

‘On very slippery ground’; ¹

The British churches, Archbishop Fisher, and the Suez crisis *

This article examines the reactions of the churches to the Suez crisis, focusing in particular on the leadership of the Church of England. It argues that the fact of religious establishment required a response from the Archbishop of Canterbury who proved a surprisingly robust critic of the military intervention, albeit at the cost of alienating many in the pews. Whilst making use of his access to political elites, he nonetheless remained keen to work with other church leaders in developing a shared critique based on rejection of the use of force and Britain’s right to be judge in its own case, instead stressing the need for an international resolution of the crisis. Yet as the crisis developed it became apparent that church leaders were not always able to speak for church members, who were as bitterly divided as the rest of society over both the specific issue and the wider argument how best to respond to Britain’s declining role in the world. This in turn presaged future debates, as increasingly specialist church agencies and religious leaders found themselves taking positions on social and political affairs that were often at odds with those of many within their own constituencies.

Keywords: Suez crisis, churches, Archbishop of Canterbury, war, Middle East

In a joint statement issued on 20 February 2003 the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, and the leader of Britain's Roman Catholics, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, suggested that the moral case for a military attack on Iraq had not been made. They called for more time to be given for the UN weapons inspectors to finish their searches, and claimed that war could only be seen as a sign of failure.² This emphasis on war as evidence of human failure was also a key element of Archbishop Runcie's non-triumphalist sermon which had outraged some Conservative politicians at the 1982 Falklands memorial service.³ Of course, these were not the first occasions on which church leaders had spoken out in time of war, and recent statements had eschewed the more jingoistic excesses that characterised the intervention of some Anglican bishops during the 1914-1918 war.⁴ Iraq was also not the first occasion on which British society was fundamentally divided over the decision for war, with significant sections of the elite and the public doubtful about the legitimacy of military action. Nearly fifty years earlier Anthony Eden had launched a controversial military action aimed at regime change in Egypt. As in 2003, the political temperature was raised by the belief of some that this action had pre-empted serious negotiation through the United Nations and, in the Suez case, by the eventual discovery of collusion between France, Britain and Israel aimed at providing an excuse for military action. In consequence, the Prime Minister divided British society, upset some of his own colleagues, put himself at odds with many Commonwealth leaders, irritated the United States, and sealed his own downfall.

In this article we explore the Suez crisis from the perspective of the British churches in general and the leadership of the established Church of England in particular. We argue that, despite ecumenical cooperation, Britain (and not just England) was still characterised by a hierarchical pluralism which gave its leaders a greater degree of access to policy makers,

even if this did not guarantee influence. The Archbishop in particular was able to engage with the Prime Minister, Cabinet ministers, opposition figures and editors to discover the truth of what was happening and also to participate directly or indirectly in discussions about the future of country's political leadership. Whilst establishment gave the Archbishop greater degree of voice and access than others, it also exposed him to public criticism when church and society were divided so strongly because it was (wrongly) assumed that he spoke for the church as a whole. During this time he consulted widely with other church leaders, involving them in at least some of his discussions with political elites and encouraging joint public statements focused primarily on a rejection of the use of force and of Britain's right to be judge in its own case, and an appeal for international solutions. Issues of morality were certainly raised, especially by the Archbishop and by George Bell, Bishop of Chichester, but there was little evidence of this critique being rooted in systematic ethical thinking comparable to later Anglican debates which drew more heavily on the just war tradition.

From the perspective of a more secular age, it is easily forgotten that up until the late 1950s, the churches appeared to be in a strong position. Many churches were enjoying a period of growth and some hoped that successive Billy Graham crusades along with the home-grown activities of churches, Sunday schools, and other religious based groups, would keep their influence alive. Though these hopes were quickly to be dashed in the late 1950s and 1960s, and several studies indicated popular scepticism about organised religion, in 1956 there still appeared some justification for optimism.⁵ At the political level the Church of England remained a part of the British constitutional furniture, a key player in the celebrations of the new Queen's accession and coronation which had largely excluded other religious communities - with the exception of a walk-on role for the Moderator of the Church of Scotland. Archbishop Fisher, unlike his successor, was a strong supporter of religious

establishment and quick to offer his not always welcome advice or opinions on a range of issues.⁶ The 26 senior hierarchs could also engage with public affairs through their membership of the House of Lords, and on issues such as capital punishment and the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality were to play a role in liberalising public policy. For their part, the monarch and prime ministers such as Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan took seriously their role in the appointment of bishops and other leading ecclesiastical figures.

Foreign affairs may have been of limited concern to worshippers in the pews, but the churches were involved in missionary and educational activities around the world, and were interested in foreign policy insofar as it might affect their interests and mission – something that came out very clearly during the Suez crisis. The Church of England's Council of Foreign Relations, formed in 1933, had maintained good relations with the Foreign Office during the Second World War and into the Cold War period. There was a fair degree of engagement with the emerging process of decolonisation as areas of Anglican strength were mostly to be found in the British colonies, and the church itself was embarking upon a process of devolving power or creating autonomous provinces free of Canterbury's control. During this period the personal connections of archbishops and senior Anglican bishops with leading politicians and other society figures ensured that they were often extremely well-informed on what was going on behind the scenes. Other churches had similar concerns, if not always the close contacts with imperial power, and the ecumenical British Council of Churches (BCC) had its own International Department which providing background information for church leaders and activists involved with foreign affairs broadly conceived. Whilst the Catholic hierarchy in England was remarkably quiet, largely because of the interregnum following the death of Cardinal Griffin, most of the other major churches engaged with the issue even if many were too divided to adopt a formal position.

