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Condemnation and Appeasement: The Attitudes of British Christians towards National Socialist Religious and Foreign Policies, 1934–1939

In Britain we still tend to write history in national categories. The dominant idea of international history remains more the study of diplomacy than of the interest shown by citizens of one society in the affairs of another. Yet that theme of international perception, understanding and involvement is a very striking dimension of the twentieth century narrative and it deserves the serious attention of historians.

Between 1933 and 1939 many men and women in the British churches did hold strong views about the domestic and foreign policies of National Socialist Germany¹. It is important to emphasize this at the outset, because it is not something that should be taken for granted. Some churches, as we all know well, present as apolitical a view of life as they can, and for them the policies of their own governments do not appear in the sphere of Christian faith. So to criticise the government of another country may be seen to represent a larger stride into such dubious territory, especially in the twentieth century when the logic of national sovereignty has increasingly been taken to prohibit the criticism of other peoples' 'internal' affairs.

The fact that British Christians sought to frame a response to the situation in Germany between 1933 and 1939 begs the question: why did they feel it to be natural, just and Christian to do so? What kind of self-understanding, or identity, inspired this? My approach in this article is essentially one of informed and, I hope, sensitive generalization. There were many different attitudes to be found in the British churches both towards German church life and National Socialist foreign policy, and it would be impossible to do them justice here. But I shall try to identify what was representative of an identifiable consensus, or broader currents of opinion. A generalization to begin with is that there was little to distinguish between the attitudes of people in the various Protestant churches – the Church of England and the Free Churches. Their denominational traditions en-

¹ See *Daphne Hampson*, *The British Response to the German Church Struggle 1933–39*, Unpubl. D. Phil thesis, Oxford University, 1973; *Armin Boyens*, *Kirchenkampf und Ökumene 1933–1939* (München 1969); *Andrew Chandler*, *The Church of England and Nazi Germany 1933–1945*, Unpubl. Ph.D thesis, Cambridge University, 1991; *Alan Wilkinson*, *Dissent or Conform? War, Peace and the British Churches 1914–45* (London 1986) 137–192.

couraged different emphases and nuances, but they saw the fundamental issues with some unity. About the Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain it is more difficult to be confident. The historiography of that church in this period is still in its infancy, and the suggestions that I shall venture will be cautious and, inevitably, vulnerable.

Churches are not institutions, but most have acquired powerful institutional characteristics in search of order and identity. Although the relationship between culture and structure is inevitably a complicated one, it is often seen that organized forms framed to represent certain commitments in their turn reinforce those commitments. The establishment of the Church of England – not nearly so impressive a reality as foreign visitors often believed – arguably encouraged members of that church to confront the world of political power with a sense of legitimacy, security and confidence. Fortified with twenty-six seats in the second chamber of Parliament, the House of Lords, the bishops of the church contributed a good deal to debates on social reform and foreign affairs². Some critics judged that the establishment equally encouraged Anglicans to adopt views that were sympathetic to the political powers that fostered them. Meanwhile, a tradition of dissent did something to lead Free Church people also to speak to the ways of the political world, or, at least, to view structures of authority critically because they had for so long lived outside them³.

German Christians who visited Britain were inclined to complain how little real theology they found preached in the churches there. Ulrich Simon, who escaped from Germany to Britain as a young man in 1933, found the sermons that he now heard simply ‘wallowed in the shallow waters of liberal ethics’. At worst, Anglican priests ‘seemed to have no very clear ideas on anything’⁴. But in so far as most British church people affirmed that the world was the work of God, and that nothing in creation lay beyond His care, they were sure that Christian people should interpret it and participate in all its affairs in faith. In the Church of England the Anglo-Catholic, or High Church, movement was emphatic that the Incarnation was the central fact of Christian revelation, and that as God had become man and dwelt among us, so Christian faith and action must flow out into all the world⁵. Conservative evangelicals were equally sure that this was a world of sin that must be saved and united with God through the love of Christ. Their basic language of atonement, redemption and salvation could be seen in a different way to encourage a sensitivity to evils that were political⁶.

