

MURIEL LESTER, 1883-1968

Baptist Saint?

Born in Leytonstone, Essex, in December 1883, Muriel Lester came to maturity in idyllic circumstances which made her journey into peacemaking quite remarkable. In *It Occurred to Me*, the first volume of her autobiography, she described growing up in a large household characterized by relative prosperity.¹ Her paternal grandfather, Henry Edward Lester, Sr (1806-94), and father, Henry Edward Lester, Jr (1834-1927), a Justice of the Peace, were successful in the ship-construction business.² Her mother was Rachel Lester, née Goodwin (ca. 1853-1918).

The Lester family, prominent in Baptist circles, helped form several congregations. Henry Lester served as president of the Essex Baptist Union 1887-1888 and 1903-1904. In his presidential address for 1904, he stressed serving others and helping bring reconciliation to a broken world, themes characteristic of Muriel Lester's future career. Muriel Lester imbibed the religious radicalism of the nonconformist conscience. Her father was 'a passionate iconoclast of the old legalisms'. She heard arguments against the Anglo-Boer War, but she was then in a pro-military phase of her life and dismissed the anti-war position. Later, she discovered the writings of the Russian novelist, Leo Tolstoy. She wrote that reading his *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* 'changed the very quality of life for me'.³

In 1898 Muriel Lester was baptized and joined Fillebrook Baptist Church.⁴ A few years later, she transferred to Loughton Union Church. In 1908, Muriel and her younger sister, Verona Doris Lester (1886-1965), reorganized the approach to Sunday School. By dividing classes according to age and gender, they pioneered graded Sunday School programmes. This enabled them to form strong bonds of friendship with young girls and boys.⁵

After a good education with ample occasions to travel, she contemplated attending Cambridge University. Already committed to social service and issues of justice, however, she left school at the age of eighteen. During these formative years, as she travelled through the slums of London, she observed poverty from the train window:

I was utterly terrified at first, because we ordinarily only rushed through it on a fast train up from Leytonstone, where we lived, to the West End, shopping, or to go to a Pantomime . . . now and then the train would stop dead quiet in the middle of the East End. And there was a ghastly smell . . . I couldn't imagine that it was a human habitation. 'Do people live down there?' I enquired. The answer came - I can hear it almost in my ears still - 'Oh yes, plenty of people live down there, but you needn't worry about them, they don't mind it, they're not like you, they don't mind any of these smells. Besides, even if they did, they only have themselves to blame. They get drunk. That's why they're poor.'⁶

In 1902 a visit with her father to a party at a factory girls' club in Bow, an extremely poor part of London, marked a turning point in her life. She began to go to Bow regularly as a social worker. In 1912 Muriel Lester and her sister, Doris, rented rooms in a Victorian working-class cottage for a base and, as they spent more time there, a residence. Their brother, Kingsley, sometime minister of a small village church, lived with them until his death in 1914.

Gradually, Muriel Lester became sceptical about institutional Christianity. For all

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its idealism, the church failed to be transformative. The campaign against abuses by the government in Congo, when the King of Belgium held it privately, provided a grim example. While the church leaders joined in mounting pressure which led the government of Belgium to assume control of the Congo, they did nothing concrete to ameliorate conditions of the people there or in Britain. Lester concluded that it was not enough to denounce government in sermons, books or meetings. The revolutionary dimension of Christianity had to make an impact both on personal life and in the structures of society.

Becoming more radical in her thinking, Lester deepened her study of Tolstoy's teachings of non-resistance. She taught these ideas to her students at Loughton Union church. Together they came to the conviction that they had to do 'Jesus Christ the honour of taking Him seriously, of thinking out His teaching in terms of daily life, and then acting on it even if ordered by police, prelates, and princes to do the opposite'.⁷

