

Philip Williamson
Department of History
University of Durham
North Bailey
Durham DH1 3EX
p.a.williamson@durham.ac.uk

NATIONAL DAYS OF PRAYER:

THE CHURCHES, THE STATE AND PUBLIC WORSHIP IN BRITAIN 1899–1957*

A terrible war had been followed by a harsh winter: trade was poor, money was scarce, and food, fuel and other essentials were in short supply. Extraordinary measures seemed necessary, so the king on the advice of his archbishop and chief minister summoned his people to observe a day of prayer to Almighty God. In every community in the kingdom large congregations attended special religious services, and in London the king and queen joined other leaders of the realm in worship at St Paul's Cathedral.

This was not an episode in medieval or early modern times. The king was George VI, the year was 1947 and the chief minister was Clement Attlee, whose government is more frequently associated with entirely secular solutions to the nation's difficulties. God has not, so far, featured in histories of Labour governments. Nor have other national days of prayer in early twentieth-century Britain received more than incidental comments, even in studies of religion and the churches. As exceptional events, arranged in times of unusual strain or celebration, they have seemed tangential to investigation of longer-term trends and have

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fallen between the concerns of different historical specialisms. Yet national days of prayer were considerable public occasions, with a significance and influence well beyond their infrequent occurrence.¹ An understanding of these occasions of special worship explains much about the place of the churches and religion in public life in modern Britain.

There were twenty-one national days of prayer.² [\[TABLE – SUPPLIED IN AN APPENDIX\]](#) Most were held during the two world wars³ and at the end of those wars, in thanksgiving for victory. One was arranged when war seemed imminent during the Sudetenland crisis in 1938, and another in thanksgiving for the Munich settlement.⁴ Two more were appointed during periods of peacetime anxiety, in 1932 as well as 1947.⁵ These days of special prayers and church services were intended to involve all members of the nation, not just regular church-goers. Their arrangement and observance were prominently reported in the ‘secular’ national and regional newspapers as well as in the religious press. For the national day of prayer in January 1918, public houses, cinemas and other places of entertainment were voluntarily closed as a mark of respect. In the 1930s and 1940s, church leaders used radio and film to maximise popular participation. For days of prayer in 1942 and 1943, the government agreed to a brief interruption of war work so that the whole nation could listen to a religious service broadcast by the BBC. Nor were these ‘days’ only national

¹ It may be noted that, during the early twentieth century, occasions of special worship for royal events (the monarch’s coronation, jubilee and funeral) were less numerous than national days of prayer, yet these have received much greater historical attention. For examples of such studies see below, n. 71.

² A list is provided in the appendix, together with related days of special worship also mentioned in the text.

³ Various studies mention one or two of these wartime days of prayer in passing. Slightly fuller observations or recognitions of their more numerous occurrence are in A. Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London, 1978), pp. 59–61, 67, 203; K. Wolfe, *The Churches and the B[ritish] B[roadcasting] C[orporation] 1922–1956: The Politics of Broadcast Religion* (London, 1984), pp. 158–9, 297–301; M.F. Snape and S.G. Parker, ‘Keeping Faith and Coping: Belief, Popular Religiosity and the British People’, in P. Liddle, J. Bourne and I. Whitehead, eds., *The Great World War, 1914–45* (2 vols., London, 2000–01), ii. 401–04; S. Parker, *Faith on the Home Front: Aspects of Church Life and Popular Religion in Birmingham, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 89–92; V. Chambers, ‘“Defend Us from all Perils and Dangers of this Night”: Coping with Bombing in Britain during the Second World War’, in C. Baldoli, A. Knapp and R. Overy, eds., *Bombing, States and Peoples in Western Europe, 1940–1945* (London, 2011), pp. 156–7.

⁴ See A. Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform? War, Peace and the English Churches, 1900–1945* (London, 1986), pp. 174–5; A. Chandler, ‘Munich and Morality: The Bishops of the Church of England and Appeasement’, *Twentieth Century British History*, v (1994), p. 80; P. Williamson, ‘Christian Conservatives and the Totalitarian Challenge, 1933–1940’, *ante*, cxv (2000), pp. 608–09.

⁵ The only historical references appear to be P. Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 453, 481, and P. Howarth, *George VI: A New Biography* (London, 1987), p. 204.

occasions. Most were also imperial acts of worship, observed right up to 1947 in the overseas dominions and colonies; and some calls to prayer were international, co-ordinated with churches elsewhere in Europe and in the United States of America.