A developing crisis, July-October 1956

From a contemporary perspective it is sometimes hard to realise the significance of the Suez crisis,⁷ which ‘cruelly punctured most of the country’s remaining pretensions to being a power of the first rank’,⁸ ‘tore apart the Anglo-American relationship and damaged the unity of the Commonwealth’.⁹ It divided society and shook up the whole political system, though the rise in the political temperature of the political class was a relatively short-lived phenomenon.¹⁰ The origins of the crisis lay in the Egyptian nationalist coup of 1952, led by Muhammed Naguib. Behind the scenes, however, the dominant figure was Gamal Abdel Nasser who seized power at the end of 1954 and was chosen as president in a referendum in June 1956. Two years earlier the new regime had reached an agreement with the British government that the latter would withdraw its troops from the Suez Canal zone over a twenty month period. Matters were complicated by concurrent negotiations over the funding of the Aswan Dam. On 19 July 1956, seven days after the US decision to withdraw funding support for the latter project, Nasser announced that he was nationalising the Anglo-French Suez Canal Company. Eden was incensed, seeing this as both a violation of the 1954 agreement and as evidence of Nasser’s duplicity. Increasingly he compared the Egyptian leader to Adolf Hitler and viewed the whole crisis through the prism of the appeasement struggle of the 1930s. Whilst some saw Nasser as more akin to Mussolini, many feared that Eden was letting this obsession cloud his judgement and making him focus obsessively on how to remove Nasser rather than on how to resolve the conflict in a way that was advantageous for Britain.

Though Nasser was fully within his right to nationalise the canal company, many in public life thought that he had acted badly, and that if not stopped he would stage further provocations. Most saw negotiation through the agency of the United Nations as the preferred method for dealing with the issues, even if the Security Council veto system meant that getting any unified response was unlikely. Christian leaders did not immediately enter the fray, but church newspapers and their letters' pages reflected different points of view. On 3 August the *Church Times* in its unsigned summary of the news commented that Nasser's seizure of the canal was hardly surprising given Britain's withdrawal from the canal zone, something that was:

...an open declaration to the world of British weakness. It invited, and has now received, the reward which is always accorded to weakness in world politics....Will Britain use force to keep Suez open? If the answer is "Yes", only Colonel Nasser need suffer. If the answer is "No" then the Russians will know that they need pay no further attention to any declaration by Britain of resolve to protect her national interests. ¹¹

On the same day an anonymous viewpoint offered in *The Church of England Newspaper* made the ill-fated comparison of Nasser to the Nazis – several weeks later an editorial in *The Baptist Times* was to make the same comparison suggesting that Nasser's recently published book on the philosophy of his revolution was 'another *Mein Kampf*'. ¹² Yet all of these papers quickly reverted to the position that hasty action should be avoided, because legally, if not morally, Nasser was acting within his rights and the key issue was whether he would allow free passage through the canal. ¹³ The Roman Catholic magazine *The Tablet*, at the beginning of September, expressed the hope that 'no more is going to be said about the use of force, which is not the proper or appropriate remedy in this case', and two weeks later it warned

against facile comparisons to appeasement.¹⁴ For *The Catholic Herald* talk of force might be useful in indicating British resolve, but ‘it remains equally true that actual armed intervention would be universally disastrous’ and probably end in short term success following by a lengthy occupation in the face of a resentful and hostile Egyptian population.¹⁵ Inevitably the ebb and flow of developments as well as the different perspectives of the contributors rendered it difficult for church newspapers to develop a consistent position, but on 7 September *The Church of England Newspaper* praised the ‘masterly statesmanship’ of Anthony Eden in organizing a conference to which Nasser was invited, and attacked critics of the Government as ‘a pack of unpatriotic escapists’.¹⁶

The Archbishop of Canterbury Geoffrey Fisher initially offered no public response, though before the nationalisation he had been receiving intelligence from Anglicans in the Middle East suggesting growing hostility to Britain. According to the Bishop of Egypt this stemmed from the creation of Israel and the feeling of many Arabs that they were being patronised as a backward people incapable of managing themselves.¹⁷ On 12 September the Lord Chancellor, Lord Kilmuir, had introduced a motion in the House of Lords condemning Nasser’s actions and supporting the government’s pursuit of a peaceful settlement. The following day an opposition amendment was proposed by Lord Attlee which shared the condemnation but deplored the government’s refusal to invoke UN authority. He called ‘upon Her Majesty’s Government to refer the dispute immediately to the United Nations and to declare that they will not use force except in conformity with our obligation under the Charter of the United Nations; and to refrain meanwhile from any form of provocative action’.

The first episcopal intervention came from Bishop Bell of Chichester, a frequent contributor to debates in the House of Lords. During the war he had upset several

Conservative leaders by his condemnation of the blanket bombing of German cities and, after the war, by his critique of nuclear weapons. Bell raised questions about the necessity of force and asked under whose authority it might come to be used. For Bell this would require UN backing, and he was concerned about a government resolution that referred to 'other means' possibly independent of the United Nations. He concluded by agreeing with Lord Attlee that 'the moral leadership of Britain' was its greatest asset, and to act independently would risk forfeiting the country's position in a rapidly changing world. In his contribution Archbishop Fisher started by agreeing that Nasser had been guilty of an act of aggression 'destructive of all the restraints of international law', but he was concerned that military precautions and planning sent out certain messages.

A more serious criticism than that made on military precautions is the criticism that the Government will not rule out the use of physical force in the last resort. And may I, following the example of the noble Lord, Lord Beveridge, substitute for "physical force" the word "war"—because it means war, and nothing else. I have noticed in the papers a lot of talk about what should be done in the last resort. Every kind of periphrasis is used except the word "war". But let us face the fact that any use against Egypt of physical force is war.

Of even greater concern was that this issue had the potential to divide the nation, for:

A divided nation, on a fundamental point like this, is necessarily weak and ineffective. In particular, I believe, it is quite unthinkable that in any circumstances the Government should go to war against Egypt without the general support of the whole of Parliament or, in an emergency, of the leaders of all Parties...