In 1914 the Lester sisters purchased Zion Chapel, previously used by a Strict and Particular Baptist congregation on Botolph Road, which was little more than a blind alley. Earlier Muriel Lester had questioned whether she could love Jesus or love God, 'unless the hymns were untrue when they talked about punishment and justice and mercy and blood'.⁸ Zion Chapel reminded her of this past. The congregation '... left behind some of their dreadful beliefs. They left behind a notice saying, "We deny that salvation is free. We deny that Christ died for all men", so we had no objection at all of getting rid of the pews and turning it into this very happy teetotal pub; but ... because we were keen Christians ... we kept quiet prayers and so on.'⁹ She helped transform Zion Chapel into Kingsley Hall, named after Kingsley Lester who had, in turn, received his Christian name in recognition of an older generation of Christian Socialists. For eighteen years the community centre served as a base for her work. Muriel Lester identified with the residents of Bow. She became a 'parson'. Sharing intimately in the troubles and joys of the people, she performed 'priestly functions' for the 'little company of the believers of Christ'. She led Sunday worship, re-wrote hymns, led prayers, invited people to follow Christ and to become members of His fellowship of believers, officiated at communion and marriage services, blessed babies, provided pastoral care, organized a nursery school, initiated a men's adult school and started other programmes.¹⁰

Muriel Lester depended upon God's Spirit and combined, in the words of a biographer, 'a practical mysticism and deeply grounded activism'.¹¹ Disciplines of the spiritual life sustained her through spiritual crises and led her to publish books and pamphlets on prayer and worship.¹² An aspect of Lester's spirituality was her love of God's creation. During her career, she retreated regularly to the country to walk through the forest glades or listen to nightingales. Nevertheless, she wrote,

I can't forget the pain of the world. One mustn't forget. It's as necessary to keep aware and sensitive to it all, as it was for the narcotic drink offered on Calvary to be refused.

So the rhythm emerges: the tension between the beauty God put into the world for the human race to enjoy, and the torments we invent for one another. One *can* keep one's balance, but vertigo is always waiting to engulf the unwary.¹³

For twenty years Muriel Lester lived and worked in Bow. Recalling interdenominational conferences at which a stock subject for discussion was 'How to

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reach the masses', she expressed astonishment that no one suggested the simple expedient of going to live with them.¹⁴ Nonetheless, going to the people was not sufficient to reach the masses with the gospel of reconciling love. Many people felt dispossessed by the church as an institution and left because of the failure of Christians to practise the teachings of Jesus. Muriel Lester faced particular obstacles. As a woman tenant in a poor area of East London, she encountered barriers of sex, station and custom. Inherited wealth made her a chief beneficiary of the existing social order. Status, education and wealth created barriers between herself and others.

These circumstances threatened to stifle the energizing Spirit of God and to prevent her from helping people to do something about their condition. As a result she had to take three additional steps along her road to radical discipleship. The first had to do with decision-making. At Kingsley Hall, she encouraged people to determine issues together. People in the community developed their own strategies for dealing with problems such as alcoholism, unemployment, poor health care, crowded housing or legal difficulties. Two illustrations indicate how she empowered people. When in 1923 it became necessary to build separate facilities for the growing children's work, Lester identified an architect who consulted with the people. Drawing inspiration from Tolstoy, the community planned every detail, raised funds for the project, helped with construction, and undertook additional tasks.

As part of her pilgrimage, Muriel Lester explored other dimensions of radical discipleship. One had to do with life-style. Because of her own inherited wealth, she gradually became uneasy with Jesus' words about the 'eye of the needle'. She became convinced that, in order to achieve justice, Christians could not simply talk, do an occasional good deed and placate conscience by giving to worthy causes. Rather, she concluded she could not possess wealth while most of her neighbours lacked essentials of life. Since in principle, as a pacifist, she had given up any claim to armed protection, repudiation of the right to any possessions meant that she would be free to put her money to some communal use. Two of her friends, Stephen Hobhouse and his wife, Rosa Waugh Hobhouse, taught her about 'voluntary poverty'.¹⁵ Believing that Christians should be concerned about those dispossessed by war or the church itself, Stephen and Rosa Hobhouse had diverted the whole of their income to an endowment called a 'restitution fund', through which they channelled their work among the poor.

