most cases, reject war on the grounds that it was contrary to the teachings of Christ.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914, which led to destruction of human life on a scale far beyond the imagination of previous generations, led to an important change in the terms of the debate. The horrors of the Somme and Ypres encouraged an increasing number of Methodist to argue that war could never, under any circumstances, be reconciled with the teachings of Christ. The following pages trace the emergence of a pacifist minority within the main British Methodist connexions during the period 1914-1918, as well as examining the debate between those who supported the war against the central powers and others who argued that Christians should never engage in or support such a conflict.

The established hierarchies of the main connexions moved quickly to express their support for the war which broke out in the summer 1914. The Extraordinary Committee of Privileges, which served as the highest decision-making body of the Wesleyan Church between Conference, passed a unanimous resolution in September declaring that its members were, “absolutely convinced that the British government [had] acted the part of peacemakers...and that our country only drew its sword when plighted faith and national safety left no alternative course.”12 The President of Conference, Rev. Dinsdale Young, praised the thousands of young Wesleyans who rushed to enlist in the armed forces, declaring in a speech at Blackpool in September that, “love of country is part of the love of God.”13 Most leading figures in the Primitive Methodist and United Methodist Churches took a similar stand. Rev. Arthur Guttery, who became President of the Primitive Methodist Conference in 1915, wrote numerous articles during the first year of the war condemning German aggression and demanding that the Kaiser should be hanged unless it could be proved that he was certifiably mad.14

\(^{11}\)See, for example, the views expressed by Rev. John Smith in his letters to the Primitive Methodist World, December 28, 1899; January 11, 1900.
\(^{12}\)Methodist Times, September 17, 1914.
\(^{13}\)Methodist Times, August 27, 1914.
\(^{14}\)Primitive Methodist Leader, August 13, 1914, December 24, 1914.
When the Primitive Methodist Conference met in the summer 1915, its representatives were, like their counterparts in the Wesleyan Church, happy to approve a Conference Address praising church members who had accepted "the call of duty" and enlisted in the armed forces. The main Methodist connexion also moved quickly to deal with the immediate demands of wartime. The Wesleyan Church greatly increased the number of its chaplains in the armed forces, while the Primitive Methodists and United Methodists appointed dedicated army chaplains for the first time in their history, in union with a number of other Nonconformist denominations. The Wesleyan Church also provided servicemen with "camp homes" designed to provide them with a place to relax off-duty away from the temptations of the public houses, while all the connexions appointed "officiating ministers" to counsel troops based at camps in Britain. They also tried, though without much success, to tackle the drunkenness and disorder that rapidly became a hallmark of national life under the stress of war, passing numerous resolutions on the subject of temperance and pub opening hours for consideration by the government and by local councils.

The defense of Britain's involvement in the war put forward by men such as Young and Guttery was largely couched in a secular language that emphasized the immorality of international aggression and the right of small countries to defend themselves against attack. Some of the letters that appeared in the press defending Britain's entry into the war did, though, attempt to locate the war within a broader theological framework. The Rev. F.W. Lewis (Wesleyan) wrote to the Methodist Times arguing in somewhat apocalyptic terms that the war against Germany was "a war not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers." Arthur Guttery himself was adept at arguing that Britain had a divine mission to defend the cause of freedom in the world.

The most sophisticated attempts to defend the war in theological terms appeared, though, in journals such as the London Quarterly Review and the Holborn Review (closely associated with the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist Churches respectively). Professor J.H. Moulton from Didsbury College, Manchester, provided one of the best discussions of the subject in an article on "Christianity and Defensive War" which appeared in the London Quarterly Review early in 1915. Moulton argued that participation in a defensive war was permissible for a Christian society, despite the seemingly unambiguous character of Christ's emphasis in the Sermon on the Mount on "turning the other cheek" in case of aggression. He suggested that such words should be treated as "oriental paradoxes.... it is deeply significant that when