He accepted that the United Nations was ‘still a very insecure instrument for the upholding of international law’ but if we were to accept its role as umpire we had to accept that even if it made a decision against our interests. At the end of the debate, followed up later in a private letter to Lord Attlee, Fisher said that he could not vote for the opposition amendment because it was ungenerous in questioning the government’s good intentions.¹⁸

This faith was to come under increasing pressure in the coming months as was Fisher’s hope that the country would remain united. The day after this speech R.Y.Jennings, Professor of International Law at Oxford University, wrote to Fisher pointing out that Nasser’s seizure of the canal was not in breach of international law and therefore, regardless of what the UN might decide, there was no legitimate reason for war. In his usually ebullient way, Fisher wrote back accepting the criticism but stressing that the case against Nasser was a moral one because he had been guilty of an aggressive act, but the Archbishop’s tone was slightly less confident.¹⁹ He was also by this stage getting letters criticising him for questioning the government’s good faith and asking him not to enter the political arena claiming to represent all Christians.²⁰ These interventions also led to the first of a series of Suez exchanges with Lord Hailsham, who called Fisher’s equation of the use of force with war a ‘lamentable heresy’. Fisher responded that there might be a legal difference but to the ordinary man they were the same thing.²¹ As chairman of the British Council of Churches Fisher sent a letter to Eden in mid-September expressing their view that the matter had to be resolved within the UN framework, and received the laconic reply that the prime minister was ‘interested to hear their opinion’.²² Access was certainly no guarantee of influence or even of being heard.

Reactions to military intervention

On 29 October Israel launched its attack on Egypt and on 31 October British aircraft bombed Egyptian airfields, with paratroopers landing in the canal zone five days later. The official rationale was to keep the warring parties apart and to ensure safe passage through the canal. What was not made public at the time was an earlier agreement between the French, British and Israelis to stage events in this way. With a House of Lords debate due the following day, Bishop Bell wrote to Fisher on 31 October expressing his concerns, noting that ‘even the Daily Mail points out’ that not only is the Government’s action ‘outside the Charter, but that it appears to lack any treaty basis, or legal basis. It also puts us at odds with the United States and with members of the Commonwealth’.²³ Unusually perhaps, given their different images as establishment figure and serial dissenter on foreign policy issues, Fisher and Bell were at one on the Suez crisis.

On 1 November Fisher spoke in the House of Lords debate on a critical opposition amendment where Lord Henderson charged that the British and French governments’ ‘go-it-alone’ actions had produced disunity at home, at the Security Council, in the Commonwealth and in relations with the USA. At this point Fisher intervened to ask whether we:

...are doing the right thing by the highest and wisest standards that we, as a nation, know?...The simplest, the most obvious thing is that Israel should withdraw within its own borders. Then the temporary situation is saved and the Canal is no longer tinder threat...Objectively regarded, Egypt is at present within its own borders. Israel is out of bounds, and the British and French Governments are out of bounds also. The immediate task is to bring everyone back within his own rightful place.²⁴

At this point the Lord Chancellor, Lord Kilmuir, got up to explain the government's action as a form of self-defence under the UN Charter, at which point occurred the well-known clash with Fisher.

THE LORD ARCHBISHOP OF CANTER-BURY

My Lords, the noble and learned Viscount referred to the attacking Power against which we have to exercise self-defence. Who is the attacking Power?

THE LORD CHANCELLOR

My Lords, I said that self-defence extended to the protection of nationals on someone else's territory. In that case, we have the right to intervene and use force in that territory to protect our nationals. Then the second point arises—I hope I made this clear; I intended to put it entirely fairly—first, we make a peaceful landing; then, if the Power into whose territory we are going says that they will resist with all their force, the force which we have the right to use is automatically extended to that sufficient to repulse the force threatened.

THE LORD ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

Which is the attacking Power in this case?

Fisher continued to press the Lord Chancellor who eventually commented that it was Egypt 'who has refused to stop'.

THE LORD ARCHBISHOP OF CANTER-BURY

This is terribly important, and perhaps I might ask the Lord Chancellor this. Where does the operational force originate? I should have thought that the attacking force, whether you like it or not, was Israel. Is that not so?

When Kilmuir agreed he continued:

May I say this? I entirely accept everything that the Lord Chancellor has said. I was not criticising it nor attacking it. I was merely asking a question: where did the force originate? That, he says, is Israel; and that is all I wanted to establish. ²⁵

Having significantly embarrassed the Lord Chancellor, the Archbishop followed this up with a letter to Anthony Eden the following day. Though written in his role as chairman of the British Council of Churches, he prefaced it with a personal note saying that:

I doubt whether you and the Government realize the depth of something approaching despair felt right through the country at the present situation...it goes right through very ordinary Christian folk and beyond their bounds, and certainly very many life-long Conservatives are bewildered; speaking in the Lords I exercised maximum restraint and did not accuse the government of breaking our obligations to the UN. I simply said that we were on insecure ground and on very slippery ground. I am sure that Christians in general, and a vast number of citizens would say not only that we were on slippery ground but that we have slipt. ²⁶

These various exchanges made clear that however conservative Fisher was by nature, his inclination to give the government the benefit of the doubt was wearing thin.

