New Blackfriars

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Making Peace at Spode

Brian Wicker

Abstract

This essay is a personal reflection, rather than a history, of the role of Spode House in the twentieth-century Catholic Peace Movement. In particular, it draws attention to the lasting influence of Conrad Pepler on Spode and on the movement.

The world being what it is, a 'peace movement' is bound to be a haven for odd-balls, eccentrics, the awkward squad: people who go against the direction of the current and resist the conventional wisdom. On the other hand, a movement composed solely of such people will always lack effective organisation, and its protests will peter out into mere idiosyncrasy. I think that these two facts go far to explain why the English Dominicans have been somewhere near the centre of the Catholic peace movement in Britain ever since it began (if one can talk of a beginning) with the founding of PAX in the mid-thirties of this century. For the English Dominicans—at least as far as my experience goes—are themselves an awkward squad: a regiment of misfits and individualists. I don't know much about the Dominican Order elsewhere in the world: I suspect that outside Britain they may be very different. Neither do I know much about their history in this country. So I speak 'existentially', as the jargon goes, from my own personal observation only.

My first experience goes back to the Oxford of the early nineteen-fifties: and to feel the difference then between, say, the atmosphere of Jesuit Campion Hall and the atmosphere of Dominican Blackfriars was to experience an almost tangible shock. As I remember it now, Campion Hall was like something out of Henry James: a rich tapestry of dark browns and reds, complex and subtle in its visual as well as its intellectual organisation. Its inhabitants wore their black suits and soutanes as a uniform: one had to dig quite deep to discover the person within. Dominican Backfriars, by contrast, was light and airy; a set of variations upon the theme of whiteness and transparency. The habits were worn in such a way that they expressed, rather than disguised, the individuality of the person inside: some were immaculate and pure as cream from a Jersey cow, others looked like tattered table-cloths hanging on the shapeless frames of scarecrows or tramps. If you felt like

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an angel, then in Blackfriars you would look like one. If you felt like a down-at-heel beggar, then that is how you dressed, too. And nobody minded—or so it seemed to me. Yet clearly, the Dominicans could not have survived if they had been merely a collection of eccentrics: what was hidden was not the individual personality (that was on show all right) but the community organisation of the 'brethren'. Not the fruit, but the tree, was the thing that must have been there, out of sight of the mere visitor, yet alive and growing all the same.

I am not making any kind of value judgment in saying all this. I am simply trying to explain a piece of history: why it was that the nascent peace movement within English Catholicism should have been associated with the Dominican Order. Of course, in a general way it would be easy to explain the matter by reference to various well-known historical facts. The Jesuits, after all, were founded on a quasi-military model: they were the Pope's army against the Protestant enemy. Did they not stand for the centralisation of power, and the instantaneous carrying out of orders? With them, surely, mind was to be bound to the service of legitimate authority: obedience was the cardinal virtue. Whereas the Dominicans were the children of St Thomas Aquinas, who had been up against authority (in the shape of a Platonising ecclesiastical and intellectual establishment) from the very outset of his career. The enemy was not the armies of organised Protestantism, but the terrorists of irrationality and disorder wherever they appeared. Defence of the Faith was therefore a more complex matter of guerilla war, in which every person had to be a thinker and decision-maker in his own right, rather than simply cannon-fodder for the papal generals to throw into some show-piece battle. So the myth might go: and so the explanation might come with it. But it will not do. The myth is too general, and the exceptions too obvious. Whatever truth there may be in the myths that sustain and nourish the members of religious orders (and I don't wish to under-rate their importance), in the particular case I am here dealing with, facts more local and particular have to be taken into account.