In 1921 Muriel Lester, Rosa Hobhouse and Mary Hughes, another friend, committed themselves to voluntary poverty. Undertaking to simplify her life-style, Lester donated most of her personal resources to the restitution fund or Kingsley Hall. With other at Kingsley Hall, she formulated a notice which appeared in the press:

We know those who cannot obtain adequate clothing, sheets and warm covering, or necessary food for their children and themselves. The poverty which we refer to is commonly known as a state of privation or destitution. But we prefer to call this condition of theirs compulsory want, being brought upon them by force of hard circumstances. Our invitation to you is not into this enforced poverty, but into a very glorious alternative, involving a drastic readjustment in your affairs, called voluntary poverty.

We invite you into this condition, that the needs of others, whether in our country or abroad, may generously be supplied by the overflowing of your treasure. We do not here wish to encourage the charity of patronage, but rather the large charity of God, which rejoices in richly providing.

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Nor do we desire to indicate the exact consequences of the step into voluntary poverty, into which we invite you. It will suffice to say we have many visions of possible blessing, derived from intimate contact with the sorrows of the oppressed.¹⁶

The announcement attracted publicity, visitors and recruits. A dozen Eastenders agreed to share a common life. While they took no formal vows, they based their life together on *The Brethren of the Common Life* of Thomas à Kempis. Calling themselves 'the Brethren of the Common Table', they ate and prayed together. They adopted forms of mutual accountability. They shared their goods and sought to give themselves as freely as Christ gave and shared.

Lester found it difficult but ultimately liberating to abandon the capacity to live as she had been raised. Knowing that this was the only means by which she could attain intimacy with the majority of those limited and inhibited by penury, she gained in serenity through freedom from the burden of wealth. She genuinely loved and was loved by people. She contrasted favourably the 'rough and ready sanity' of working-class people with the 'meticulous, finicky particularisms' of middle-class folk.¹⁷

The community used the restitution fund for basic needs such as food for the hungry and decent housing for people crowded into rat-infested premises. Kingsley Hall purchased a country centre for family holidays, camps, conferences and other needs. The Hall cared for growing numbers of children, in whose plight Lester took a special interest. The services outstripped the physical capacity of the Hall. After complaints from the local education board about the crowded conditions, Muriel and Doris Lester realized that the rooms were inadequate for what had become a children's home and school. They raised money for a separate Children's House, which opened in September 1923. Accommodating a broad range of activities, Children's House was to 'build up the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth and to Him who went about doing good with all His heart, and loved His neighbour as Himself.'¹⁸ For five years Muriel Lester lived at Children's House, although the primary focus of her work was the growing number of unemployed workers.

This dimension expanded, especially after she took part in the 1926 General Strike. Facilities became inadequate until she inherited £400 from her father in 1927; Lester claimed that the money was not properly hers in the sight of God, and organized community meetings to discuss the best way to spend the money for the benefit of people in the neighbourhood,¹⁹ and it was decided to use the money for the building fund. In 1928 the new Kingsley Hall opened at its present site on Powis Road. The following year another Kingsley Hall opened in Dagenham to serve former residents of Bow who had been moved by slum clearance operations.

Believing that capitalism was inherently selfish, causing much wretchedness, Muriel Lester adopted Christian socialism as espoused by George Lansbury.²⁰ Standing as a socialist, she was elected in 1921 to the Poplar council, on which she served nearly five years. As an Alderman, she chaired the Maternity and Child Welfare Committee of the borough with the highest child mortality rate in London. Under her leadership, Poplar became the first local authority in Britain to establish dental clinics for mothers, to distribute milk to poor children, and to provide other health benefits.

Living and working among the poor enabled Lester to create enduring bonds of helpfulness. During the First World War, the destitution of East End 'dregs of war' deepened with rationing and the bombing raids. Lester threw herself into efforts to help

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the needy. As Martin Luther King Jr would realize in the 1960s, she learned that the struggle against poverty could not be uncoupled from the struggle for world peace. Gradually her stage of peacemaking shifted from Bow to the world at large.