² For a thorough overview, see *E. R. Norman, Church and Society in England 1770–1970: A Historical Study* (Oxford 1976) 221–278.

³ See *David Bebbington, The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870–1914* (London 1982) and *James Munson, The Nonconformists* (London 1991) 204–289.

⁴ *Ulrich Simon, Sitting in Judgement 1913–1963: An Interpretation of History* (London 1978) 42.

⁵ See *Peter d’A Jones, The Christian Socialist Revival 1877–1914* (Princeton 1968) 85–98.

⁶ See *David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London 1989).

In 1933, Ulrich Simon found the Church of England 'conservative without being nationalistic, English without being against other races, Christian without being anti-Jewish, hierarchical without being opposed to reform, rich without cursing socialism'⁷. It would be a circular and sterile debate to analyse how these identifiable religious themes borrowed from, or, in turn, informed, distinctive political values in a liberal, pluralistic, constitutional state. How may they be detached? Anglicans were doubtful that they could be. They were more inclined to see the political state as the creation of the Christian Church that had established its precepts and then fostered it. Contemporary political culture in their eyes still declared the debt. It was the role of those in authority to govern in the name of the national conscience, and the duty of the national church to educate that conscience⁸. This may well have claimed too much for the Church of the twentieth century. But, in its way, it did plead for the inter-relationship of matters temporal and spiritual, and it also put the politicians in their place.

These values may have taken British Christians some way towards the reality of political life in their own land, but not necessarily all the way to confront the realities of a foreign country like Germany. Such a journey was made possible when abstract principles converged with the force of experience and circumstance. The Great War of 1914–18 created a popular commitment to international life. Those who had survived felt under an obligation to those who had died, and to those who would now come after. In Great Britain the League of Nations Union attracted a lively popular support wherever it set down roots. The churches in Britain brought a powerful dimension to this mood. Peace was a word to be found more often than any other in the prayers of congregations. Hitler was first an issue because he appeared to threaten peace.

To trace the connecting strands between British and German Christianity is by no means an obvious business. The Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain lived as a part of a great international communion, and the fate of fellow Catholics in Germany was naturally a concern to them. There were few existing denominational ties for Free Church people to draw upon. There were some German Baptists, but not very many. Then, to most, German Protestantism appeared uninvitingly complicated in its structures and remote in its theological precepts⁹. But a decade of busy ecumenical activity had encouraged a vision that every foreign church had its place in the *Una Sancta*, and this vision strengthened concern for German Christianity just as it also legitimated it. Ecumenism was a movement

⁷ Ulrich Simon, *Sitting in Judgement* 40.

⁸ Perhaps the most fluent exposition of this view may be found in the writings of Brooke Foss Westcott and Mandell Creighton. See Brooke Foss Westcott, *Christian Aspects of Life* (London 1897) 59–118 and Mandell Creighton, *Church and Nation* (London 1901). See, too, William Temple, *Church and Nation* (London 1915) and *Christianity and the State* (London 1928).

⁹ See Andrew Chandler, *Brethren in Adversity: Bishop Bell, the Church of England and the Crisis of German Protestantism 1933–39* (Weybridge 1997) 5–11, and W. R. Ward, *Faith and Fallacy: English and German Perspectives in the Nineteenth Century*, in: *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, ed. by Richard Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (London 1990) 39–67.

whose time had come. Archbishop Temple spoke of it enthusiastically as the 'great new fact' of Christian life¹⁰. The 1920 Lambeth Conference had published its Appeal to all Christian People¹¹. The international contacts with churches abroad at Lambeth Palace had so grown that a new body, the Archbishop's Council on Foreign Relations, had been established in 1933 to elicit and organize information for him. This was chaired by the bishop of Gloucester, Arthur Cayley Headlam.