National days of prayer are significant because they were a new type of special public worship created, and widely observed, during an important period for historical understandings of modern British religion and its place in public life.⁶ The early twentieth century was once regarded as part of a prolonged period of secularisation, characterised by an inexorable decline in church attendance and religious belief dating from the nineteenth century and exacerbated by the dislocations and disenchantments of the First World War. More recently it has been argued that the churches and religion retained considerable public and popular influence during these years, with the Church of England in particular experiencing a relative recovery, before an abrupt decline and an intensification of secularisation, dated variously from the 1920s to the 1960s.⁷ Examination of national days of prayer—their development, character, and effects—provides a new understanding of these issues, especially by demonstrating that explanation lies not just in social, cultural and intellectual changes, but also with the activities of the national leaders of the church and the state. From their precursors during the South African War of 1899 to 1902 and their creation during the First World War, these days of prayer established an entirely new co-operation between the principal churches in all parts of the United Kingdom. . The example of these

⁶ The terms ‘British’, ‘Britain’ and ‘United Kingdom’ have particular complexities when dealing with the churches as well as with government and the state in Britain and Ireland over this period: see K. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales: The Christian Church, 1900–2000* (Oxford, 2008). As this article is concerned chiefly with leaderships based in England and in Scotland, the terms British and Britain are used freely. National days of prayer were nevertheless observed by churches throughout the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland (after 1921, Northern Ireland), and indications of the wider complexities are given where appropriate.

⁷ Notable recent (and differing) perspectives are: C.G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (2001; 2nd edn., London, 2009), id., *Religion and Society in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Harlow, 2006), and id., “‘The Unholy Mrs Knight’ and the BBC: Secular Humanism and the Threat to the “Christian Nation”, c.1945–1960’, *ante*, cxxvii (2012), pp. 345–76; M. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State between the Wars* (Oxford, 2004); H. McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007); S.J.D. Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change, c.1920–1960* (Cambridge, 2011).

co-ordinated acts of special worship led to continued consultation and to joint public appeals by leaders of the churches through the 1920s and 1930s. During the Second World War, national days of prayer and other joint calls to prayer were arranged even more frequently than during the First World War. This co-operation between the churches both affected the relative positions of the main churches and ensured that religious perspectives remained prominent in public life. It changed the relationship of the various churches with the monarchy and with the government, both of which were now able to identify themselves with, or to appeal to, a broader range of religious sentiment than had been possible during the denominational conflicts of earlier periods. This created a tacit alliance between the churches, the monarchy and the government which sustained the public role of religion, gave the Church of England a new position of leadership among the churches of the United Kingdom, and endorsed a non-sectarian form of public religion which had considerable ideological significance. To an extent which is overlooked in most histories of politics and ideas during the early twentieth century, prayer and public worship continued to be important elements in public belief.

As two historians of wartime religion have noted, national days of prayer were not simply generated by national leaders and the media: they were also ‘notable expressions of public religiosity’.⁸ During the First World War, they were made more elaborate and more frequent largely because of pressure from clergymen ministering to congregations across the United Kingdom, supported by various public bodies in the regions and by petitions from members of the general public.⁹ During the international crises of the late 1930s and during the Second World War, the king and prime ministers, as well as church leaders, again

⁸ Snape and Parker, ‘Keeping Faith’, p. 403.

⁹ Various memorials and petitions were circulated; for one with 82,000 signatories, see photograph in the Imperial War Museum, London, Q53987, 2 Aug. 1917, reproduced in A. Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 183.

received many requests from members of the public for such occasions to be organised.¹⁰ On the days of prayer themselves, all the places of worship of every religious community—in total, tens of thousands of churches and chapels—held at least one and often several special services, generally using prayers or complete liturgies composed and published by church leaders specifically for the particular occasion. For the first national day of prayer in January 1915, the public sales of the Church of England’s service alone reached almost three million copies.¹¹ The clergy also delivered special sermons, and those of the senior or most popular preachers were reported in national, regional and local newspapers. In towns and cities, leaders of the local authorities and representatives of the various civil associations and military forces attended the main churches. While congregations for the different days of prayer varied in size and were not always exceptional, for most of them the newspapers reported that churches and chapels were unusually wellattended, ‘full’, or ‘crowded’, with queues at cathedrals and sometimes with overflow services held elsewhere.¹² The special services evidently attracted many who were relatively indifferent towards religious observance. For the day of prayer during the fraught wartime conditions of May 1940, *The Daily Mirror* observed that ‘more people took part in communal prayers in Britain and the Empire ... than ever before’.¹³ One study by Mass-Observation in March 1941 found that in circumstances in which low church attendance might have been expected – in a bombed area of London, during poor weather – congregations were considerably higher than for the holy