This stance was supported by other church leaders, though not all. On 3 November a group from the British Council of Churches led by Fisher had met with the Lord Chancellor to express their concerns and call for an immediate ceasefire.²⁷ The Council itself was in receipt of a number of critical letters from member churches critical of the government position though their own adherents were often divided. Nonetheless on 8 November the BCC issued a press statement which expressed its ‘grave disquiet’ that the Government should have taken unilateral action. Perhaps the most outspoken statement came in a press release on 4 November from the Church Missionary Society which circulated a memo by Rev C.S. Milford, West Asia and Egypt Secretary of the Society. He noted the position of missionaries in the region, and the fact that some have had to leave Jordan because of disturbances, and says that:

If the Government appears to be trying to re-establish Western control by force, the effect on the witness of our Society may well be disastrous. We therefore most heartily endorse, from our special angle, the words of the Archbishop of Canterbury during the recent House of Lords debate: “Here surely we are wise to see what other people think of us”... We believe that the universal desire among formerly subject peoples for self-determination is a healthy movement of the human spirit. This means that our own country among others must accept a diminished position in the international scene.²⁸

Missionaries and church activists working in the Middle East were increasingly uneasy about the situation, as growing pressure forced some to leave. Winifred Coates, a missionary working in Jordan but now forced out, wrote to *The Church of England Newspaper* that ‘we believed that the old imperial policy of making peace by making war had long been forsaken’.²⁹ Similar sentiments were apparent in letters sent to Bishop Bell and others by

missionaries in the field. The BCC called on the government to remit the dispute to the United Nations whilst some of its members stressed the need to link resolution of this conflict to a just settlement of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict – a call that was to be heard repeatedly in subsequent decades.³⁰ By the end of the month some of these fears about the implications of British actions were realised with the expulsion of the Anglican bishop in Egypt, along with some of his staff and several doctors associated with mission organisations.³¹

Whilst church leaders may have given the impressions of considerable unity in their critique of government actions, the reality was more complex. The *Church Times* offered qualified support on 2 November,³² and one week later *The Church of England Newspaper* carried a commentary with the headline ‘Eden was right’. Here it suggested that the prime minister had ‘burst the bubble of moral inanity that hung over the United Nations and frustrated clear thinking about international affairs’, and it condemned the BCC’s hasty response, saying that ‘an attack on Israel’s interests in the canal zone was an attack on the world’s interests’.³³ In the weeks that followed both papers carried a series of letters on either side of the debate, focusing on issues of morality, the need to defend Israel, keep communism at bay, or defend British interests.³⁴ On 23 November the Rev J.Aidan Harlow commented disapprovingly on the fact that ‘we have the Archbishop of Canterbury attacking the prime minister for what will surely go down in history as an outstanding act of moral courage, foresight and true concern for humanity. I only wish the archbishop had not taken it upon himself to speak for us all.’ He went on to praise Robert Mortimer, the Bishop of Exeter, who ‘has spoken out of true Christian conscience, not counting the cost and disregarding the ecclesiastical party line, which in these challenging days savours too much of spineless churchianity.’³⁵ Fisher’s comments, and particularly his intervention in the House of Lords, came in for plenty of criticism. A letter from Kenneth de Courcy³⁶ argued

that it was an extraordinary thing for the Archbishop to claim that Christian opinion was shocked by the government's actions, and suggested that Fisher should 'admit this, Christian opinion is divided. I for one think the Government's action is right and brave. I pray for the full and decisive victory of our forces'.³⁷

Once again there was an extensive exchange with Lord Hailsham, always ready to cross swords on politics or theology with the Archbishop. Writing on 6 November he warned Fisher that when he addressed the Lords:

I shall almost inevitably make some unflattering references to your own public part in this matter. I must tell you frankly that although I recognize your good intentions and sincerity in the cause of peace, I consider both your speech in the House of Lords and your subsequent actions to have been calamitously ill-judged and I shall say so. I do wish you would realize how much confidence in your leadership has been shaken amongst some ordinary occupants of the pew.

Three days later, Hailsham noted that whilst the situation has changed, my underlying critique remains, because 'I believe that an Archbishop has an immense influence with Governments and the public, but not if he always speaks publicly and never privately, and exhausts all his ammunition before the facts are ascertained adequately or the moment for his intervention has come'. He went on to criticize his frequent interruptions of the Lord Chancellor with a question that was 'irrelevant to the point and...was confusing the Minister and making it difficult for him to make his point?' Fisher responded five days later noting that he was making two basic points: that the nation was divided over this issue, with many Christians unhappy about the action, and that the only attacking nation was Israel, because

Egypt had not launched any attack or made any hostile move against us. Hailsham retorted that nothing would convince him that between Israel and Egypt, Egypt was the not the aggressor and that Israel was not acting in legitimate self-defense, and ‘I regard the outbreak of hostilities whoever was the aggressor as the emergence of a state of anarchy which demanded an intervention to protect our vital interest’. At this point Fisher drew the correspondence to a close for the time being, commenting in a brief note to himself, or posterity, that Hailsham always wants the last word, and questioning the latter’s ‘psychological balance...and powers of wise judgment’. ³⁸

Yet Hailsham was right that people in the pews were divided over the issue, particularly at this stage when information about the origins of the action was not freely available. Whilst Cuthbert Bardsley, Bishop of Coventry might suggest that any premature resort to force was an abrogation of moral leadership, ³⁹ or Bishop Bell write to *The Times* stressing that the moral issue should be paramount in assessing the Government’s actions and that no government could be judge in its own cause, ⁴⁰ other bishops took a different line. Mortimer of Exeter suggested that Eden had shown ‘superb moral courage’ as a peacemaker acting to prevent a major war, and ‘led the country into an action which is morally courageous and right...If the Prime Minister has struck a blow at the United Nations, I believe that it is the blow of the surgeon’s knife and not the assassin’s cudgel’. ⁴¹ Frank Wood, Bishop of Middleton, wrote to BCC General Secretary Kenneth Slack that ‘I would find myself unable to put my name to anything like an outright condemnation of the British Government...I have come to the conclusion that Nasser intended...to try and wipe Israel off the map...On the other hand, I hope very much that the Council will urge the Government to be ready to accept a police force which does not include either British or French troops’. ⁴² The free churches were equally divided and the letters’ pages of *The Methodist Recorder* and *The Baptist Times*

are full of heated exchanges on both sides,⁴³ with one contributor to the former suggesting that it was ‘a source of deep shame that Britain should lose its good name while a Methodist is Foreign Secretary’.⁴⁴ Several of the Protestant churches were too divided to offer their flock clear guidance, with the Council of the Baptist Union unable to express ‘any common mind’. The Church of Scotland preferred to look forward rather than apportion blame, much to the chagrin of one leading member who wrote to Bishop Bell apologising for his church’s ‘most humiliating abdication of responsibility’.⁴⁵