If church people believed that they had a message for a world of politics, they also enjoyed a sense of confidence that they would be heard, respected and heeded. At the end of March 1933 the archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, registered his anxiety for the Jews of Germany in a statement to the House of Lords¹². Some later told him that he was in part responsible for the early cancellation of the boycott of Jewish businesses, on 1 April. If this appears dubious, it would be as well to remember that a German politician like von Ribbentrop did believe that the archbishops and bishops of the state church were men of political status and influence. Accordingly, he attempted to cultivate their sympathies¹³. After the war it was reported that a list had been discovered in Berlin of public figures to be eliminated once Great Britain was occupied. It included the archbishop of Canterbury and his secretariat. Alan Don, who had worked as Lang's chaplain and secretary, was both puzzled and flattered. Then a bishop could also be confident that his letter would be published by the *Times*, and much of the British response to National Socialist Germany is to be found in the correspondence columns of that newspaper. The *Times* did favour the national church. Free church leaders were less sure of publication there.

A local vicar could feel that he reasons for confidence, too. When Hitler came to power in January 1933 a priest in Northampton sent a letter inviting him to clarify his position on foreign policy. When he received no reply from Berlin he sent a telegram, telling the local newspaper that he expected an answer before long¹⁴. This story may only speak of a certain idiosyncrasy, and the British often care to think of their clergymen as eccentric. But the episode also demonstrates a convergence of what historians would often separate and categorize distinctly as religious, political, local, national and international history. It is a salutary reminder that while such academic categories seek to represent the past, the past itself does not always work in such ways. What is important here is that the Northampton vicar felt involved, and legitimately.

1933 was, for British Christians, the year in which their views of the new Germany were forged. The appearance of Hitler in January of that year had been

¹⁰ *F. I. Iremonger*, William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: His Life and Letters (Oxford 1948) 387.

¹¹ The Lambeth Conference 1920: Encyclical Letter from the Bishops with Resolutions and Reports (London 1920).

¹² Parliamentary Debates, House of Lords, 5th series, vol. 87, col. 225, 30 March 1933.

¹³ See *Chandler*, Brethren in Adversity 89–92.

¹⁴ My thanks to Philip Coupland for this reference.

greeted with anxiety or even alarm in most church journals¹⁵. He was a danger to the peace of Europe. He was also seen, almost from the first, as a new example of a dangerous political breed already known to them: an ideological politician who sought to create a totalitarian state. He was placed in the same category as Lenin, Stalin and Mussolini. If the ideology of National Socialism appeared difficult and confused, the creation of a repressive political state appeared all too clear. The justification that Hitler had saved Europe from Communism was not much respected in British Protestant circles: in Roman Catholic life it had, arguably, greater credence.

In 1933, too, the foundation on which British attitudes to the German Church Struggle, and German politics at large, was based was this recognition of the totalitarian state. First, the totalitarian state was an atheistic state because it was all-powerful and claimed rights over the conscience of the individual that belonged to God alone. Second, such a state was ideological, one that affirmed its ersatz religion of racial supremacy. Third, the totalitarian state was a violent state which persecuted Jews, Socialists and Communists, and – symbolically – pacifists. Not at once, but by the spring of 1939, that sense of power, ideology and force was seen also to make the preservation of international peace impossible. These connections may appear clear enough, set down on paper, but throughout the period British Christians were not always sure how to judge the relationship between the different strands.

British church people seldom articulated a commitment to the theory of democracy. But a striking number were now vocal about the varieties of political life Christians could not endorse. Political movements that abolished other parties and confined their opponents in concentration camps could not be acceptable. The establishment of such camps in 1933 in Germany provoked indignation in Britain, and church leaders played an active part in inspiring protest. The intimidation of pacifists was noted bleakly; it did not reassure people who were anxious about Hitler's intentions abroad. The persecution of Jews was, above all, odious: British Christians struggled to understand what they often saw as a recrudescence of medieval barbarism. At the Church Congress of 1935, the Bishop of Winchester argued that Christians could endorse many forms of political government, but not totalitarian states¹⁶.

One of the most impressive studies of religion in the Nazi state published in these years was an analysis of the Catholic Church in the Third Reich. It was written not by a Roman Catholic but a Congregationalist, Nathaniel Micklem¹⁷. At large, however, British Protestants committed their energies to the plight of German Protestants. After all, it was felt, the Vatican could look after the Catholics. In comparison, the Protestants appeared friendless and vulnerable. Hitler

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Church Times*, 3 February 1933, 127a and 30 June 1933, 227a.