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15 Minutes of the Primitive Methodist Conference (1915), The Conference Address to the Churches.
16 The detailed records can be found in the Minutes of the Wesleyan Army and Navy Board, Methodist Archives and Research Centre, John Rylands Library (henceforth MARC).
17 Methodist Times, November 12, 1914.
Jesus Himself was smitten on the one cheek He did not turn the other, but offered very dignified remonstrance.” Moulton went on to offer a staunchly “realist” analysis of the human condition, arguing that governments had to treat divine law “as an unattainable ideal,” the main purpose of which was to serve as a general guide to action designed to minimize “to the utmost the evils that it cannot rule out.” When applied to the international arena, such an approach clearly implied that countries sometimes needed to resort to force in order to repel unprovoked aggression. Moulton’s approach was echoed by Arthur Wood in an article on the “Moral Problems Raised by the Great War” that appeared in the *Holborn Review*, in which the author observed that, “Christian ideals are not achieved easily.” He went on to suggest that, “the dream of a sudden or immediate permanent peace is one of the most foolish fancies man has ever been the victim of,” the pursuit of which could actually make war more likely. While Wood did not identify the target of his attack, which was first published in the autumn 1915, there is little doubt that his words were aimed in part at the minority of Methodists who had expressed unease about the war. For, while a majority in each of the main connexions had been ready to throw its support behind the national war effort during the first year of the conflict, numerous voices had also been raised expressing concern about the conflict.

The correspondence columns of the main Methodist newspapers provided one of the best forums for those who had qualms about the war. A few days after the start of hostilities in August 1914, the Rev. J.P. Milum (Wesleyan) wrote to the *Methodist Times* arguing that Christians around the world should take the lead in a “movement of war against war.” The Rev F.W. Lofthouse, Secretary of the radically-minded Methodist Union of Social Service, wrote to the same paper expressing his conviction that, “force is no remedy. As followers of the Prince of Peace we know that war, of itself, can settle nothing.” The Rev. H.B. Turner observed that Christ’s “Kingdom had its birth in non-resistance and can only have its continuation in the same.” Similar sentiments were expressed in the *Primitive Methodist Leader*. The Rev Ben Spoer argued passionately that, “Force will never destroy force,” while another anonymous contributor pointedly attacked ministers who treated their churches as “auxiliaries to the recruiting stations.”

One lay member of the Primitive Methodist Church observed bitterly that, “It is astonishing how the attitude of the Church has changed in relation to

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20 *Methodist Times*, August 6, 1914.  
22 *Methodist Times*, October 8, 1914.  
23 *Primitive Methodist Leader*, September 17, 1914.  
24 *Primitive Methodist Leader*, September 24, 1914.
war. At one time the feeling was all against war, but now the war spirit is with us, in both pulpit, school and classroom, and we are condemned if we dare to stand against war.” Similar sentiments were also expressed from time to time in the United Methodist newspaper, although the cautious editorial line that prevailed during the first year of the war placed some limits on the freedom of expression that was allowed in the correspondence column. Methodists who were critical of the war undoubtedly felt swamped by the prevailing mood of patriotism that swept through British society in 1914-1915, which may explain why only a small number of those who articulated their views in the main Methodist newspapers following the outbreak of war openly declared themselves as committed pacifists. Most, like Samuel Keeble, preferred to emphasize the importance of preventing the war from descending into a bitter conflict of hatred and revenge. As a result, while the debate on the war within Methodism was sometimes quite tense during 1914-1915, it seldom revolved at great length around the problem of reconciling the use of organized violence with the Christian conscience, focusing instead on the immediate circumstances surrounding the outbreak and development of the conflict.

The Military Service Act of January 1916, which introduced conscription, played a critical role in fomenting divisions within British Methodism. The main Methodist newspapers, with the exception of the Methodist Recorder, were opposed to the introduction of compulsory military service. The Methodist Times blamed the influence of the Northcliffe press for forcing the move on Asquith’s government, an opinion that was echoed by the Primitive Methodist Leader, which also suggested that conscription would be opposed “by the great mass of Free Churchmen.” The United Methodist agreed that the introduction of military service represented “a step backwards,” and warned that “trusted Liberal leaders” had betrayed “one of the most cherished tenets of Liberalism.” Contributors to all three newspapers were concerned that the abolition of the voluntary principle represented a growth in state power that was profoundly alien to the traditional Nonconformist ethic, with its emphasis on individual freedom of conscience and suspicion of official coercion in any form. The Military Service Act did include a conscientious objection clause, which allowed for the exemption of men whose principles did not allow them to bear arms, but most contributors to the Methodist press were initially unconvinced that it would prove sufficiently robust. In any event, most of those who opposed conscription soon tac-