One of these can perhaps be traced to the fact that the Dominicans are a mediaeval, not a Renaissance, order. For there is a clear link, in English cultural history, between mediaevalism and modernism: each stands for a certain kind of order and clarity, and rationality, over against what is felt to be the chaos and disordered absurdity of the post-Victorian industrial world. The line from Pugin and William Morris, back into the past of Langland and Dante, and towards the future of Guild Socialism, Distributism, and opposition to the 'Servile state', was clear in the minds of many thinking people in Britain, even if it was not so clear in the objective record. The ideology involved here was fairly obvious. The world of mass-production industrialism was, quite evidently, chaotic, out of control, topsy-turvy in all its aspects. The First World War had been an almost perfect demonstration of that simple fact. So true order, and hence any 'true humanism' for the modern

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world (to use Maritain's phrase in its English version), must inevitably be found in opposition to the general trend of industrial society. Any truly modern order must therefore be the product of a fusion of that past which embodied true order, with a view of the modern world that grasped its own possibilities for order. Modern technology now made possible a return to the kind of order that once existed, in far more primitive technological but far more sophisticated spiritual conditions, in (say) the Europe of Aquinas and Dante. What was needed was a rediscovery of the spiritual key of that past and an application of it to unlock the potentialities of the future. In the twenties and thirties, in Britain, people with very varied cultural backgrounds were talking in roughly these terms. Aldous Huxley, for example, pictured the horrors of modem disorder parading as total order in *Brave New World*, *Eyeless in Gaza,* and *Ends and Means.* And later in *The Perennial Philosophy* he expressed one characteristic version of an alternative future, based on a fusion of eclectic mysticism with modern techniques (such as those of F.M. Alexander) for the better 'use of the self'. T.S. Eliot's work, both in poetry and in criticism—social as well as literary—was largely devoted to the same theme. The writings of John Middleton Murry, now a forgotten guru who features only as the husband of Katherine Mansfield and temporary friend of D. H. Lawrence, when viewed as a whole, reveal the same general set of concerns. Editing *Peace News* and running *Community Farm* went hand in hand with the discovery of new ways of talking about God and Democracy. Lawrence himself, of course, was at the centre of this 'structure of feeling', a touchstone both of its strengths and its weaknesses. Now, an important strand within this history can be seen in the work of Catholic thinkers of the period: and the founding of the British Catholic Peace movement PAX in 1936 was closely bound up with it. PAX, after all, was really the product of a mediaeval sense of order, expressed, for example, in the scholarly liturgical work of men such as Donald Attwater and in the philosophico-historical writings of E. I. Watkin, combined with a feeling for the modern expressed, for example, in the artistic and moral practices of the Ditchling community round Eric Gill; these included nude mixed bathing as well as the making of stone icons of a clarity, serenity, and austere modernity shocking to sensibilities founded on plaster saints and piety stalls. PAX saw itself as a Catholic movement of resistance to war, supporting conscientious objection for Catholics and opposing the automatic assumption by Catholics of a duty to the state, or of unyielding loyalty to 'Christendom' as a quasi-political entity in Europe.

Eric Gill, of course, was a Dominican tertiary. Though not quite in at the beginning of PAX, the influence of what he and his friends stood for was psychologically and spiritually important. It was not surprising that one of the earliest PAX members, a young man called Evans, should eventually enter the order under the name of Illtud (and later become

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editor of *New Blackfriars*). Nor was it surprising that the son of one of Gill's closest associates, Hilary Pepler, should also enter the order and become known as Fr Conrad Pepler, O P.

For anyone who wishes to understand fully the historical roots of the Catholic peace movement in Britain, Conrad must be seen as an essential link in the chain, which goes back at least as far as the First World War and which extends forward to the present time. Not only was he almost literally embedded in the world of which PAX was born: his tone, his Dominican spirit, his culture is part of its own ethos. And as Warden of Spode House, he has of course been largely responsible for transmitting that tone and spirit to at least two later generations of kindred souls.

I don't know exactly how it came to be that the Dominicans decided, sometime in the post-1945 period of reconstruction in Britain, to turn Spode House into a conference centre: but one thing that is certain is that they cannot have foreseen just what its significance, or its contribution to Catholic (and indeed all) life, would be. Neither could they have known the effect of giving the key job to Conrad. I admit that when I first heard that he was in charge, I was a little worried. How would such a quiet, self-effacing, and mystically inclined person as the man I had met at Blackfriars in Oxford cope with the hurly-burly of a residential talking-shop like this? The answer lies, of course, in just the combination of individuality and fraternity that the Dominicans are notable for.