¹⁶ Maxwell S. Leigh, *The Church and the Modern State: A Report of the Proceedings of the Sixty-fifth Church Congress*, Bournemouth, 8–11 October 1935 (London 1936) 43–67.

¹⁷ Nathaniel Micklem, *The Catholic Church in National Socialist Germany* (Oxford 1939).

was right to resent the bad publicity that the church struggle generated abroad. British liberal opinion, Christian or not, rejoiced to see the designs of a violent, cynical government frustrated by impressive numbers of resilient pastors. It was often heard that only the churches of Germany had offered genuine opposition to this dictatorial state.

This paper is concerned not with acts, but attitudes. But an attitude that is not undergirded and informed by weighty evidence cannot lay the foundation for effective involvement, and many British church people did seek to be effective participants in the German church struggle. From where did they get their information? The ecumenical movement guaranteed a regular dissemination of authoritative news. Bishop Bell was much advised by friends like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1934–5, and throughout the period by Alphons Koechlin¹⁸. Many others, in turn, owed their information to him. The leaders of the Church of England had some access to the views of politicians and diplomats. What the establishment of the church made possible was the friendship of archbishops and government ministers, and useful conversations in Parliament. It did not grant to the archbishop of Canterbury a regular income of privileged information and expertise. In this sense, the value of establishment was conversational rather than structural, although it could be said that the structures encouraged personal encounters and friendships. But it was in the columns of the press that all interested Christians could find the finest information. The broadsheet newspapers of the 1930s contained a wealth of news from Germany, and the newspapers published regular and extensive reports on the affairs of the German churches. George Bell once recorded his gratitude to the *Times* in a debate in the Anglican Church Assembly¹⁹. Such reports both encouraged a public response to Nazism and educated the interest they inspired.

However, the dense narrative of the church struggle itself was not easy to follow, even armed with daily copies of the *Times* or the *Manchester Guardian*. Between 1933 and 1939, most concerned British Christians found the truth of the matter in simple terms, and those terms barely changed over time. They began with the basic fact that Germany was governed by a totalitarian state, and in such a state the freedom of religion must be as improbable as the freedom of trades unionists, socialists or pacifists. Because they placed the claims of the Nazi state at the heart of the issue, they saw the troubles that arose in the German Protestant churches clearly. It was a crisis between Church and State; between ideology and faith; between violent men who were employed by, or abetted by, the state and good Christian men and women who sought to preserve the integrity of their churches. British Christians felt instinctive warmth for the Pastors' Emergency League, and then for what they called the 'Confessional Church'. William Temple

¹⁸ See *Andreas Lindt* (Hrsg.), *George Bell, Alphons Koechlin Briefwechsel 1933–1954* (Zürich 1962).

¹⁹ Report of the Proceedings of the Church Assembly (London 1937) XVII, 274–5 (22 June 1937).

wrote to a friend, 'My sympathies are all with the opposition.'²⁰ For them, the Church Struggle spoke of the righteous defence of religious liberty and freedom, and of opposition – resistance, even.

This, of course, was a perception that most German Protestants would have disputed. British Christians were nonplussed by the distinctions that their German friends drew. The Barmen Declaration seemed to them to criticise the powers claimed by the Hitler state. The idea that it singly concerned what a credible Church should be believing and preaching and being, and not what the state in itself should be, did not occur to British observers. There were examples of a shared language, however. George Bell and Dietrich Bonhoeffer confirmed and strengthened each other's views, particularly in the period 1934–5, when Bonhoeffer was pastor to the German-speaking congregation in London. But Bonhoeffer was, to the end, unusual²¹.

Although these were the views of the majority, they were by no means uncontested. Bishop Headlam, repeatedly, and with increasing exasperation, pronounced that the 'Confessional Church' was only a minority group in the whole of German Protestantism. Between that and the *Deutsche Christen* lay a vast, unacknowledged body of the church, of pastors working with dignity and quiet devotion in their parishes. For Headlam, the existence of this middle ground that was occupied by the majority was proof that the Nazi state was not persecuting the Church in itself. For Headlam, the Confessional Church was not a great statement of Christian conscience, but a provocation to an unpleasant but legitimate government, and an irritation to sensible men who wished to get on with the business of Christian life. It was led by firebrands like Niemöller, who were unreasonable, intemperate and dogmatic²².