¹⁰ This is most evident from correspondence of the archbishops, but a list of letters received in Buckingham Palace from 1936, and especially numerous during 1940, is in R[oyal] A[rchives, Windsor] PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/00508.

¹¹ *The Times*, 2 Jan. 1915. Strictly, only the officiating minister needed a text for a service, so such sales for use by members of congregations indicated unusual interest. Archbishop Davidson considered the demand for this and other published wartime services and prayers to be ‘practical evidence that we have at this moment a nation at prayer’: *Chronicle of Convocation: [Being a Record of the Proceedings of the Convocation of] Canterbury* (1915), p. 8 (9 Feb. 1915).

¹² A selection of many examples: *The Scotsman*, 4 Jan. 1915; *Daily Express*, 3 Jan. 1916; *Manchester Guardian*, 7 Jan. 1918; *The Times*, 19 Sept. 1938, 8 Sept. 1941; *Daily Mirror*, 4 Sept. 1944; and see Parker, *Faith on the Home Front*, pp. 89–90.

¹³ *Daily Mirror*, 27 May 1940, and see, e.g., British Movietone [Digital Archive], film 39087, and the succession of crowded services and meetings in Southampton described in C. Smyth, *Cyril Foster Garbett, Archbishop of York* (London, 1959), p. 254.

festival of Easter Sunday. Another survey in April 1942 judged that more than twice as many people attended than usually went to church.¹⁴ It was also common for the special services in each place of worship to be supplemented in the afternoon or evening by prayer meetings or ‘united services’ of the various Protestant churches, held in public halls or in urban squares or parks: 20,000 people were reported in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh in August 1916, and a similar number in Hyde Park in London in August 1918.¹⁵ For days of prayer held on weekdays in September 1942 and September 1943, gatherings for prayers were organised in factories, canteens, offices, schools, military locations, cinemas, theatres, fields and squares,¹⁶ and, as many other people listened to the broadcast services in their homes, a very high proportion of the population must have participated.

National days of prayer were therefore not anachronisms, a legacy from ostensibly more religious centuries, but a response to contemporary spiritual, institutional and public needs and opportunities. This article considers how these occasions of special nation-wide worship assist in the understanding of prominent features of religion and public life from the late 1890s to the 1950s. The first section defines what was new about about national days of prayer, and explains their creation and development up to the 1940s. Further sections consider how they affected the position and activities of the leading churches, the monarchy and the government, and what they can reveal about the public purposes of prayer (including remembrance of the war dead), and about understandings of divine providence and the issue of ‘civil religion’. Consideration is then given to the implications of these issues for recent historical interpretations of the place of religion in public life during the early twentieth century. The final section examines the end of this type of special worship. The national day

¹⁴ Mass-Observation Online, FR 693 (March 1941), and FR 1199 (Apr. 1942); and see the comments in C. Field, ‘Puzzled People Revisited: Religious Believing and Belonging in Wartime Britain, 1939–45’, *Twentieth Century British History*, xix (2008), pp. 464–5; Snape and Parker, ‘Keeping Faith’, p. 403; H. Jones, *British Civilians in the Front Line* (Manchester, 2006), p. 167.

¹⁵ *The Scotsman*, 18 Aug. 1916; *Daily Express*, 5 Aug. 1918.

¹⁶ E.g. *Daily Mirror*, 4 Sept. 1942, ‘Britain’s factories turned into churches’; *The Times* (with photographs), 4 Sept. 1942, 4 Sept. 1943; photographs in *Illustrated London News*, 12 Sept. 1942.

of prayer in July 1947 was the last to be held, though the government seriously considered a proposal for another in early 1957. Its eventual refusal to approve a further national day of prayer indicates an important change in British public religion during the 1950s.