To me, Conrad and Spode are inseparable. This is because I see them as aspects of a single historical moment. Conrad is practically part of the woodwork. As far as the Catholic peace movement is concerned, his contribution has been that of the classic enabler. He has never been one of the movement's talkers. He has hardly ever given a paper at one of the many Spode weekend meetings, whether of PAX or of its stepchild, the British section of *Pax Christi.* His presence has been of a different kind. Whether up to his arms in stuffing and crackling while serving the Sunday lunch, fiddling with new-fangled tape-recorders in his office, saying Mass in his tiny private chapel off the reading-room, or driving the black and white mini-bus to and from the station, he has exemplified what the whole enterprise of peace has been about: the whole gamut of attitudes summed up in the 'prayer of St Francis'. The weekend visitor to Spode can only infer, because he does not see, the sheer efficiency and hard work, the hours at the typewriter and the filing cabinet, which go before, and go on after, his own weekend has come to a conclusion. For not only is Conrad a Dominican personality, one of the awkward squad in the best and most valuable sense: he is also (and this I did not see when I first heard of his appointment to the new Spode Conference centre) a Dominican *organiser*: the sort who answers your letters, remembers your instructions, and (like Evelyn Waugh's Paul Pennyfeather) knows how to see to luggage at

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railway stations and has all the other necessary skills of the practical enabler whose work in the wings makes possible the on-stage show.

Conrad and Spode, as I have said, are for me inseparable: they combine to create the atmosphere in which the Catholic peace movement, from the early fifties to the early seventies, came to a kind of maturity. That atmosphere was only the airy lightness of the Dominican spirit, of which I have already spoken in its Oxford manifestation, transposed into another physical environment. Like the Oxford Blackfriars, Spode House is also a sham gothic pile: but behind the battlements one encounters the classic eighteenth century country house. Perhaps the gothic facade was more important than one thought at first—given the cultural tradition which I have already mentioned. In any case, as a place of religious retreat, Spode House has always stood for a spirit very different from that of most other 'retreat houses', with their mouldering status of the Sacred Heart amid the damp rhododendrons, and their hygienic glossy lino. Spode speaks to me of homely practicality, an essential poverty that has to do with communal washing-up, curtained cubicles, used-up marmalade cans for wastepaper baskets, and the plumber-handyman in sandals who doubles as barman in the evenings. A residential house lives outwards from its kitchen: and Conrad at supper there, alongside cook and handyman, symbolises something very significant about what *Pax Christi* stands for. So does the occasional glimpse of the modernist world, seen in a Gill-like statue on a window sill or a piece of classic Gill printing. Long before others cottoned on to them, the books too, seemed different: titles such as *German Catholics and Hitter's Wars, or Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience*, casually encountered among the spiritual treasuries, reminded the visitor that here was a place that knew what life in the twentieth century was like and was prepared to talk about it frankly.

Perhaps the most significant thing about the 'atmosphere' of the early PAX weekends I recall at Spode in the fifties and early sixties was the liturgy. For the first time, I remember Mass was held in the very room where the talk and the differences of opinion had only just been done with. One sat amidst the hard, practical wooden chairs, in which it was difficult to go to sleep, however long-winded the discourse, and heard for the first time (often against, or in advance of, the official rules) the readings in one's own language, the prayers said spontaneously; biddings came out of genuine and prolonged silences, invitations were issued from the floor to comment on the reading. A general sense of adventure, of a risqué and dangerous experience, in which one might be caught out any moment by the ecclesiastical thought-police (the enemy would usually be some current curial ogre or episcopal backwoodsman) prevailed. In most of this, Conrad was not apparently—involved. He just turned the other way, and this made it possible: the judicious art of the born diplomat was part of his battery of skills.