But Headlam did not represent many. His apparent obduracy provoked those who disputed his views to speak out in greater numbers, and to shout more loudly. Without Headlam, it would be more difficult to judge how powerful that majority was.

Because of the power of this dominant interpretation, certain developments in the unfolding narrative of the Church Struggle between the autumn of 1934 and September 1939 received more attention than others. In Germany itself, the period was largely defined by the creation and recreation of institutional forms that would represent the conflict. Even to the most earnest observers in Britain, the structural developments of the struggle seemed complicated and difficult. But personalities lent themselves more vividly to the moral imagination. Ludwig Müller was installed as Reichsbischof at the national synod on 22–3 September 1934. They did not have to work particularly hard to see him as a Führer figure,

²⁰ Temple to Lang, 8 October 1934, Lang Papers, 'Germany: Church Situation 1934–40'. Lambeth Palace Library, London.

²¹ For a brief survey of the relationship of Bell and Bonhoeffer, see *Andrew Chandler*, 'The Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer', in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* XLV (1994) 448–59.

²² See *Ronald Jasper*, *Arthur Cayley Headlam: Life and Letters of a Bishop* (London 1960) 284–306.

and one who licensed intimidation, or was at least implicated in it. His known closeness to Hitler did not reassure, but made him appear merely the blatant manifestation of corrupt patronage. On a number of occasions British Church leaders were driven to eccentric lengths to avoid him when travelling abroad, fearing that contact of any kind might suggest the official sanction of their church – a sanction they were determined to deny him. When George Bell met von Ribbentrop in November 1934 he was emphatic that before any progress could be made in the church struggle, Müller must go²³. Although Hanns Kerrl, whose Reich Ministry for Church Affairs was appointed on 16 July 1935, attracted less criticism than Müller, he did not placate or reassure opinion in Great Britain for long. By the end of that year it was widely recognised that he had assumed dictatorial powers in the church.

When, on 28 May 1936, the second provisional council of the Confessing Church wrote its critical memorandum to Hitler it was leaked and published by the press abroad in July. The language of the memorandum seemed to offer confirmation of the dominant British interpretation, and strengthened commitments to the Confessing Church. But subsequent events reinforced these things powerfully. On 6 October Friedrich Weissler and Ernst Tillich were arrested, and on 13 November a third man, Werner Koch, was detained.

The months of February and March 1937 offer a revealing glimpse of the priorities that characterized the attitudes of British Christians. Some hope had been placed in Zöllner's Reich's Church Committee, first constituted on 14 October 1935, but the resignation of that body on 13 February 1937 appeared to show the impossibility of progress. When, on 15 February, Hitler met Kerrl and ordered free elections in the church, British opinion was evidently sceptical. More notice was taken when Friedrich Weissler died in Sachsenhausen four days later. On 11 March the *Times* published a letter written by an Anglican, Dorothy Buxton and signed by a group of church people from different denominations, protesting against his death. Then Bishop Bell published a letter in the *Times* on 24 March warning the state not to intervene in the new elections, and citing the criticisms made against the German state by the recent Papal Encyclical to strengthen his hand.

On 1 July 1937 Martin Niemöller was arrested. His name was already familiar to Christians in Britain, but now he became the source of a veritable personality cult to Christians and non-Christians alike. The newspapers were indignant; protests mounted. The following February the dean of Chichester, A. S. Duncan-Jones, and the Congregationalist, W. G. Moore, flew to Berlin, attempting to see his trial for themselves. They were not admitted to the court. On 2 March Niemöller was acquitted and taken to a concentration camp. The bishop of Durham, Herbert Hensley Henson wrote a bitter letter to the *Times*. Headlam replied acrimoniously. It seemed to him that Niemöller went around asking for trouble, and he had only himself to blame if he got it. Henson exploded back at Headlam on 16

²³ See Chandler, *Brethren in Adversity* 90–91.