The collusion question

Of course, most of these interventions came from men who knew nothing of the back-story to Suez that gradually leaked out over the following weeks. None of this discussion took account of the fact that French, British and Israeli representatives had met in Sèvres on 22-24 October to concoct the chain of events that they hoped would lead to the overthrow of Nasser. As November progressed this issue was raised more frequently and, perhaps by chance, as early as 3 November *The Tablet* commented that even if there had been no collusion, this was how it will appear to many in the Arab world. The emerging discussion of collusion ran parallel with concerns about Eden’s fitness for the job, with the same editorial commenting that ‘the man who is wielding all the power is forever remembering the 1930s, and itching to do something strong for its own sake’.⁴⁶ This was a view taken by some of Eden’s own colleagues who, once things began to go wrong, sought to distance themselves from the decision to intervene. Following Eden’s ill-advised decision to recuperate in Jamaica during late November and early December, it was increasingly clear that his days as Prime Minister were numbered.

Though Britain ceased its military action on the 6 November, the political temperature continued to rise in the following weeks, and the political households of the capital played host to numerous meetings where Suez was hotly debated. The Lambeth archives include some intriguing documents suggesting that the Archbishop Fisher was well aware of at least some of these discussions, though he also kept a distance from them.⁴⁷ In his files there is a note from Rev Herbert Waddams, Secretary of the Church of England's Council on Foreign Relations, dated 6 November, and reporting a phone conversation with Michael Scott earlier that day. Scott was a controversial cleric who worked extensively in South Africa and had often been a thorn in Fisher's side because he refused to accept the primarily diplomatic approach to apartheid favoured by the then Archbishop of Capetown. Waddams note continues:

Michael Scott rang me up this morning to say that he and some others thought it highly desirable that some national council should be formed to keep opposition to Government policy out of purely party politics, and to provide a focus for the uneasiness of many people in the country....I said I would have a word with the Archbishop who did not take any definite line at such an early stage; a few minutes later Chichester rang and he thought any action should be concerted with Judd⁴⁸ at the UN and wondered if Lord Halifax could be induced to take part; I then discussed it with Stephen King Hall who said that if a committee were formed to take action outside constitutional processes it would have to be very strong and that if it were not, it would be likely to dissipate pressure on the Government rather than to concentrate it...he thought that ordinary constitutional methods had not yet been exhausted.⁴⁹

Remarkable here is the suggestion that some people were at least considering the option of non-constitutional means of resolving the political crisis and that Fisher was at least aware of such conversations, even if, like most responsible public figures, he carefully avoided such talk.

The Fisher papers contain another note by Waddams reporting a meeting held at the home of David Astor, editor of the *Observer* whose editorial pages on 4 November had already stated that ‘we had not realised that our Government was capable of such folly and such crookedness.’⁵⁰ This undated note refers to the presence of Violet Bonham Carter, Michael Scott, Ian Gilmour of *The Spectator*, Lord Altrincham, and the Labour politician Kenneth Younger. They discussed the issue of what Astor calls the ‘scandalous collusion’ between the three governments, and the fact that the resultant moral stain might harm the Conservatives at the next election. It was also noted that the only person who seemed to know the full truth was William Haley, editor of *The Times*, who felt obliged to honour information given in confidence but who has consequently turned against the Government.⁵¹ Clearly there was a lot of conversation and debate going on, and well-connected clerics such as Fisher and Bell seem to have been aware of collusion from a very early stage, possible in the former’s case via conversations with William Clark, Eden’s disillusioned, gossipy and anti-Suez press secretary who had previously worked for *The Observer*.⁵²

On 20 November, the day that *The Guardian* reported French pilots playing a role in the Israeli attacks, Bishop Bell put this charge firmly in the public domain. In a letter to *The Times* he asked the Prime Minister whether there was any truth to the rumour that three governments had met in France and agreed a plan already prepared by the French and the Israelis.⁵³ In response he was attacked two days later by Bernard Braine MP, who said that

this was an outrageous line of questioning which ignored the Foreign Secretary's statement that there was no prior collusion though Israel had given advance warning of mobilisation.⁵⁴ Bell was also criticised in a private letter from a lay person in the Chichester diocese who said that Anthony Eden had 'done more for peace and goodwill during 10 years than any man alive... more than the Church has done'.⁵⁵ Despite this, the church press continued to publish a variety of opinions, though many editors were increasingly sceptical about the government's attempt to set itself up as judge in its own cause. The Church of Scotland's *Life and Work* asked whether it was:

...better to violate the Charter and act as you believe necessary, or abide by the Charter and perhaps see a situation worsen which you believe you could have saved? This is a hard dilemma; but the peace of the world, the long range peace, may well depend on the willingness of nations to wait when it may seem agonisingly wrong to delay.⁵⁶

In *The Baptist Times* at the end of November, an anonymous columnist suggested that charges of prior knowledge or even collusion had not been answered properly and that the replies given by Mr Butler in the House of Commons 'read like lamentable evasions'.⁵⁷

Archbishop Fisher generally made no public statements suggesting collusion, but was blunt in private correspondence. In a letter sent to Rev H.K.Sherill, presiding bishop of the American Episcopal Church, on 6 December he stated:

It is known to some of us here beyond all doubt that the Prime Minister knew of the Israel invasion before it took place: he knew it was going to happen: he knew that we were going to use the opportunity to send our own ultimatum and he deliberately did

not tell the American ambassador; nothing could be more insulting than that, and I think that the Government got all that they deserved.⁵⁸

A handwritten note in the Archbishop's papers reflects further on the question and notes R.A. Butler's comment to him at a Buckingham Palace garden party that the last few weeks had been dreadful. In consequence they fixed a private meeting at Butler's house for 13 December and here Fisher made the point that Eden clearly knew of Israeli intentions and had deliberately kept the USA in the dark as well as most of the Commonwealth. For his part Butler tried to distinguish between the prime minister's errors of judgement and anything immoral, and suggested he was doing what he thought best for the country. Fisher responded that he was unable to accept this distinction, and:

I said the trouble was in the PM. However devoted to the public good, he had lost his balance of judgment...Rab said nothing in anyway disloyal to PM...But he took my account in silence, and more than once said "I did not know everything, the matter was kept very tight". If the PM's second-in-command can say that, things were indeed in jeopardy... So we ended. He had tried to lead me off the point and I had not followed.⁵⁹

Eight days later Herbert Waddams sat in the public gallery when Anthony Eden got up in the Commons to deny foreknowledge of the Israeli attack, and he notes Lady Violet Bonham Carter's comment that they need to talk with the editor of *The Times* William Haley about what to do next.⁶⁰ Eden's resignation in the New Year effectively ended such discussions.

* * * * *

A number of conclusions emerge from this study concerning the public engagement of the churches in a religious context characterised by hierarchical pluralism, the types of arguments advanced by church leaders in critiquing military intervention in Egypt, and the divisions within church and society relating to both Suez and the wider role of Britain and the world. Increasingly the churches sought to work together on key moral and political issues, but the Church of England remained *primus inter pares*, its leaders expected to speak on issues of the day but, in those days, not expected to rock the boat. Personally Archbishop Fisher was a conservative establishment man who was reluctant to go too far in public, though also unpredictable in his interventions in the political sphere. Despite the sharp exchange with the Lord Chancellor in the Lords and speeches questioning the wisdom of Eden's policies, his most barbed comments were confined to private meetings, letters and memorandum. Indeed, much of the most critical activity took place behind the scenes in a world where leading Anglican hierarchs and government ministers still met in the lobbies and offices at Westminster, at Buckingham Palace garden parties, in gentleman's clubs or at gatherings in private houses. In this atmosphere Archbishop Fisher could raise sharper questions about the integrity and even the mental balance of the prime minister and contribute to discussions of Eden's political future. This was a world that was not to last much beyond the 1950s as the old Edwardian-formed political establishment faded away, and a new archbishop more sceptical about the virtues of religious establishment took office in 1961.

Suez also marked the beginning of a period where Anglican and other church leaders were more frequently to be found at odds with the government of the day or on some issues, such as capital punishment or the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, at odds with a

more conservative public opinion.⁶¹ In the past individual clergymen like Canon Collins at St Paul's Cathedral or bishops such as Bishop Bell had acted as gadflies on issues such as the blanket bombing of German cities or on the nuclear issue following the war, but future decades were to be notable for more visible tensions over a range of domestic and foreign policies. On the Suez issue the critique was fairly undeveloped and scattershot in approach. It focused primarily on the need to refer conflicts to an admittedly feeble United Nations, to observe international law – though there was little grasp of what exactly this might entail – and a rejection of the idea of that interests could somehow trump morality. Addressing the House of Lords on 1 November, Fisher argued that talk of 'our vital interests' or 'the vital interests of Israel' is 'beside the point'. The real issue is that when we joined the United Nations we 'bound ourselves in honour not to claim to be judges in our own cause'.⁶² Much of this argument was pragmatic in nature, dwelling less on ethics and theology than on pragmatic concerns about the domestic and international political arena, and is part of a general turn to a 'public reason' approach as church leaders made their case in what they recognised as an increasingly secular society. Bell and Fisher certainly felt a moral revulsion at what they saw as the dishonesty underlying government policy during the Suez crisis, but they often preferred in public to focus on the practical consequences for the country in the international arena. There was also awareness that Britain had lost the moral high ground when asked to condemn the Soviet invasion of Hungary at the same time, and recognition that Britain would henceforth enjoy a reduced role in the world. What was mostly absent, as pointed out by a letter writer in *The Catholic Herald*,⁶³ was any attempt to evaluate the intervention with reference to the just war theory. That may have been because this was 'too Catholic' a conceptual framework - though implicit in some of Bishop Bell of Chichester's critique of obliteration bombing during the war and speeches on nuclear weapons – and was only to be taken up by Anglican thinkers later in the century.⁶⁴

In the pews opinion was as divided as in the rest of society, with Kenneth Younger suggesting that in fact the mass of ordinary people following the launch of the attack inclined to ‘a nationalist not to say chauvinistic reaction’.⁶⁵ Public opinion ran broadly in favour of the Government for much of the period, with various intellectuals noting in diaries and letters that their own positions were out of tune with majority opinion. Equally divided were the newspapers, with *The Observer* experiencing a loss of advertising revenue as a consequence of its outspoken editorial position.⁶⁶ This article has suggested that the churches and their members were no different from the rest of society, with some influential laypeople horrified that the Archbishop of Canterbury did not play his appointed established role as government supporter. Leading Christian parliamentarians such as Lord Hailsham and the Baptist MP Cyril Black offered strong support to the Prime Minister and criticised Archbishop Fisher, who found himself in the not entirely comfortable position of leading a church attack on the government of the day when British troops were in action.⁶⁷ Of course, the role of the churches was always marginal to the core conflict but, as Lord Hailsham rightly pointed out, many in the Anglican pews were confused by the stance taken by Archbishop Fisher and others, unused to seeing church leaders seemingly at odds with the government on a major policy issue. In practice the divisions caused by Suez, if not its political consequences, proved short-lived, but within the churches it presaged a period when their leaders increasingly often found themselves out of steps with those in the pews on public affairs.