Early in the First World War, when politicians were promising a swift triumph, Muriel Lester resisted the patriotic ground-swell and by December 1914 she had become a pacifist. As a committed Christian, believing that a victor's peace would sow seeds of future wars, she experienced the condemnation of other Christians for her refusal to pray for victory. She joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and later recalled its launch:

In December, 1914, a hundred or so Christians of all sects met in Cambridge, drawn together by the immovable conviction that a nation cannot wage war to the glory of God. The doctrine of the Cross, self-giving, self-suffering, forgiveness, is the exact opposite of the doctrine of armies and navies. One must choose between the sword and the Cross. Thus the Fellowship of Reconciliation was formed, providing us with anchorage as well as with a chart for all adventuring.²¹

In 1919 she attended founding meetings of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (IFOR) at Bilthoven, Holland.

During the war, Lester protested in several ways: she spoke at Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, and attended tribunals of conscientious objectors and visited them in prison. When, in 1916 during Graf Zeppelin raids, Kingsley Hall and the surrounding area were bombed, she shared in the reconstruction work. And she took to the streets. In April 1917, during one anti-war demonstration organized in part by the FOR, she headed a contingent carrying a large black cross. Counter-protestors disrupted the procession before it could complete the march from Kingsley Hall to Victoria park. Frank Hancock recalled, 'The March enabled us pacifists to demonstrate for peace. It also enabled East London to show that they would have none of it.'²²

After the war, in January 1919, Muriel Lester again took to the streets to support famine relief. Frustrated by government inaction and apathy in certain quarters, she brought together a soldier and conscientious objector to make a rough wooden cross. The two men with the cross headed a procession from Bow to the House of Commons. Ordinary people carried handmade clothing to send to Europe. Others carried placards stating, 'We do not want any children anywhere to go hungry'. Humanitarian aid began to flow, with the 'Save the Children Fund' becoming a testament to Lester's approach to peacemaking.

Reports of Gandhi and India's non-violent struggle for independence gave Lester's pacifism fresh impetus. Professor Gangulee, son-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore, spoke at Kingsley Hall in 1926. Impressed by her work, Gangulee invited Muriel Lester to India to meet Tagore and Gandhi. Accompanied by an eighteen-year old nephew by marriage, Daniel Hogg, she made the journey.²³ Thirteen weeks in India resulted in lifetime friendships, notably with Gandhi. He challenged her to share with the British public what she had seen in India. 'Speak the truth, without fear and without exaggeration, and see everyone whose work is relative to your purpose. You are on God's work, so you need not fear men's scorn'²⁴ Lester invited Gandhi to visit Kingsley Hall to 'learn from us'. When Gandhi came to Britain for the Round Table Conference in 1931, Kingsley Hall hosted his three-month stay. Mildred Fahrni, a Canadian working then at Kingsley Hall, recalled that Gandhi broke free from his busy

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schedule to maintain disciplines of ashram life in India. He spent an hour each morning in meditation, followed by an hour to walk, meet people, teach and learn from the poor in Bow.²⁵

In 1933 Muriel Lester turned over leadership of Kingsley Hall to her sister and became travelling secretary to the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, in which capacity she made nine world tours. She helped organize IFOR chapters, conducted prayer schools and reached out to adherents of all religions - Muslims, Jews, Hindus - without manifesting any prejudice. She investigated injustices, such as the drug trade in India under British rule and the effects of Japanese colonization upon China. She collected documentation about various issues, which became part of her speaking and writing. In 1934, during her second visit to India, she travelled about the country with Gandhi to campaign against untouchability. After her visit to China in 1938, she spent two weeks in Japan, courageously telling people about the terrible things done to the Chinese by their country.