25Primitive Methodist Leader, December 3, 1914.
26Methodist Times, November 5, 1914.
29Methodist Times, January 6, 1916.
30Primitive Methodist Leader, January 20, 1916.
31United Methodist, January 6, 1916.
itly reconciled themselves to the new situation, but the correspondence columns showed that deep divisions continued to linger on the twin questions of conscription and conscientious objection.

Opponents of conscription cited a whole range of arguments to support their case. Samuel Keeble called on “progressive Methodists everywhere” to oppose the Military Service Bill, noting sadly that should conscription come, “then the England I love and honour is no more. She is a servile state.”32 The Rev. H.W. Horwill, who as a Wesleyan minister was himself exempt from military service, wrote to the *Methodist Times* that he would never be willing to surrender his conscience to a superior officer.33 Another young lay contributor to the paper, who was determined to seek exemption from military service, argued that, “War cannot be justified by Christ’s gospel...as a follower of Christ I cannot allow even the state to come between God and myself.”34 These opinions were echoed by members of the other main connexions. The Rev. J.E. Black, a United Methodist minister, urged his church to oppose conscription on the grounds that it posed a grave threat to “the democratic freedoms of our land.”35 Another minister, Primitive Methodist, even suggested that, “Conscription is as much a danger to our religious as our political freedom.”36 This initial concern about conscription was heightened when it became clear that the tribunals set up to establish the *bona fides* of those seeking exemption from military service all too often behaved in a high-handed and arbitrary manner.37 The Methodist press was full of indignant accounts of the activities of the tribunals throughout 1916, describing how the men who came before them were routinely described as “shirkers” and “cowards.” While the “conscientious objection” clause in the Military Service Act seemed to provide a cast-iron guarantee for all those whose principles did not allow them to fight, the *modus operandi* of the tribunals made it difficult for conscientious objectors (COs) to establish that they were acting in good faith.

The activities of the tribunals evoked a good deal of criticism across Methodism. Even the *Methodist Recorder*, which supported the introduction of conscription, accepted that the rights of private conscience needed to be protected.38 The 1916 Conference of the Primitive Methodist Church gave a good deal of attention to the plight of conscientious

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37 For a damning account of the activities of the tribunals, see David Boulton, *Objection Overruled* (London, MacGibbon and Kee, 1967); for a more balanced view, see Rae, *Conscience and Politics*, 94-133.
38 See, for example, the article by Rev. C. Andres, “Conscience and the Tribunals,” *Methodist Recorder*, March 16, 1916, or the Notes column in the same paper on March 30, 1916.
objectors, declaring its abhorrence at the “deliberate and savage brutality” faced by men who refused to put on a uniform when they had failed to gain exemption from the tribunals. The Conference of the United Methodist Church also discussed the subject, but agreed to end its deliberations when it became clear that the whole issue might “cleave the Church to its very base,” a decision that highlighted the sensitive nature of the whole issue. The editorials and leading articles that appeared in the main Methodist newspapers usually took a somewhat patronizing approach towards the conscientious objectors, but generally accepted that they were entitled to exercise the rights granted to them under the Military Service Act. However, some contributors to their letters pages adopted a much harsher tone. The Methodist Times published letters describing COs as “quaint old self-righteous pharisees” who refused “to stand up for their country when it is imperilled.” Similar sentiments were voiced in the letters column of the Primitive Methodist Leader, where one contributor noted that he had “little respect for a person’s conscience who will allow himself to sit whining at home while murder and rape, and atrocity and devastation are rampant in Belgium and France, Serbia, and Poland.” Other correspondents accused the conscientious objectors of citing their religious principles against fighting to hide their cowardice. The treatment of the COs in the Methodist press was on the whole more fair-minded than in the secular press, but many of the same suspicions and animosities were only too visible.

