"Recognised" forms of opposition

Opposition to the Great War took many forms. This was perhaps not surprising, given its scale. It was a unique occasion for Great Britain. Never before had the whole, industrialised nation been mobilised for war on this scale. In medieval times, men who worked on the land had, in times of threat, left their harvests and gone to war as part of the agreement between landowner and serf. Much later, with the establishment of a regular army and navy, there was little need of binding agreements. As often as not, men joined up out of sheer patriotism or desire to repel foreign invaders. The more unfortunate were simply press-ganged, even in times of peace. Now, with the coming of the first ‘total war’, and an initial rush to answer the nation’s call to arms; the government was able to boast by September 1915 that almost three million men had volunteered for armed service. This was not deemed ultimately sufficient and, for the first time, everyone – from humble clerks to country squires – was forced to bear arms from 1916.

Such a call-up was bound to find disfavour and foster discontent. The majority of those who declared an opposition towards compulsory enlistment (or the war as a whole) did so in the name of Christ. As outlined in the Introduction, of a wartime total of 3,964 conscientious objectors referred to the adjudicating Pelham Committee by local tribunals, 1,716 declared themselves Christadelphians and hence possessed of a religious objection to the war. There existed, of course, other denominations of religious opposition within the almost 4,000 declared conscientious objectors – in particular the Quakers. However, out of this total, 240 men declined to state a specific denomination and instead declared a personal objection of a religious nature. More crucially, although forty-two men stated their objection to be of a specific political nature, almost five times as many declared their objection to be a moral objection to the conflict whilst over a quarter of all the men referred did not state (or were not able to state) the nature of their objection. If these figures are taken as representative of overall proportions of categories of opposition to the war then it is clear that there was a significant proportion of individuals who did not base their opposition to the war on specifically religious or political grounds. This book aims to fill some of the gaps in these statistics.
Firstly, however, it is worth pointing out how even within the ‘organised’ forms of anti-war protest there was a great variety of personal response. This diversity was observed by a range of contemporary observers – from leaders or commentators such as Clifford Allen, the young chairman of the No Conscription Fellowship (NCF), and the Quaker J.W. Graham, the author of _Conscription and Conscience_ (1922), to individuals such as the conscientious objector Howard Marten, mentioned in the Introduction. Crucially, these observations included (as will be seen) some evidence of _contemporary_ recognition of aesthetic, humanistic and moral objections.

While religion of all denominations played a large part in determining responses to the war, both for and against, in many cases the boundaries between ‘recognised’ opposition and humanistic anti-war reaction could become blurred. Strong religious beliefs served to keep many individuals from extreme doubt concerning their place in the war or their response to it and yet, perhaps not uncommonly, as in the case of Kenneth Campbell which follows, we observe an individual for whom the conflict’s effect was to take the edge off their religious way of life.

Many of the generally unwavering convictions concerning the war, whether for or against, were centred on a personal religious faith that had guided the individual before the war and was now brought to bear directly upon the conflict. The religious were encouraged by sermons, flags and parades at their local churches to ‘fight the good fight’, whether at home or abroad, whilst men of a Quaker background were some of the first to have their consciences officially recognised by the tribunals established to deal with cases of conscientious objection after the implementation of the Military Service Act of January 1916 (which, incidentally, exempted ministers of religion from military service). Sometimes, previously firm religious feelings could be adversely affected by exposure to the reality of the war at the front.

For 2nd Lt. Kenneth Campbell of the 9th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, although the war was a physical game with a ‘tremendous moral backing’, it represented neither a strengthening nor coarsening of character but instead led to a slackening of religious devotion. ‘When one is taken from the props of congenial friends’, he wrote to his friend A.V. Murray, ‘one should all the more feel the personality of Christ and the real oneness of the Church which transcends time and place’. However, on active service the reality was different, as Campbell admitted; ‘To put it crudely one feels much inclined after a heavy day to have a “blow out” than say one’s prayers. In fact my feelings in Church now are what they were at school’. Life at the front contained no real pain or joy for Campbell, only a constant struggle of ‘moral choice’.