The Suez crisis contributed to a growing recognition and acceptance of Britain’s reduced role in the world. At the beginning of the crisis politicians and some religious commentators were framing it in terms of defending Britain’s vital interests – which presumably trumped the interests of others - with *The Baptist Times* arguing that the Suez canal could not be

treated as ‘simply an Egyptian affair’ because ‘the whole economy of the West, as well as the defence of Asia, depends upon that line of communication’⁶⁸ By way of contrast, *The Catholic Herald* commented that the world has changed and a change of attitude on the West’s part was required if we were to avoid further provocations in the future.⁶⁹ This was also realised by that idiosyncratic churchman Enoch Powell who claimed that Suez ‘cut deep into the consciousness of the British people...They no longer felt sure of themselves. They disbelieved that they could any longer be a nation, with all that meant in terms of independence, pride, and self-confidence’⁷⁰ Such a view might resonate with someone like Powell with his almost mystical understanding of the nation, but in reality the last word is perhaps best left to John Robinson, then Dean of Clare College Cambridge and yet to achieve notoriety of his own:

Rarely, one has got the impression, have the mass of people in this country had their heads so complacently in the sand. It was shock enough to realise that, after the first dazed uneasiness, most people had not really been shaken to any degree by the Suez intervention. One imagined a wave of revulsion such as swept over the country after the Hoare-Laval deal. But with a week most people were preparing to justify it by results...I find myself dismayed and shattered by political events to a degree that I seldom if ever remember before, I feel it has destroyed the only basis upon which Britain could hope to exercise leadership in the post-war situation and that it has finally finished us as a great power more effectively than Hitler ever did.⁷¹

* I am grateful for the help of a number of people who helped this first entry into British history, including Edward Burrows, Mark Imber, Tony Lang, Andy Williams, Tim Wilson, the two

anonymous referees, and the incredibly helpful archivists at Lambeth Palace Library and the Church of England Record Office.

Notes

¹ The title comes from the comments made by Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher in a personal note to Anthony Eden following his critical intervention in the House of Lords on 1 November 1956. *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 272-73, 2 November 1956. Archbishop Fisher's papers and are located at Lambeth Palace Library, (hereafter *Fisher Papers* + volume number).

² BBC Online, 20 February 2003

³ The text of that sermon can be found in Hastings, *Robert Runcie*, 183-86

⁴ See Wilkinson, *The Church of England the First World War* and Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 152-86.

⁵ The social atmosphere of the period is skilfully evoked in Kynaston, *Family Britain, 1951-57*; on religious developments see Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 170-75 and Green, 'Was there an English religious revival in the 1950s'.

⁶ On Archbishop Fisher see Carpenter, *Archbishop Fisher* and Chandler & Hein, *Archbishop Fisher, 1945-6*.

⁷ There are numerous books and articles on the Suez crisis, with the standard, very full account being Kyle: *Suez*. See also Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*; Morgan, *The People's Peace*, 145-57; Gorst & Johnman, *The Suez Crisis*; Smith, *Reassessing Suez: New Perspectives on the Crisis and its Aftermath*.

⁸ Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, 3.

⁹ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, 154.

¹⁰ Morgan, *The People's Peace*, 155-56; Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, 105-106.

¹¹ *Church Times*, 3 August 1956.

¹² *The Church of England Newspaper*, 3 August 1956; *The Baptist Times*, 23 September 1956.

¹³ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 10 August 1956 & 17 August 1956; *The Methodist Recorder*, 20 August 1956; *The Baptist Times*, 13 September 1956

¹⁴ *The Tablet*, 1 September 1956 & 15 September 1956.

¹⁵ *The Catholic Herald*, 17 August 1956.

¹⁶ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 7 September 1956.

¹⁷ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 240-41.

¹⁸ *House of Lords Debates* (hereafter H.o L.Debs), vol 199, col. 767-72 & 854-57; the letter to Atlee can be found in *Fisher Papers 171*, f.248.

¹⁹ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 246-47 & 250.

²⁰ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff 277-78, 282.

²¹ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 257-66.

²² *British Council of Churches/Department of International Affairs/7/2/2/3/1* (hereafter BCC/DIA)

- documents relating to Suez located at the Church of England Record Centre in Bermondsey.

²³ *Bell Papers 100*, f.12; Bishop Bell's papers are also in Lambeth Palace Library. This volume is given over to his correspondence and publications relating to the Suez crisis.

²⁴ *H of L Debs.*, vol. 199, col. 1293-97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, col. 1352-54.

²⁶ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 272-73.

²⁷ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 279-80.

²⁸ *BCC/DIA/7/2/2/3/1*.

²⁹ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 9 November 1956.

³⁰ *Bell Papers 100*, f. 33 & 42.

³¹ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 23 November 1956.

³² *Church Times*, 2 November 1956.

³³ *Church Times*, 2.11.1956 & *The Church of England Newspaper*, 9.11.1956.

³⁴ *Church Times*, 9 November 1956.

³⁵ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 23 November 1956; see various letters published on 9 & 16 November.

³⁶ Kenneth de Courcy (1909-1999), variously proprietor of Intelligence Digest, evangelical activist & British Israelite, convicted fraudster, and reportedly a confidante of the Duke of Windsor involved in an attempt to prevent the accession of Elizabeth II.

³⁷ *Fisher Papers 170*, f.320.

³⁸ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 285, 294-96, 308, 319-20.