The introduction of conscription at the start of 1916 played a critical role in fostering a strong pacifist movement within the main Methodist connexions, predicated on the assumption that participation in war was always incompatible with the Christian conscience. Samuel Keeble played a central role in this development within the Wesleyan Church. During the Boer War and its aftermath, Keeble had denied that he was committed to an unconditional rejection of war, opposing the conflict in South Africa primarily on the grounds that British policy was dictated by a handful of rapacious financiers seeking to advance their own private interests. By the beginning of 1916 he had apparently come to the view that there could never be circumstances in which it was right to take up arms. In the spring of that year, Keeble and a number of lay and ministerial collaborators distributed a manifesto to Wesleyan ministers declaring that, “We believe, if need be, we must be wronged rather than wrong others, and, in the last resort, be killed rather than kill.” The manifesto also roundly declared that, “Satan does not cast out Satan,” and argued that in the final analysis war could only be “overcome by
the spirit of love.”

Keeble’s manifesto provoked a furious response. The *Methodist Recorder*, in particular, printed numerous letters complaining bitterly about the document. The Rev. B.C. Spencer complained that Keeble and his fellow signatories had impugned “the honour of the nation,” while the Rev. E.H. Jackson accused the authors of the manifesto of undermining the national war effort. Despite the chorus of criticism, Keeble went ahead with his plans to establish a Peace Fellowship of the Wesleyan Church, which played a critical role during the following years in bringing together Wesleyan pacifists, as well as offering practical help to conscientious objectors who fell foul of the law. Similar bodies were also established in 1916 and 1917 in the Primitive Methodist and United Methodist churches. The prevailing patriotism within the main Methodist churches effectively forced critics of the war to organize themselves outside the formal connexional structure.

It is difficult to discern a well-defined theological defense of pacifism in the letters and articles of those who were active in organizations such as the Wesleyan Peace Fellowship and its counterparts in the Primitive Methodist and United Methodist churches. Some conscientious objectors—both Methodist and non—Methodist—were “caught out” when they sought to defend their pacifism before the tribunals by reference to specific biblical injunctions. It was only too easy for the chairman or the military representative on the panel to cite a scriptural passage with a directly contrary meaning, a tactic that often had the effect of confusing the less sophisticated appellant, leading to the dismissal of their case. Keeble’s own pacifism was apparently grounded in a pervasive sense that war was directly contrary to what might be termed the whole ethical stance of Christ’s teaching. This was certainly the approach that distinguished the best-known interdenominational Christian pacifist organization of the period, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR), the program of which rested on the position that, “love as revealed in the life and death of Jesus Christ...is the only power by which evil can be overcome and the only sufficient basis of human society.” Many of the Christian pacifist organizations that emerged during the First World War, including those established by Methodists, shared this pervasive sense that the hatred and slaughter of war could simply not under any circumstances be reconciled with the values espoused in the Sermon on the Mount.

It is useful to examine briefly the views and experiences of a number of Methodists who themselves sought conscientious objector status, along with those who supported them, although the destruction of the official records relating to the activities of the tribunals makes it difficult to reconstruct the profile of these men in detail. Most of those who sought exemption were content to accept alternative work in areas of vital national interest such as

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45 MARC, Methodist Peace Fellowship file (“The Early History of Pacifist Witness”).
forestry or agriculture; a few, though, insisted that they were unwilling to undertake any form of service that might aid the war effort. Those who failed to gain such "absolute" exemption from the tribunals, and still persisted in their refusal to fight or to undertake any alternative service, faced the prospect of jail (usually with hard labor). The number of men who claimed conscientious objector status in Britain during the First World War was in fact comparatively small—probably no more than 16,000 men in all—while the number of those insisting on absolute exemption from any alternative service was smaller still. Quakers and Christadelphians predictably predominated among those who cited their religious principles for refusing to fight. While the available evidence is very fragmentary, it appears that Methodists were more likely to seek exemption from military service than Anglicans or Catholics, though probably no more so than other Nonconformists such as Baptists and Congregationalists.  