During the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, when air travel was still uncommon, maintaining such an arduous schedule was not easy. Invariably, she encountered risks. In August 1941, returning to Britain after a speaking tour through Latin America, the British authorities seized her when her liner docked in Trinidad and detained her for ten weeks. During her time of confinement, she attempted to lift the spirits of others imprisoned with her, whilst struggling with her own growing depression and sense of isolation. Public outcry helped secure her release,²⁶ but back in Britain, she was detained for several days in Holloway Prison and her passport was confiscated for the duration of the war. She continued to travel throughout the United Kingdom, campaigning against the war. In Bow she organized anti-war activity and resumed her work at Kingsley Hall. With other peace activists, she raised funds which the community centre used for food, clothing and the Children's House.²⁷ She also helped break a blockade which made it hard to send humanitarian relief to the continent. 'Seeing that it is the common instinct to feed the hungry, no political or military situation is likely to be able to hold back for long the great stream of generosity once it has burst its way through the obstructions that have so long impeded its life-bringing flow.'²⁸

After the Second World War, Lester resumed her international activity, going first to Europe, where she warned that the atom bomb threatened the newly-won peace. During visits to areas devastated by war, she ministered alike to former Resistance leaders and Germans taken as prisoners-of-war, and organized humanitarian relief efforts.

Retiring in 1954, Muriel Lester moved from Bow to a cottage in Loughton. She continued to campaign for peace. Between 1954-1960 Lester visited the United States, the Soviet Union, India, Indonesia and the Far East. On 29 February 1964, in recognition of her efforts to improve social conditions in East London, she received the Freedom of the Borough of Poplar. At her death, tributes from around the world acknowledged her selfless service in the cause of humanity.

Kingsley Hall remains a busy centre, offering a range of educational and recreational programmes, opportunities for counselling and advocacy services. Elderly people, youth and members of immigrant communities still gather there. Volunteers working for various groups, including the Gandhi Foundation, organize in the community. The room where Gandhi slept in 1931 serves as a Meditation Centre. A memorial garden allows people to pray or meet friends.

Only a few ageing folk actually remember Muriel Lester, or the visit of Gandhi, but

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millions have caught a glimpse of the modern Kingsley Hall when viewing the film *Gandhi*, directed by Richard Attenborough. Along with several recent publications, the film has rekindled interest in Kingsley Hall, and in the life of its co-founder, Muriel Lester. Gandhi testified that Muriel Lester manifested the gospel of reconciliation to people in daily life as did few others.²⁹ It is a testimony to Lester's commitment to serve the people that she is remembered most by ordinary people. Principally, she derived strength from the residents of Bow. In an interview given at the end of her life, she reflected on what had most helped her in life:

It was just the ordinary people. We were completely happy, being one of a crowd, and finding them utterly natural and accepting me with my awfully luxurious upbringing . . . not having the slightest bitterness towards me or any sort of feeling, and always telling each other what we thought and being quite honest and happy. No it was just like being treated as relations . . . it was just glorious wide friendships.³⁰

At the same time, Muriel Lester won the friendship and support of people in high standing. The work of Kingsley Hall was widely known and she challenged her family and friends to engage with her in its ministry. Many distinguished friends helped. The author, H. G. Wells, joined in opening Children's House. The actress, Sybil Thorndike, wrote of Lester as one whose exploring of the Spirit helped her and others to share a living experience of how God works.³¹ Lester had a gift of friendship. Her home in retirement became a pilgrimage site, where she spent time with friends old - for example, members of Loughton Union Church - and new, like Dorothy Day (1897-1980), a leader in the Catholic Worker movement, who in 1963 attended a peace conference in London and asked to visit Lester.³²

Combatting injustice and working for peace never led Muriel Lester to despair or cynicism. She had a lively wit and could laugh at herself or at the most difficult of circumstances. A powerful speaker, she exhorted others against the temptation of evading responsibility. A remarkable woman in her own right, she believed that women were guardians of life with a particular destiny to combat imperialism and share in the responsibility of building God's realm of peace with justice. Throughout her life, she sought to release spiritual and moral forces that she believed were present within every human being. This releasing, she wrote, 'is something we can learn, explore and practise and train ourselves to perfect - all of us, boy, girl, brown skin, white skin, slum-dweller and woodsman, diplomat and navy, bishop and atheist.'³³