³⁹ *Church Times*, 9 November 1956; see the *Church Times*, 16 November 1956 for positions taken by other bishops, some hostile to the government's actions and one (Peterborough) saying that he was unqualified to comment.

⁴⁰ *The Times*, 4 November 1956.

⁴¹ *Church Times*, 9 November 1956.

⁴² *BCC/DIA/7/2/2/3/1*, 5 November 1956.

⁴³ *The Methodist Recorder*, 8 & 15 November 1956; *The Baptist Times*, 8, 15, 22, 29 November, and 13 & 20 December 1956 .

⁴⁴ *Methodist Recorder*, 15 November 1956.

⁴⁵ *BCC/DIA/7/2/2/3/1*; letter to Bell from Rev Pitt Watson on 21 December 1956, *Bell Papers 100*, f.116.

⁴⁶ *The Tablet* 3 November 1956, p. 370.

⁴⁷ *Fisher Papers 296*: the appointment diary for 1956 would appear to be only a partial record of Fisher's activities in general, and this conversation with Butler does not merit an entry.

⁴⁸ Charles Judd (1896-1974), then Chairman of the Executive of the World Federation of United Nations Associations.

⁴⁹ *Council on Foreign Relations CRF 29/1, 1944-61*, f.110; the papers of the CFR are also to be found at Lambeth Palace Library.

⁵⁰ *The Observer*, 4 November 1956; the text of this editorial can also be found in Gorst & Johnman, *The Suez Crisis*, 120-21.

⁵¹ *Fisher Papers 171* f. 307; see Yates & Chester, *The Troublemaker*, 183-84 which notes Astor and The Observer taking a lot of heat for its critical position on Suez, and Scott covering Astor's back by assembling an informal group, not to be confused with the right wing Suez Group, including Jo Grimond, Lady Violet Bonham Carter, Sir Edward Boyle, Richard Scott of *The Manchester Guardian*, Lord Altrincham (better known as Observer writer John Grigg), Ian Gilmour of *The Spectator*, Donald Tynerman of the Economist, Stephen King Hall of the *National Newsletter*, Lord Hemingford and Peter Calvocoressi, and Rev Herbert Waddams who was close to Bishop Bell.

⁵² Thorpe, Eden, 540-41; some of these discussions appear to have been more widely known, and on 27 December an anonymous contributor to *The Baptist Times* noted 'plots being hatched' associated with people around David Astor of *The Observer* and Ian Gilmour of *The Spectator* to promote opposition to the Prime Minister.

⁵³ *The Times*, 20 November 1956.

⁵⁴ *The Times*, 22 November 1956.

⁵⁵ *Bell Papers 100*, f.59.

⁵⁶ *Life and Work*, November 1956.

⁵⁷ *The Baptist Times*, 29 November 1956.

⁵⁸ *Fisher Papers 171*, f.335.

⁵⁹ *Fisher Papers 171*, ff. 341-49; this conversation is also discussed briefly in Thorpe, Eden, 540-41.

⁶⁰ *Fisher Papers 171*, f 350.

⁶¹ Davies, *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*.

⁶² H.o L.Debs), vol 199, col, 1296-97

⁶³ *The Catholic Herald*, 21 December 1956.

⁶⁴ Bell, *The Church and Humanity, 1939-45*; for a general discussion of Anglican engagement with this tradition, see Biggar, 'Between development and doubt', 55-75; for a brief discussion of Bell's development of something resembling a just war approach see Kirby, 'The Church of England and the Cold War nuclear debate', 250-83, especially footnote 122, on pp 279-80.

⁶⁵ Younger, 'Public opinion and foreign policy', 27.

⁶⁶ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 679-96.

⁶⁷ Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*.

⁶⁸ *The Baptist Times*, 16 August 1956.

⁶⁹ *The Catholic Herald*, 17 August 1956.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Carlton, *Britain and the Suez Crisis*, 105.

⁷¹ James, *A Life of Bishop John A.T.Robinson*, 57.

References

BBC Online, 20 February 2003. 'Archbishops doubt morality or Iraq War', at:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2781783.stm>.

Bell, G. *The Church and Humanity, 1939-45*. London: Longman, 1946.

Biggar, N. 'Between development and doubt: the recent career of just war doctrine in British churches', in Reed, C & Ryall, D. ed., *The Price of Peace: Just War in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 55-75.

Brown, Callum.G. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*. 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2001.

Carlton, D. *Britain and the Suez Crisis*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Carpenter, Edward. *Archbishop Fisher – His Life and Times*. Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 1991

Chandler, Andrew & Hein, David. *Archbishop Fisher, 1945-61: Church, State and World*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012.

Davies, C. *The Strange Death of Moral Britain*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004.

Gorst, A & Johnman, L. *The Suez Crisis*. London: Routledge, 1997

Green, S.J.D. 'Was there an English religious revival in the 1950s'. S.Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c. 1920-1960*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, 2011, 242-72

Gregory, Adrian. *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Hastings, Adrian. *Robert Runcie*. London: Mowbray, 1991.

Kirby, D. 'The Church of England and the Cold War nuclear debate', in *Twentieth Century British History*, 4:3, 1993, 250-83.

Kyle, Keith *Suez*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1991.

Kynaston, David. *Family Britain, 1951-57*. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

Morgan, Kenneth O. *The People's Peace: British History, 1945-90*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Robbins, K. *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church 1900-2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Smith, S. ed., *Reassessing Suez: New Perspectives on the Crisis and its Aftermath*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2008.

Thorpe, D.R. *Eden: The Life and Times of Anthony Eden*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2003.

Wilkinson, Alan. *The Church of England the First World War*. London: SPCK, 1978.

Yates, A & Chester, L. *The Troublemaker: Michael Scott and his Lonely Struggle against Apartheid*. London: Aurum, 2006).

Younger, K. 'Public opinion and foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 40:1, 1964, 22-33.

The Tablet