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BAPTIST PEACEMAKERS

I write my editorial this quarter in Buenos Aires, a city profoundly shocked by the bomb attack upon a Jewish community centre which like no other event has brought people of different faiths together in this city in common concern and prayer. At the same time, the television screens flash around the world the senseless bloodshed of Rwanda heedless of religious constraint or political sense. The world seems as full of violence as ever it was.

In this context I have been reading Paul Dekar's *For the Healing of the Nations: Baptist Peacemakers*, a product of that promising new American publisher, Smyth & Helwys [311pp, \$16.95pb, Smyth & Helwys, 1400 Coleman Avenue, Macon, GA 31207, USA, but available from Baptist House, Didcot].

To some there is surprise in the title, even a contradiction in terms - for Baptists have a reputation both for being only pietistic, and in recent years in the USA for

being identified with domestic brawls and battles rather than peacemaking. From North America too comes the accusation that Baptists particularly have been 'pro-gun, pro-big defence, pro-aggression - and sometimes pro-war'. Billy Graham, it is noted, risked and received more criticism from his fellow Baptists for advocating nuclear disarmament than for any other action.

The witness of Paul Dekar's book is that, whilst Baptists are not one of the historic peace churches, there has been a consistent tradition of peace witness amongst Baptists from the earliest times, always suspicious of state power, and absolutely clear that it has no authority in the affairs of the soul.

The book is organized in three sections. The first concerns negative peace, that is opposition to war, and here there is much British material. Much of the earliest material relates to those who challenged the authority of the existing regime, rather than those who were pacifist: whether the Levellers, Lilburne or Overton, can legitimately be regarded as Baptists may be questioned. Substantial chapters on British Baptist involvement in nineteenth-century peace societies (already seen by readers of this journal), John Clifford, and J. H. Rushbrooke are well conceived.

The second section is concerned with the advocacy of positive peace, defined as endeavours to eliminate the causes of war. Two chapters explore Baptist involvement in the fight for the freedom of slaves, the first focusing on the more familiar story of Jamaican slavery, whilst the second tells the less well-known story of those who were helped to follow the Polar Star to freedom in Canada. Complementary chapters on 'The Missionary as Peacemaker' and 'Voices from the Developing World' complete this section.

The final section pertains to 'Prophecy', defined as the critiquing of religion and society, based on the Biblical vision of a better world. A presentation of Baptist martyrs, those who made the supreme witness of life, leads into studies of Walter Rauschenbusch (the best known of a number of North American peace advocates here introduced in the book), Muriel Lester (through research already published in this journal), and Martin Luther King. The book is brought to a conclusion by a study of British Baptist conscientious objectors and the British Baptist Peace Fellowship, and analysis of the birth and work of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America.

This is a good study. The pressure of condensing much good material into a finite number of words and sentences is obvious. The style is gently didactic but never in a way that compromises the intellectual integrity of the analysis. Put the other way round, here is an historical record which poses moral choices of all its readers, especially in a world where even conventional wars in some parts of the world are fraught with appalling nuclear potential because of the vulnerability of the environment to the very existence of nuclear power plants under war conditions.