The opposition of some Methodists to the war took on a decidedly political coloring, which was not perhaps surprising given that many Methodists had been active in the pre-war labor movement, a section of which remained resolutely opposed to the war throughout 1914-1918. Wilfred Wellock, an Independent Methodist local preacher from Lancashire, was a radical socialist who subsequently became a Member of Parliament in the 1920s. As a young man he was sharply critical of the "corrupting industrialism" which he believed was responsible for stunting individual freedom and development, a sentiment which played a key role in leading him towards political radicalism. In the wake of the Military Service Act he began to publish the New Crusader journal, which was designed to provide a platform for articulating his conviction that "Pacifism is simply applied Christianity." Wellock himself was eventually arrested for refusing to fight or undertake non-combatant service, and sentenced to two and a half years in jail. Jim Simmons, a Primitive Methodist local preacher from East Anglia, was also jailed for his opposition to the war. Simmons was a professional soldier who joined the army in 1911, but was wounded soon after the war broke out and sent back home to Britain in order to convalesce. During his time back home he developed close associations with anti-war politicians in the Independent Labour Party, and began touring the country, preaching the "fiery cross of peace" under the banner "Private Jim Simmons with a message from the trenches." Simmons was eventually arrested and imprisoned for a time on sedition charges, although he was released after his plight became something of a cause celebre. His opposition to the war, like Wellock's, displayed both a political and a religious character. Simmons was certainly convinced that the horrors of war could never be reconciled with the "warm, human, inspiring" aspects of Christianity that he

46Friends House (London), Harvey Papers, Temp MSS 835, Box 10.  
preached in his sermons, but he also spoke at length against the "war profiteers" and "the armaments sharks" whose activities he believed had brought the war about. Wellock and Simmons were both convinced that the origins of war were to be found as much in the workings of modern capitalism as in the depraved depths of human nature.

Many critics of the war in the various Methodist connexions undoubtedly held progressive views on a range of social and political issues, although it should be noted that many who belonged to organizations such as the Methodist Union of Social Service were happy to support the war. Individuals such as Keeble and Lofthouse not only believed that war was incompatible with the ethical teachings of Christ; they also believed that it was a natural consequence of allowing the private manufacture of weapons for profit. It was for this reason that some Methodist pacifists were ready to join organizations such as the Union of Democratic Control and the No Conscription Fellowship, whose opposition to the war was normally couched in political rather than religious terms. The few surviving testimonies of Methodists who appeared before the tribunals strongly suggest that many "ordinary" conscientious objectors had little interest in wider political questions. Instead they couched their desire for exemption from military service and non-combatant service in religious terms. One young Wesleyan CO from West London spoke for a number of his co-religionists when he declared to the tribunal hearing his case that he would not even join the Royal Army Medical Corps on the grounds that it formed "part of the whole military system which conflicts with my conscience." Another Wesleyan CO from London, P.T. Moore, was supported by his circuit minister—himself a supporter of the war—who informed the tribunal that Moore held "strong views absolutely opposed to war...as contrary to the teachings of Christ." Many other Methodist COS also sought to support of their ministers, in the hope that such a testimony would sway the verdict of the tribunals that hear their cases. Some Methodist COS were handicapped by the fact that none of the main connexions formally opposed war. At least one member of the Wesleyan Church was abruptly informed by his tribunal that he had no case because it was "not a part of the creed of the Wesleyans that fighting is a wicked thing." Many tribunal chairmen remained resolutely unsympathetic to the claims of the individual conscience.