As one would expect and as apparent in the categories of objection brought before the Pelham Committee, religious individuals made up a significant proportion of one of the main sources of strong and generally unfaltering critical opinion (and action) against the war. The Quakers and other smaller
denominations were actively involved alongside the other diverse elements that made up the composition of the ‘organised’ peace movement in Britain. For example, in July 1915 a Joint Advisory Council was established linking the work of the No Conscription Fellowship to that of two specifically religious anti-war organisations, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Young Men’s Service Committee of the Society of Friends.1 Despite occasional tension between the religious and political ‘wings’ of the growing alliance of ‘organised’ groups, they all generally threw their weight behind the cases of conscientious objection that sprang up following the implementation of the Military Service Act in early 1916, whether these, on an individual basis, were of an ‘absolutist’ or ‘alternativist’ nature.4

Aside from the purely religious element, which tended to be centred upon the bedrock of specific concerns and structures, whether of the Church of England, nonconformity or Quakerism, evidence also exists of individuals who exhibited a drier, more ‘rational’ and (especially) moral stance in relation to the war. In his 1922 study of the experiences of the conscientious objectors and the wartime struggles of organisations such as the NCF, John W. Graham acknowledged the multiplicity of motives among those who protested against the war and, in some cases, refused military service. ‘Many and various’, he wrote, ‘were the origins and upbringing of the men who banded themselves together to resist conscription, and many and various in consequence their beliefs’. He then recognised that the commonality of fellowship of these protestors, ‘was the belief in the sacredness of human life as the vehicle of personality’.5 Their protest had been aimed at a war the purpose of which had been, ‘to destroy the garnered wealth of the world … to ruin every lovely and cherished possession, to put death and destruction everywhere for life and growth, to baffle the march of beneficent evolution’.6

The kernel of the war’s negative impact as far as the NCF was concerned was the compulsion of conscience issue, which Graham described simply as an attack upon the soul; to deny conscience on an individualistic basis was, as Kenneth Campbell had found, to ‘deprive a man of his moral personality’ and to force him to commit ‘moral suicide’. The dignity of the human personality was sacred in itself and came above all else, and a world in which this was not recognised was a world in which no political and religious creeds could ever bring happiness. However, the championing of the freedom of personality:

is not merely individualistic concern for a man’s own purity or the salvation of his own soul, but a compulsion to champion a truth which seems to him vital to the soul of the nation and of mankind. To stand by such a truth so far as he sees it is a binding duty, and the only line of truly patriotic conduct. To betray it is to be false to one’s self, one’s nation and humanity.7

Like Graham, for whose book he provided the Preface, Clifford Allen saw the commonality of purpose of those involved in the peace movement and, specifically, the NCF. Reacting to the threat of conscription at the national
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convention of the NCF in November 1915, he had declared that, ‘the right of private judgement … must be left to the individual, since human personality is a thing which must be held as sacred’. In his speech at the concluding convention in November 1919 he described pacifism as a philosophy of the sanctity of life set against a war which was evil because, ‘it depends for its process and very existence upon a fundamentally wrong conception of the relationships of human beings to each other’. He also analysed the make-up of the differing personal motivations that made up the body of the NCF, declaring that, hitherto, it had been generally assumed that a personal conscientious objection to war sprang from a religious belief of some kind, the Quakers being the most well-known. However, as he pointed out in his essay ‘The Faith of the N.C.F.’ (part of a No Conscription Fellowship souvenir pamphlet, published in 1919) religious objectors only formed a part of the visible spectrum of anti-war response; the rest he labelled under headings such as Socialists, political objectors and ‘followers of Tolstoy’.