* * *

What were national days of prayer? How were they organised, at what times and in what forms? When these occasions have received historical notice, a common assumption is that they were an old practice—that, for instance, during the First World War ‘King George V, as head of the Church of England, called national days of prayer in the time-honoured tradition of his predecessors’.¹⁷ Certainly there was a long history of special days of worship observed simultaneously in the parish churches of each kingdom in the British Isles, in the forms of fast days or days of humiliation to seek God’s assistance during wars or domestic crises, and days of thanksgiving to express gratitude to God for peace treaties or the removal of other anxieties. Normally these were arranged in the middle of the week, as religious days specially ‘set apart’ from secular business and employment. From the Reformation onwards they were ordered by an act of the state, through royal proclamations which carried legal force and secular sanctions. Even after the successive political unions which created the United Kingdom, separate proclamations were issued for England and Wales, for Ireland and for Scotland, largely because of their different ecclesiastical and legal arrangements. As the sovereign exercised a royal supremacy only over the Church of England and the Church of Ireland,¹⁸ the proclamation for the presbyterian Church of Scotland was expressed in a different style which assumed the concurrence of its general assembly. Although the

¹⁷ M. Snape, ‘The Great War’, in H. McLeod, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity, IX: World Christianities, c.1914–c.2000* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 133.

¹⁸ Wales was included in the Church of England until the separate Church in Wales was created by disestablishment in 1920; the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1871. In both cases, disestablishment ended the royal supremacy.

archbishop of Canterbury (most commonly) or the moderator of the general assembly (very rarely) might make proposals or be asked for advice, there was no requirement that they or any other clergyman should be consulted in advance. By the nineteenth century the decision to appoint a fast day or day of thanksgiving lay with the prime minister, because in matters of public worship, just as in political issues, the sovereign now ultimately acted on ministerial advice. All of this assumed that every person was a member of one of the established churches (or, in Scotland from 1712, also the Episcopal Church). No other churches or faiths were consulted or mentioned. For their part, the Protestant nonconformists or free churches rejected in principle the claims of civil authorities to issue orders to them on spiritual matters, although in practice, - as they usually shared the religious diagnosis of the nation's troubles, some did choose to arrange their own special services on the same day. As these occasions were ordered by a Protestant state, no official notice was taken of the Roman Catholic church. Nor could the Roman Catholic church recognise orders to worship from Protestant authorities, though it too sometimes arranged its own special services on the same day.¹⁹

This was not how the national days of prayer were organised. The traditional days of special worship ended in the 1850s, as governments became sensitive to the implications of religious pluralism, to nonconformist attacks on the established churches and to disagreements even within the Church of England and the Church of Scotland over state authority in religious issues, as well as to increasing concerns that some parts of the population treated special days of worship merely as mid-week holidays. From the 1870s, state orders for worship were largely confined to special prayers or services for the established churches to mark royal events. These royal occasions were uncontroversial, indeed so popular that other religious groups readily observed them with their own special acts of worship.²⁰

¹⁹ P. Williamson, 'State Prayers, Fasts and Thanksgivings: Public Worship in Britain, 1830–1897', *Past & Present*, no. cc (2008), pp. 126–32, 161–2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–70.

Only four more state orders for special worship were issued for other public episodes, and all of these orders took new forms. The first followed the outbreak of the South African War and the series of military defeats during December 1899, which aroused considerable agitation within the Church of England for an act of national penance and special petitions to God, through the revival of the earlier practice of state proclamation of a mid-week day of humiliation. When this was proposed by the archbishop of Canterbury, Frederick Temple, both Lord Salisbury as prime minister and Queen Victoria refused, for the now familiar reasons. But Temple was able to persuade them instead to have the Privy Council authorise special services for use in the Church of England for the duration of the war. Rather than ordering a religious occasion for the whole nation, the state was now assisting one established church in accommodating the wishes of its clergy and congregations.²¹ This became a precedent which was followed at the start of each of the two world wars, with Council orders in August 1914 and September 1939 again authorising wartime services for the Church of England.²²

The fourth instance was the last use of a royal proclamation to appoint special worship in all parts of the nation, for a Sunday of thanksgiving in July 1919 to mark the Versailles peace treaty. From the seventeenth century to the Crimean War, the end of major wars had been marked by state orders for religious thanksgivings, but in other respects this proclamation was unprecedented. It was a proclamation for the whole of the United Kingdom, indeed a single document for all of the king's realms. It was addressed both to the Church of England and to the Church of Scotland, and more significantly still it added a