July; Headlam reappeared again on 20 July. His critics were terrified lest opinion abroad might think that the words of the Bishop of Gloucester might be more weighty than they were. On 26 July Bell and Lang published an exchange of letters in which the fact that Headlam spoke for no-one but himself was made explicit²⁴. Certainly, Headlam did not represent the views of the members of the Council on Foreign Relations, which he still chaired. A number of its members even conspired to depose him.

The trial and imprisonment of Niemöller occasioned the last public flourish of protest inspired by the German Church Struggle. In March 1938 the majority of British Christians turned away from church affairs in Germany to Hitler's foreign policy. Since January 1933 the great question that most preoccupied British Christians was: did Hitler intend to reform the Versailles status quo, or to prosecute a foreign policy of expansion? It was often heard that if the western powers had embraced the Germany of democratic politicians, and negotiated with justice in those more favourable days, National Socialism would never have taken hold in Germany. Now, when they confronted Hitler, they confronted a danger they had brought upon themselves. The Germans had found that the politeness and courtesy of diplomatic revision would not do. Now they were governed by a man who would exact change by force.

Because British Christian opinion so embraced the League of Nations, Germany's withdrawal from the organized international community, and from the Geneva disarmament talks on 14 October 1933, had caused immediate offence. But when Archbishop Lang spoke of it at his diocesan conference that month, it was more in sorrow than anger. When, on 16 March 1935, the German government reintroduced conscription and repudiated the disarmament clauses of the Versailles treaty, the developments were noted with regret.

But it was not Hitler, but Mussolini, who wrecked the League of Nations. Christian opinion in Britain was outraged by the invasion of Abyssinia. Full support was given to punitive sanctions and a stiff response. In the House of Lords, Archbishop Lang counselled against pragmatism. Italy must be brought to heel. But as the powers that composed the League struggled to orchestrate a response, and as sanctions fumbled, the confidence of many church people collapsed. Abyssinia took their attention away from the invasion of the Rhineland in March 1936. When, in 1938, German foreign policy moved forward into a far more aggressive phase the League was seen to be ineffectual. Church leaders looked for a strong, constructive response, and believed that the League could not offer it. If anything, it was a greater service to leave it out of the picture altogether, to recuperate and revive. Another model of foreign policy must be found. This was Appeasement²⁵.

²⁴ See *Owen Chadwick*, *Hensley Henson: A Study in the Friction between Church and State* (Oxford 1983) 264–269. See too *Keith Robbins*, *Martin Niemöller, the German Church Struggle and English Opinion*, in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* XXXI (1970) 149–170.

²⁵ See *Alan Wilkinson*, *Dissent or Conform?* 137–189, and *Andrew Chandler*, *Munich and Morality: the Bishops of the Church of England and Appeasement*, in: *Twentieth Century British History*.

Why did Appeasement, which was effectively the diplomatic indulgence of National Socialist Germany, appeal to Christians who so criticised the realities of Nazi domestic policy? Some writers have found this surprising²⁶. Appeasement was certainly the chosen policy of those who were sympathetic to Nazi Germany. But it did not follow that those who were critical inevitably, or even naturally, saw a forceful foreign policy as a natural expression of their hostility to National Socialism. Wars were not fought to bring down wicked governments, but to repel international aggression. If Britain went to war with Germany it must be in defence of a *status quo* that was credible. But many, and arguably most, British Christians could not think the Europe of the Versailles settlement just and defensible.

When German forces invaded Austria on 11 March 1938, Archbishop Lang responded that the union of the two countries was natural and inevitable. On 29 March he addressed the House of Lords. It could only be a good thing that the union of the two countries had been achieved with so little bloodshed. And now, rather than cankering, and disfiguring future understanding, the problem had been removed from the scene. That was a mercy²⁷. Lang had his critics on the day, and those who protested against his words were likely to insist that Hitler had not merely redrawn the map and corrected his borders. He was a dictator who exported tyranny. It was widely known that Jews in Vienna had escaped the German occupation by committing suicide. Whatever they made of the invasion, it could not be called bloodless. The blood that was shed was the blood of women and men who feared the persecution of a violent state bent on their misery and even their destruction²⁸.