Allen had stated in his Presidential address to the NCF convention of 1915 that the organisation was built on a moral as well as a religious basis and later, in his ‘The Faith of the N.C.F.’ essay he pointed out that, in fact, it had been the largest category of objectors who had, ‘advanced what was known as a Moral objection’. ‘By this’, Allen continued, ‘they meant that they entertained fundamental beliefs either about the value of human personality, or about the relationship of human beings to each other. Each precluded them from engaging in war. Conscience related man to man’. That there was a moral choice to be made and one not necessarily linked to a religious persuasion was also recognised in the Absolutists’ Objection to Conscription, a statement and an appeal issued by the Quaker Friends Service Committee which argued, ‘We still believe that the man who regards military service as contrary to his deepest religious or moral conviction – a service which denies his sense of personal responsibility – is right in refusing obedience to the state’. Individual choice was paramount. The statement did not claim that all objectors were right and soldiers wrong; it pointed out that, in all the nations at war, ‘sincere’ men had been drawn to fight through ‘their own call’ but, ‘if the individual is not infallible’, the statement declared, ‘neither is the State, nor any religious organisation, nor newspapers, nor public opinion, especially in war-time’.

The Manifesto issued by the NCF in September 1915 distinguished between and drew together the differing categories of objection and united them under the cause of the threat to the sacredness of the human personality. ‘First and foremost’, the pamphlet declared, ‘our decision rests on the ground of the serious violation of moral and religious convictions which a system of compulsion must involve’, while another NCF pamphlet, Compulsory Military and Alternative Services and the Conscientious Objector (1916), pointed out that taking the Military Oath was the moral equivalent of handing one’s conscience to another and that, as a body, it was not possible for all the shades of objection to
define exactly what they were not prepared to do, concluding that conscience was, above all, an ‘individual matter’.

These examples show that the existence of a moral element to objection to war and military compulsion was not only documented in post-war studies but also in contemporary publications. Those of a moral or aesthetic objection to war or sympathetic to this view also recorded or witnessed individual experiences themselves. Frank Shackleton, a company accountant and worker for the Adult School Movement, had always held firm views on the immorality of war and he perceived the folly of fighting Prussian militarism with the same instruments that it made use of – such as compulsion. Shackleton was soon alienated by the ‘artificiality’ of the orthodox churches’ pro-war attitude to the conflict and was persuaded to declare for peace after attending a public meeting chaired by Clifford Allen. He had always felt that ‘non-violence was in itself an individual matter’ and at his local tribunal in March 1916 he declared his objection to be, ‘as much a moral as a religious one’ and that the individual alone had to be the arbiter in matters of conscience. Hence there existed the possibility of separately defined categories of opposition within the individual (in addition to the blurring of categories in the cases of people such as Kenneth Campbell), as Shackleton clearly possessed some religious inclination in addition to his personal moral code.

His local tribunal turned Shackleton’s case down and he refused non-combatant service when offered it by the appeal tribunal. After being arrested and detained at Felixstowe military camp, he was forcibly sent to France where he came into contact with some German prisoners at Le Havre. ‘The safety of my loved ones’, he mused, ‘would, I felt, be surer in my practical belief in the inherent goodness in these young men, rather in their acceptance of orders from a brutal command’. He found the circumstances of men from all countries, some with university degrees, trapped in improvised shelters in France, Palestine or wherever the misfortunes of war had sent them, to be ‘instances of prostitution of the mind beyond my comprehension’.

Shackleton was an embarrassment to the authorities and, as such, was shunted around – from Rouen to the Calais Base Hospital and finally back to Britain, whilst being subjected to three courts martial and an eventual sentence of ten years penal servitude. He remained defiant, if weary, and later wrote, ‘It seemed ludicrous to me to affirm my belief in the sacredness of human life, before men who had become inured to the sight of death, and to whom the value of a human life lay not in its sacredness but in its strategic worth’. He was sent to Winchester Gaol where he accepted ‘alternative’ work offered under a Home Office scheme to make some practical use of conscientious objectors and was then transferred to road-making facilities, firstly at Dyce Quarry and then Longside. It was while he was involved in road-making that he observed the different categories of objectors working in his group, such as the Christadelphians and the ‘Peculiar People’ (faith healers). ‘The rest of the party...
'Recognised' forms of opposition was made up of members of the better known religious denominations, agnostics, socialists and what were generally classified as "moralists".17