Muriel Lester was a seeker of truth, justice and peace. The rediscovery of her life story may help us to recover her vision. As a prophet of social justice, Muriel Lester believed it was 'a trifle ludicrous' to have to prove that women should be accepted as ministers in the church.³⁴ By word and deed, she defended the role of women who, in the name of Jesus Christ, opposed imperialism, poverty and war. She challenged others - women, men and children - to follow along her path by contributing in building up God's peaceable realm, promoting international reconciliation and engendering healing among the nations. As a Christian shaped by the ethos of Baptist evangelicalism, Muriel Lester owed to her Baptist inheritance a passion to live fully in the light of Resurrection power. As she once wrote, describing an Easter service at Kingsley Hall, she sought to share with all, 'the vision of God as Love and Beauty, and the sense of comradeship which brings strength and vigour to the weakest'.³⁵

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NOTES

- 1 Muriel Lester, *It occurred to me*, New York 1937, ch.1: 'A Child's Mind'. She also wrote a second volume, *It so happened*, New York 1947. Richard Deats provides ample excerpts in a recent anthology, *Ambassador of Reconciliation: A Muriel Lester Reader*, Philadelphia 1991.
- 2 Jill Wallis, author of *Valiant for Peace: A History of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1914-1989*, London 1991, is writing a biography of Muriel Lester. I am indebted to Dr Wallis, and another biographer, Richard Deats, for their comments on a draft of this paper. In addition to Lester's own publications, documents for the project include her papers at the Kingsley Halls at Bow and Dagenham; Tower Hamlets Local History Library, Bancroft Library, Bancroft Road; Swarthmore College Pace Collection, Document Group 13 (FOR), Box 9 (Correspondence 1940-47); Document Group 50 (A. J. Muste papers; correspondence 1958-63). Secondary sources include Vera Brittain, *The Rebel Passion*, Nyack 1964; Caroline Moorhead, *Troublesome People: The Warriors of Pacifism*, Bethesda 1987; Lilian Stevenson, *Towards a Christian International: The Story of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation*, London 1941.
- 3 It occurred to me, pp.6,10-12.
- 4 Personal correspondence: Raymond L. Vincent, pastor, Leytonstone United Free Church, 5 March 1991.
- 5 Vivian Lewis, 'Come with Us and We Will Surely Do You Good!' *The Story of the Loughton Union Church, 1813-1973*, 1974, pp.22-3.
- 6 Typescript, interview with A. H. French, 17 January 1968, Tower Hamlets Local History Library.
- 7 It occurred to me, p.42.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.6.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp.56-7; typescript, interview with Mr French, 17 January 1968.
- 10 It occurred to me, ch.12, 'On Trying to Be a Parson'.
- 11 Richard Deats, 'Muriel Lester made a difference', *Fellowship* 54, July/August 1990: 5.
- 12 *Let Your Soul Catch Up With Your Body*, 1942; *The Prayer School*, Nashville 1940; *Ways of Praying*, 1932; *Why Worship?* 1937.
- 13 It so happened, p.xii.
- 14 It occurred to me, p.46.
- 15 Imprisoned during the First World War as a conscientious objector, Stephen Hobhouse (1881-1951) wrote an autobiography, *Forty Years and an Epilogue*, 1951. Rosa Hobhouse was the daughter of Benjamin Waugh, founder of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.
- 16 It occurred to me, pp.88-9.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp.92-3.
- 18 *East London Advertiser*, 14 April 1923.
- 19 It occurred to me, pp.109-10; *Daily Chronicle*, 14 October 1927; *Reynolds Illustrated News*, 16 October 1927.
- 20 As Member of Parliament for Bow and Bromley, 1910-12 and 1922-35, Lansbury (1857-1940) championed social reform. As a defender of the rights of workers and women, he became 'one of the best loved men in the world', Raymond Postgate, *The Life of George Lansbury*, 1951, p.134. Fully cognizant with the plight of Poplar's poor, he defiantly refused to remit that portion of the local rate due to the London County Council until he was convinced that Poplar's poor had been properly catered for.
- 21 It occurred to me, pp.61-2.
- 22 Wallis, p.28.
- 23 Muriel Lester, *My Host the Hindu*, 1931. She returned in 1934, 1935, 1938, 1946 and 1949, when she helped form an FOR chapter. See Acharya K. K. Chandy, *The Fellowship of Reconciliation (India)*, Manganam 1980.
- 24 Muriel Lester, *Entertaining Gandhi*, 1932, pp.157-8. In other publications, e.g. *Gandhi: World Citizen*, Allahabad 1945, Lester became a leading advocate for Gandhi's cause.
- 25 Personal interview, 25 May 1990.
- 26 *East End News*, 31 October 1941. It so happened, ch.11, 'Behind Barbed Wire'.
- 27 Vera Brittain's *Letter to Peace-Lovers*, broadside.
- 28 It so happened, p.235.
- 29 In Harijan, Gandhi published an article by Lester, 'Wanted: A Manifestation of Christ in Daily Life'. In a preface, Gandhi observed, 'Many persons have written like Muriel Lester before now...[but] she endeavors every moment of her life to practice what she professes and preaches in her writings.' See Deats, 'Muriel Lester made a difference', p.8.
- 30 Typescript, interview with Mr French.
- 31 It so happened, Foreword.
- 32 Personal correspondence: Kathleen Whittle, 25 February 1991; Eileen Egan, 'Foreword', *Ambassador of Reconciliation*, p.vii; Jim Forest, *Love is the Measure: A Biography of Dorothy Day*, Mahwah 1986, p.153.