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But what actually happened? Well, here I can only give a rough and ready account, from my own recollections, of a period from the mid-fifties to the early seventies. I think, in this connection, of three quite distinct generations—though these are less matters of chronological age than of active involvement in the Catholic peace movement. First of all there was the generation that belonged to the thirties, and who remembered the pre-war and war-time world of PAX, or who had been associated in other ways with the same set of causes: conscientious objection, recognition of pacifism as a Catholic option. Of these, Conrad himself was of course the hidden but ever-present representative: but other names crop up as one looks over the records, though some of them never actually came to the Spode weekends: Donald Attwater, Christopher Hollis, Sir Compton Mackenzie, Clare Sheridan, Canon Drinkwater. John O'Connor was the indefatigable secretary and writer of letters to the papers. Associated with them in my mind, though they did not strictly belong to the older generation of PAX, were figures of similar age who had joined in after the war and laid the foundations of the post-war Catholic peace movement in Britain. In notoriety, the most notable of these was surely Archbishop Roberts (a stray Jesuit but somehow an oddball even among those ranks). But others were equally important: Henry St John OP, Michael de la Bedoyere (Editor of the *Catholic Herald*), Hugh Delargy MP, J.M. Cameron, Pamela Frankau, Charles Burns, Bede Griffiths.

Secondly, there were the post-war 'young turks' from the provincial universities who joined as a result of the H-Bomb and all its progeny, rather than because of any direct involvement with the second world war itself. In the late fifties, this group were the ones who made the running, I suppose, bringing a new kind of intellectual energy and a new set of basic assumptions to the debate. Looking through the bulletins of PAX issued at that time, one notices a strange and exhilarating mixture of Catholic fundamentalism (the kind in which a quote from a Pope, high-up Cardinal, or notable local hierarch could be used as a verbal missile, or killer satellite, to knock out a battery of die-hard Stonyhurst Generals, or shoot down a military chaplain or resident moral theologian in flames) and of Wittgensteinian linguistic analysis applied to, say, the conditional intentions of bomber-pilots or the ramshackle arguments of those who still believed that fleets at sea existed as legitimate targets of all-out nuclear attack. Among these young turks, one found some of the junior (often now eminently senior) members of the Dominican Order: Laurence Bright, Herbert McCabe, Guy Braithwaite, Simon Blake, and others; others were clever academics from Leeds or Birmingham or Liverpool, such as Walter Stein, Robert Markus, and Stan Windass among them.

It is difficult for anyone under thirty, or even under forty, to understand how unrespectable, how far-out a group such as PAX in the years before the second Vatican Council was. Today we live in a world

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where the belief that the greatest moral issue, and the greatest danger to both civilisation and Christianity, is the arms race, is a commonplace (though hardly the central consensus) among thinking Catholics. It is not too much to say that the church in Britain owes it to those rare pioneers in the pre-conciliar fifties that what then seemed to most people an eccentric and impossibly unworldly choice, such as vegetarianism (the parallel is not irrelevant) has now become the dominant ideology of those Catholics who think at all about the church's commitment to 'justice and peace'—as witness the final document of the justice and peace section of the National Pastoral Congress. I have neither space nor competence to trace here the history of that growth in detail. Let me just mention a few landmarks on the way, as they come into my memory. First was perhaps the publication in 1959 of a small paperback anthology of essays called Morals and Missiles. It was published by James Clarke — presumably none of the big Catholic houses would look at it. It was largely the work of the older generation of PAX: there were pieces in it by Canon Drinkwater, Bede Griffiths, Christopher Hollis, Sir Compton Mackenzie, Archbishop Roberts, E. I. Watkin, and Michael de la Bedoyere, as well as a piece by Franziskus Stratmann OP, a German Dominican whose book, *War and Christianity Today*, was a landmark for all PAX readers. S. King-Hall's *Defence* in a *Nuclear Age*, an early plea for an alternative defence policy, was also an important influence.

Soon after that, if I remember rightly, we heard the first rumblings of Pope John's plan for an ecumenical council. Schemes were soon afoot to make sure that the issue of war and modern weapons was put squarely on the agenda. Archbishop Roberts was indefatigable in this matter and was quickly rumoured to have got into hot water with the Vatican. This was despite the fact that—believe it or not—PAX was firmly convinced that Cardinal Ottavianni, who was in charge of the preparations, was on 'our' side because of a remark he had made about the inadmissibility of modern war. The heyday of PAX was during and soon after the council. In 1961 Walter Stein produced his blockbuster of a book, Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience, which got reviewed all over the place and contained essays by intellectual heavyweights, such as Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, and put the Catholic arguments about the limits of just war theory on the agenda of the whole Christian community. But I think the highlight of all those PAX conferences at Spode around the time of the council was the meeting in October 1963. It began with a massive (and much debated) paper by Stan Windass, the result of his latest researches in patristic thinking about war and in modern international affairs. This was followed by contributions by two of the most remarkable Catholics of our time: Bede Griffiths from India and Dorothy Day from New York. Bede Griffiths was dressed in his saffron robes and had an eye like a laser beam, cutting through outer layers of conceit and cleverness like orange peel.