The *Anschluss* arose before the world as a *fait accompli*. But the tortuous negotiations that eventually bore dubious fruit in the Munich settlement of 30 September 1938 were far more dramatic, and the eyes of the public followed one desperate stage after the other. Church people were not at large convinced that the Sudeten issue presented sufficient grounds for war with Germany. If Britain went to war now, what was the cause? Surely it could not be to return the Sudeten Germans to a Czech government that nobody could reasonably think was rightly theirs. Then how could a European war serve the purposes of a Czechoslovakia that would surely be destroyed in such a conflict? It is important to recognize the sense of trust which Chamberlain himself inspired in Christians of all churches. A Birmingham Unitarian, he appeared a man of transparent good sense and laudable determination. His purpose was peace, and peace was a prize above all prizes to be valued by men and women of faith. When he flew to Germany many were moved by the spectacle of a man of advancing years standing up to Hitler personally and seeking to preserve Europe from a war which few doubted must be calamitous, even apocalyptic.

²⁶ Kenneth Slack, George Bell (London 1971) 80.

²⁷ See Andrew Chandler, Lambeth Palace and the Jews of Germany and Austria in 1938, in: Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 1995, 228–229.

²⁸ Ibid.

The response of the churches was above all to unite, on 18 September 1938, in a day of prayer. When Hitler agreed to a conference of powers, it was not difficult to perceive that those prayers had been answered. More were called for. When Chamberlain subsequently returned with an agreement, and an undertaking for peace clasped in his hand, a national movement of intercession seemed miraculously vindicated. A day of thanksgiving followed. It was almost impossible to think that Europe could again return to the brink of the abyss. War would be nothing less than a betrayal of the God who had intervened. There were critics, but few of them. Bishop Henson of Durham wrote witheringly in the pages of his private journal. He had castigated the government for its appeasement of Mussolini, but now he decided not to return to the fray. The dean of Chichester, A. S. Duncan-Jones, was vehement that no peace could be built on the foundation of this injustice²⁹.

In September 1938 the domestic and foreign policies of Germany were detached from each other in the minds of many concerned Christians. But it was in the euphoric rhetoric that applauded the Munich agreement that the seed for a reaction already lay. Those who praised the settlement found in it the hope of salvation. It was a call for repentance, not merely in diplomacy but in every sphere of life; an appeal to every citizen to mend their ways, make good their shortcomings, and to be worthy of the miracle. Distinctions between foreign and domestic policy, private and public life were abandoned. Accordingly, when Hitler sanctioned the pogrom against the Jews of Germany and Austria only weeks later, on 9–10 November 1938, it assumed a terrible significance within these terms. In effect, he struck the rawest nerve at the worst time. He had not changed. He was as malevolent now as he had been before. Another crisis must follow. In the following March Prague was occupied by German forces, and the assurances that Nazi policy was committed simply to reclaiming all true Germans for the Reich were seen, for the first time, to be palpably false. Now church leaders urged a firm response³⁰.

Those who are obliged to view the world through moral spectacles fear accusation of inconsistency and hypocrisy. Some Christians felt that they had been taken in at Munich. Most did not. They believed that Chamberlain was right in September 1938 and also in the next year, when Britain declared war on Germany after the invasion of Poland. His stock was still high when he was forced out of power in 1940. The Chamberlain archive at Birmingham University contains a significant collection of letters from church leaders of all denominations written in sympathy to him then.

When Britain went to war against Germany in September 1939, Christian opinion offered powerful justifications. Hitler was impossible. There could be no peace. The justice and wisdom of reasonable men had failed. It was now time to pray again, in the face of coming catastrophe, and to sanction a war that few if any

²⁹ See *Chandler, Munich and Morality* 89–91.

³⁰ See *Wilkinson, Dissent or Conform?* 183–189; also *Chandler, Munich and Morality* 95–96.

could deny was righteous. The religious and foreign policies of Hitler's Germany spoke the same bitter truth. It was not long before British church people prayed not merely for the defeat of the German army, but the destruction of the Nazism itself.