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33 It so happened, p.xiv.

34 For Lester's contribution to the struggle for the rights of women, see Deats, *Why Forbid Us?*

1930, pp.57ff.

35 Muriel Lester, 'Easter at Kingsley Hall', *Reconciliation* 1, May 1924, 72.

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REVIEWS

Keith W. Clements, *What Freedom? The Persistent Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Bristol Baptist College, 1990, pp.189 inc. notes and index. £7-95.

Yet another book on Bonhoeffer might seem an encumbrance or an extravagance, but Keith Clements' collection of essays should soon establish itself as an essential item. The introductory chapter deals with 'why and how' we should read Bonhoeffer, and gives a succinct biographical sketch. This is followed by the transcript of an interview with Eberhard and Renate Bethge. Eberhard became Bonhoeffer's confidant and married into the Bonhoeffer family. Subsequent essays deal with religious liberty, peace, patriotism, South Africa, the Old Testament, and the suffering of God.

The value of Bonhoeffer, whose enigmatic life might be compared with an 'unfinished masterpiece', is perhaps well summed up by the author when he observes that in him 'intellectual alertness and spirituality, original thinking, and concrete engagement are fused in a singular way.' And it is certainly this marrying together of theological reflection with certain decisions and choices in the political and religious sphere which helps to account for Bonhoeffer's enduring appeal and usefulness.

It is the way in which Bonhoeffer, who before the war had leaned towards pacifism, could take a role in the plot to kill Hitler which particularly invites interest. That plot not only had assassination as its goal, but also inevitably involved a sequence (perhaps rather, a spiral) of deceptions to maintain its viability. Bethge's interview both sheds light on the historical details of all of this, and offers a convincing theological commentary upon it. The Christological parallel becomes most striking when Bethge agrees that Bonhoeffer's involvement constituted a willingness to become guilty for the sake of others.

For any who have read Bonhoeffer this territory is fairly familiar, and the real 'revelations' of the book will come in later chapters. In particular, in discussing issues of religious liberty and the freedom of the church, Clements shows how Bonhoeffer has a very great deal to contribute to current debate. Amidst our discussion on 'Baptist identity' some of Bonhoeffer's thoughts on what it means to be a 'free church', and a 'gathered church', seem highly relevant. Indeed, they may make crucial contributions. The gathered church is portrayed as 'deputising' for the whole of humanity, and the free church is called to be free to stand with others. Bonhoeffer's involvement with the politics of his day was strongly moulded by his concern at the treatment of the Jews. In standing by this ruthlessly oppressed minority the church showed its true freedom, which manifests itself in the liberating of others. Bonhoeffer wished to speak of the