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But he was much exercised at the time by the problem of India's right to defend itself against China: he came across more like a puzzled patriarch than a total Gandhian. Dorothy Day's talk was a huge collection of anecdotes, focusing on the awkward and nagging theme of poverty as a necessary basis for any effective organisation for peace and nonviolence. Being in prison, too, was, it seemed, an almost inevitable requirement for full participation in the work.

It had always been part of the salutary, bracing world of PAX that intellectuals and clerics had to face, for themselves, embarrassing challenges thrown down by people such as these. As I recall the debates—and the weekends consisted of virtually nothing but talking, eating, drinking, and washing-up—were of an exceptionally high intellectual standard (much more rigorous than anything one would expect from a University course) but also much more demanding morally. One was continually being confronted by practical holiness at close quarters, whether from a senior civil servant who had chucked up a career and a pension for reasons of pure Thomist principle, or an architect who had lived in a lay community longer than anyone else could remember, and survived the experience sane and intact.

As the sixties developed, one noticed the new influences emerging. One was the result of having Père Régamey, a French Dominican who had written a major book on the importance of Gandhi's outlook for Western Christians, talking to the conference in French (with instantaneous translation by Simon Blake). Another, more lasting perhaps, in organisational terms, was the increasing importance of the American connection. After Dorothy Day's 1963 visit, this connection became more or less regular, not only through Eileen Egan in New York, but from elsewhere: from Gordon Zahn, reporting from Franz Jagerstatter's home village, or from wherever the Berrigan brothers were pouring symbolic blood on college campuses. At the same time, rumours became more frequent that there was a rival outfit around, with younger and more foreign connections than PAX could boast: it was called *Pax Christi*. There were great uncertainties as to whether it was of the true faith or not: the fact that it was largely, in Britain, the brainchild of a secular Monsignor who had been secretary to the Cardinal Archbishop scarcely helped to give the old PAX awkward squad confidence in its credentials. Not until the seventies were the doubts dispelled and the merger terms settled. When they were, I think the Spode days of PAX were, practically speaking, over.

What I have said in this short sketch of a significant slice of Catholic history has been personal and idiosyncratic: a participant's angle, with all the limitations and gaps that one person's view inevitably entails. I have been impressionistic and reminiscent, not historical or thorough. But then the point of writing has been to pay tribute, and say thank you, to another individual: so perhaps the personal note is right for the occasion. To put my main point in a nutshell: Conrad's Spode was a

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catalyst that made something happen, without itself being directly involved in the happening. He has done what Eliot says any worthwhile individual in the history of a culture (he is referring to poets, but I think other kinds of creative people, including priests, are in the same boat) must do: namely, sacrifice his own eccentricities for the sake of the larger tradition that surrounds and nourishes him. Only by such self-effacement can anything really new come into being; but when it does, then in retrospect we see that our whole view of that tradition has been changed in the process. This is the essential pattern of resurrection, as of any permanently valuable revolution. If this conception is right, then Conrad's Spode has been the focus of many creative revolutions within the Catholic community in Britain: and the reason for his, and its, enormous influence on the thinking and actions of that community (an influence far exceeding anything that ordinary human expectations could have foreseen) has been the continuous self-effacement of the man at the centre, the invisible catalyst who remains steady and whole in the midst of the myriad reactions that have been sparked off around him. It is difficult to think of any greater tribute being payable to someone in charge of a conference centre than that, in the appropriate spiritual and practical sense, he has laid down his life for his friends. For this reason, he has been one of the great, though unsung, peacemakers of our time.

Brian Wicker
Canterbury, UK

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