Another individual who experienced Dyce Quarry under the Home Office scheme was Howard Marten (discussed in the Introduction) who was sentenced to death in France on 15 June 1916, following a court martial for refusing to drill. Stunned, he then found his sentence commuted to ten years penal servitude. Marten had always inclined to pacifist views and opposed martial violence. He joined the Harrow NCF and later became its chairman. It was in this unenviable position that he sometimes found it difficult to mediate between the differing opinions that were strongly expressed during the sometimes stormy meetings. ‘They were some of the most argumentative people’, he remembered to an interviewer, ‘You found so many different points of view; it seemed inherent among pacifists … they’re men of strong individuality, and when you get that clash of personality coming along you almost inevitably strike strong differences of opinion’.18 When he appeared before his local tribunal he declared himself an absolutist. ‘I think it was more than just an objection to fighting’, he recalled, ‘It was an objection to having one’s labour directed by an authority. We didn’t feel anyone had the right to direct one’s personal life in that way … it was an objection to having one’s life directed by an outside authority’.19 Marten remembered the whole process of objection as being ‘intensely personal’ and we have seen in the Introduction his recognition of the differing elements that made up his local branch of the NCF, in particular his identification of an element which he labelled ‘artistically-minded’ and who were, ‘individualists to the core’.20 But who precisely were these people and what motivated them?

Notes

1 Rae, Conscience and Politics, pp. 250–1. For analysis of the religious element of opposition to the war, including the Quakers, see John W. Graham, Conscription and Conscience (London, 1922). Graham was himself a Quaker.

2 University of Leeds, Liddle Collection (UL,LC hereafter), file of A.V. Murray, letters dated 21 Dec. 1914 and 23 March 1915. For further examples of individuals of a religious persuasion and wrestling with moral concerns see C.G. Raven and Stephen Bowen, discussed in Chapter 7.

3 The Fellowship of Reconciliation had been launched in Cambridge in December 1914 and was a union of Christian pacifists of all denominations who shared the Quaker view of war (it had 8,000 members by 1918). The Young Men’s Service Committee of the Society of Friends consisted of Quakers of military age who individually rejected military service, in common with long-standing Society beliefs. Other anti-war organizations included the Stop The War Committee, run by J. Scott Duckers (see his account, Handed Over (London, 1917)) and the National Council Against Conscription (later the National Council for Civil Liberties) which acted as an auxiliary body to some of the larger groups – the NCF in particular – producing leaflets and assisting appellants before their tribunals. The Council was described by J.W. Graham as, ‘a watchdog for liberty against D.O.R.A. [The Defense of the Realm Act] and the bureaucracy of war’.

4 ‘Absolutists’ were those conscientious objectors who would not accept any ‘alternative’ to
A war of individuals

military service, such as service in a Non-Combatant Corps, work ‘of national importance’ or work offered specifically to them under an official Home Office Scheme.

6 Ibid., p. 31.
7 Ibid., p. 39.
12 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 154.
17 Ibid., pp. 207–8.
18 Imperial War Museum, Sound Archive, file of H.C. Marten, 383/6, p. 31.
19 Ibid., pp. 2–3.
20 Marten also identified this ‘artistic’ element in his description of the various categories of objector that he had witnessed at a prison/work centre at Princetown on Dartmoor, supplied to J.W. Graham for Graham’s study *Conscription and Conscience*. At the camp, Marten noted how, ‘Many of the political and agnostic objectors, together with those belonging to a not inconsiderable “Artistic” group [my italics] were usually ranged in general policy alongside Friends, Tolstoyans and members of the F.O.R. [Fellowship of Reconciliation]’. See Graham, *Conscription and Conscience*, p. 235.