The Methodists of New Zealand and Australia

Initial doubts about the war were overcome by ‘Empire love’, writes Glen O’Brien

METHODISM in Australia and New Zealand, along with other Christian Churches in the early part of the 20th century, was deeply committed to the cause of empire and thus implied in the imperial agenda behind the Great War. The Methodist Church of Australia (which from 1914 until 1914 included Australia, New Zealand, Tonga and Fiji) emerged from a colonial situation in which support for Britain’s military agenda seemed natural, even in the post-colonial setting.

However, in the early stages of the war, Methodists expressed horror and revulsion at the prospect of Christian nations at war with each other in Europe. It was seen as a thing of horror and shame, unjustifiable on the basis of the teachings of the New Testament. Methodist Church leaders generally upheld the Christian preference for peace over war, so that the onset of hostilities in Europe led to some ambivalence in the Church’s early pronouncements.

Danger

The New South Wales Methodist newspaper “Glad Tidings” had led opposition to conscription in Australia as early as 1914. Methodist support for the Australian and New Zealand soldier is, of course, a well-established part of both countries’ national myths. The “digger” is usually seen as the epitome of manhood – rugged, brave, and contemptuous of invested authority yet willing to die for his mates. Methodist newspaper writers were filled during the War years with stories of gallantry on the part of young diggers. Though Australians and New Zealanders had fought in other British military conflicts, the mythic ideal of the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) soldier was not fully drawn out until the Gallipoli landing of 1915, which continues to form the centrepiece of historical memory.

Imperial

Methodist theological re-creation on fallen soldiers even included the conjecture that death in the trenches was a kind of martyrdom guaranteeing salvation, though this never replaced the more orthodox demand for a personal conversion. The adoration for and ministries toward the diggers almost necessarily implied the adoption of a more militant and imperialistic outlook. The idea that such brave and noble examples of Australian and New Zealand manhood were dying for an empty or questionable cause would have been unthinkable. In such a context pacifist voices, even if their stance was drawn from a profoundly religious conviction, were all too readily seen as unpatriotic and even seditious.

There was much work to be done in military camps at home and abroad and Methodists set about this work with great gusto. Opportunities were given to present the claims of Christ to the unconverted soldier, so that his salvation in the next life could be assured. In addition to the offering of regular religious services and personal contact with the troops, support for the troops was also expressed in attempts to safeguard his moral purity. This included campaigning to ban alcohol from being served in "wet canteens" and efforts to stop the spread of venereal disease.

In the centenary celebrations currently taking place there is a long overdue recognition of the part played by Aboriginal and Maori soldiers, many of whom, though they were displaced peoples, chose to act in support of the national military agenda. Sadly, the sacrifices they made were tragically overlooked until now, at least in Australia where indigenous people were not even given citizenship until 1967.

The situation in New Zealand was somewhat better due to the existence of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) which at least recognised the bi-cultural nature of New Zealand society.

Australian and New Zealand Methodists of this period shared in the wider “Non-conformist conscience” that was profoundly aware of the responsibility of ethical thought and action and the range of possible responses that a thoughtful Christian might make to such a crisis as war in Europe. In the end, however, the “Empire love” typical of this period led them to become willing to make any sacrifices necessary to assist the Empire in its struggle against what it considered the forces of “barbarism.” Among these sacrifices, it appears, were the more peaceful religious ideals exhibited during the earlier stages of the conflict.

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Troops charging an Ottoman trench, just before the evacuation at Anzac Cove.

*Anzac, the landing 1915* by George Lambert, 1922, shows the landing at Anzac Cove, April 25, 1915.