Some Methodist conscientious objectors eventually paid a high price for refusing either to fight or to accept alternative work that might assist the war effort. Not only did they have to face the hostile interrogation of the tribunals, which could be a considerable ordeal in itself. They also had to face the opprobrium of a public that was for the most part very unsympathetic to those

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48 The best guide to Simmons' views can be found in his autobiography, Jim Simmons, *Soap Box Evangelist* (Chichester: Janay Publishing, 1972).
49 Public Record Office (Kew), MH 47/67 (Records of the Middlesex Appeal Tribunal).
50 Methodist Times, March 2, 1916.
who refused to play their part in the defeat of the enemy. Many of the young men who were sent to prison lacked the psychological and physical resilience to survive in a harsh environment, where both the guards and their fellow-prisoners treated them with contempt. One young Wesleyan who spent more than two years in prison was sent home on a stretcher, doomed to spend the rest of his life as an invalid. The body of another young Wesleyan who died in Dartmoor Prison was stoned by local people as it was removed by his friends for burial. Even those who avoided prison faced many problems. A Primitive Methodist CO in a Durham pit village had his windows smashed by neighbors, some of them quite probably from his own chapel. Others were subject­ed to a vicious campaign of rumor and innuendo. One Primitive Methodist minister wrote to the Leader that it took more courage to face the “sneers” of the community than the horrors of the battlefield.” While this may have been something of an exaggeration, there is little doubt that the decision to refuse military service required its own particular form of courage and determination.

II

The problem of war has posed an enduring problem for the Christian conscience down the years. Some members of the early church committed themselves to a pacifist interpretation of Christ’s teaching centuries before St. Augustine began his ruminations on the character of the just war. The historian Peter Brock has traced the development of Christian pacifism in Europe during the second millennium in impressive detail, showing how different groups ranging from the Czech Brethren through to the 19th-century Quakers sought to challenge the militarism of the societies in which they lived. The challenge of organized state violence became even more acute in the 20th century, when the development of “total war” and nuclear weapons massively increased the destructive consequences of international conflict. The tension between Christian “realists” and Christian “pacifist” has always ultimately been rooted in a competing interpretation of the character of Christ’s ethical teaching. To use the language of Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth, should

51Methodist Times, February 20, 1919.
52Primitive Methodist Leader, November 6, 1919.
54Primitive Methodist Leader, April 20, 1916.
55For a valuable guide to the attitudes of the early church on questions of peace and war, see C.J. Cadoux, The Early Christian Attitude to War (London: Headley Books, 1919).
56Brock, Pacifism in Europe.
57Among the massive literature on pacifism in Britain during the first half of the 20th century, see Ceadel, Pacifism; James Hinton, Protests and Visions: Peace Politics in Twentieth-Century Britain (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).
Christ’s ethical commands be treated as a transcendent ethic that cannot be applied directly to the mundane world of human affairs, or as a more direct and compelling set of commands designed to govern the action of the individual Christian in everyday life?58 The various theories of “just war” that have been propounded down the centuries all rest on an assumption that the injunction to “turn the other cheek” cannot be taken literally, and that war can be justified if it is designed to achieve certain clear and morally acceptable objectives. By contrast, a commitment to absolute pacifism explicitly or implicitly rests on the view that the Christian should follow the teaching of Christ in a literal fashion, trusting that such action will in some way mitigate the evil of the world and promote the common good.

The debates within British Methodism on war and peace during the First World War were not for the most part expressed in the theological language of the “just war” tradition. Nor did they really anticipate the language of the arguments subsequently articulated by Niebuhr and Barth in their voluminous writings. J.H. Moulton’s treatment of Christ’s words on peace and war as “oriental paradoxes,” that should not be taken as a direct guide to action, anticipate the language later used by Barth, but most prominent Methodists who supported the war articulated their position in a more prosaic language that emphasized the need to oppose international aggression. The tension between the opponents and the proponents of war within British Methodism was in truth always as much related to wider development in British society as it was to sustained theological debate. Most Methodists supported the war because they shared the instinctive patriotism exhibited by their fellow Britons. Those who opposed the war more often than not couched their opposition in the traditional language of 19th-century Nonconformist liberalism. It was only after the horrors of the 1914–1918 war had passed into history that a new generation of British Methodists began to reflect somewhat more systematically on the nature of war and the duty of the Christian to promote international harmony and peace.

58 The most accessible account of Barth’s ideas on a range of issues, including war, can be found in Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts (London: SCM Press, 1976); among Niebuhr’s voluminous writings on the subject, see his books Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Scribner, 1934) and Beyond Tragedy (London: Nisbet and Company, 1938). See, too, his pamphlet Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1940).