²¹ G.K.A. Bell, *Randall Davidson, Archbishop of Canterbury* (2 vols., London, 1935), i. 312–4, and P. Hinchcliff, *Frederick Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury: A Life* (Oxford, 1998), p. 274, give brief indications, but the scale of the agitation and issues are evident in the extensive correspondence in *The Times*, 16 Dec. 1899–7 Feb. 1900, *The Guardian* [the Anglican newspaper], 16 Dec. 1899–7 Feb. 1900, and London, [L[ambeth] P[alace] L[ibrary]], [Archbishop] Frederick Temple papers, 32/370–413, 33/2–120, and [Archbishop] Davidson papers, 169/231–63.

²² *The Times*, 6 Aug. 1914; [LPL, Archbishop] Lang papers, 83/132, Privy Council order, 8 Sep. 1939.

request—not an order—for participation by all other religious bodies in the nation and across the overseas Empire:

we do ... advertise and exhort ... all Spiritual Authorities and ministers of religion in their respective churches and other places of public worship throughout Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and in all quarters of Our Dominions beyond the Seas to take part as it may properly behove them to do in this great and common act of worship.²³

The proclamation was actually a hybrid, containing both an order and a request. In this second aspect—a royal request for a ‘common’ and co-ordinated act of public worship by the various churches—the proclamation acknowledged and endorsed the wartime re-invention of special days of nation-wide worship. In effect, the day of thanksgiving for the peace was another instance of a national day of prayer.

National days of prayer (or thanksgiving) were ‘national’ in two senses.²⁴ Firstly, they were organised by the leaders of the principal churches in both England and Scotland, and all religious communities in the United Kingdom participated in them. In these respects, as both ‘pan-insular’ and cross-denominational,²⁵ they were more genuinely ‘national’ than earlier types of special worship—certainly since the emergence of various types of religious dissent during the seventeenth century. They were arranged by consultation between the leaders not only of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland but also of the free churches of England and Wales, and—in the most striking break with the ecclesiastical and ideological past—of the Roman Catholic church in England. Churches in Wales and Ireland (after the Irish treaty of 1921, Northern Ireland) and most other religious bodies joined in, including the Orthodox congregations and the Jewish community. Secondly, they were

²³ *London Gazette*, no. 31427, 1 July 1919, and in many newspapers. For revision of the style of proclamation, see Sir Almeric Fitzroy [Clerk of the Privy Council], *Memoirs* (2 vols., London, 1925), ii. 699–700, 701, 704.

²⁴ The absence of a standard formula of announcement and certain variations in organisation and terminology create some problems of definition. But the archiepiscopal correspondence and public announcements establish that the two aspects noted here were the defining criteria. For fuller details of all types of special nation-wide services and prayers see P. Williamson, S. Taylor, A. Raffe, and N. Mears, eds., [*National Prayers: Special Worship since the Reformation, II: Worship for National and Royal Occasions [in Britain since 1871]*] (forthcoming).

²⁵ See Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, pp. 100–02, for the separation of the various churches within the United Kingdom before the First World War.

publicly approved or requested by the sovereign. There was, however, no state order and no exercise of the royal supremacy (except, in part, in 1919). The sovereign's role was now symbolic and non-denominational: as head of the nation—not of the state, nor of the Church of England—the king endorsed the arrangements agreed by leaders of the various churches. His chief advisor remained the archbishop of Canterbury, but now the archbishop acted less as primate of the Church of England than as the representative of the main churches of the United Kingdom. Prime ministers were not at first involved. When they did become involved in 1917–18, this was to advise on the style of announcement and to agree to the organisation of a national service in London. From 1939 to 1944, they were consulted because of the implications for wartime morale, air-raid precautions and other controls. This led archbishops of Canterbury during the 1940s to concede a power of veto to the cabinet. Nevertheless, government involvement did not alter the essential character of national days of prayer. Announced by the king's wish but without any state or government order, their organisation was based on the principles of ecclesiastical independence and voluntary co-operation, enabling all religious communities to participate if and as they wished, each issuing directions on their own authority to their own clergy and congregations.

The key elements of this new process were the initiative and co-operation of church leaders. After the state ceased, in the 1850s, to proclaim the traditional fast, humiliation and thanksgiving days, the leaders of the Church of England and the Church of Scotland had marked wars, crises and celebrations by issuing their own orders for special worship within their churches. For instance, each had organised days of intercession early in the South African war, on different Sundays in January and February 1900, and the Church of England held a day of thanksgiving for the peace treaty that ended the war in June 1902. Without state orders, this special worship was 'national' only in the limited sense that it was arranged and observed by the established 'national' church. Yet this absence of state orders also created the possibility of national worship in another sense: if they wished, the leaders of the

established churches could now seek to arrange occasions of special worship in conjunction with other churches, including those which did not accept or had reservations about state intervention on matters of worship. Since the 1860s, the Church of Scotland had co-ordinated some days of special worship with 'dissenting' or free presbyterian churches in Scotland. During the national coal strike in March 1912, a joint day of intercession had been held in England and Wales, following an invitation from the archbishops of the Church of England to the National Free Church Council, the body which represented Baptists, Congregationalists, the several Methodist connexions, Presbyterians and other 'nonconformist' Protestant denominations. This practice had large implications. The two established churches had tacitly conceded that they alone could no longer plausibly express 'national religion'. If special days of worship were to be considered as 'national', participation from other churches would now be needed. If this was to occur, the churches would have to be in agreement on the spiritual and moral issues; and if the churches were to claim to express the nation's spiritual needs, much of the public would also have to be in agreement as to the rightness of the cause.

The South African War had been controversial, with divisions among the free churches and the public. In contrast, wide agreement quickly became apparent after the outbreak of the European war in August 1914, with all the churches holding special wartime prayers and attracting large congregations. So great was the support for the war, and the belief in its righteousness, that leaders of the various churches soon agreed to appoint simultaneous occasions of special services, beginning with two days of intercession organised by the archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson. For the first, he invited the leaders of the English Roman Catholic Church as well as the National Free Church Council to recommend special services on a day which had already been arranged for the Church of England, Friday 21 August. For the second, on the first Sunday of 1915, he went further: he consulted the Roman Catholic and the free-church leaders in advance, and obtained a public

statement of support from King George V. Davidson explicitly wanted ‘national’ worship in the new sense of services by all the churches, with the ability to appeal ‘to every Christian citizen’.²⁶ Originally, his meaning of ‘national’ was limited to the area ministered to by the Church of England, that is, to England and Wales. But the Church of Scotland asked to be associated with the king’s statement, and was followed by the other churches of Scotland and by churches in Ireland. Consequently, 3 January 1915 became the first properly *national* day of prayer, observed throughout the United Kingdom. But a ‘national’ observance was not Davidson’s only aim. By including the Roman Catholic church and by a later invitation to the head of the Orthodox congregations in England, he involved churches which had co-religionists in the allied nations. He also arranged for special worship to be held in those nations on the same day. On Davidson’s suggestion, Cardinal Bourne, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, successfully asked for special services to be held in Catholic churches in France and Belgium, while Davidson himself asked for the blessing of the patriarch of the Orthodox church in Russia.²⁷

Davidson had another purpose: to deflect new appeals for a state-proclaimed and mid-week ‘day of humiliation’, which were made much more widely and more persistently than during the South African War. These began after the first inconclusive battles and heavy casualties in the autumn of 1914. As fighting became more extensive and more prolonged, as the numbers of war dead increased remorselessly, and as victory seemed ever more elusive, the appeals became more urgent and anxious. Private requests to church leaders and the King were joined by resolutions, open letters, petitions, and demands for a deputation of church leaders to the prime minister. These came from the Church of Scotland, from the inter-denominational Evangelical Alliance and, with some historical paradox, from the heirs of the dissenting tradition: the National Free Church Council, and officers of the non-established

²⁶ *The Times*, 12 Aug. and 5 Nov. 1914, announcements by the archbishops of Canterbury and York.

²⁷ Davidson papers, 367/249, 253, 335–7, Davidson-Bourne letters, 24–25 Nov. 1914, Davidson to Lang, 14 Dec. 1914; London, Archives of the Archbishops of Westminster, Bourne papers, BO 5/81E, documents from French archbishops, Dec. 1914; *The Times*, 19 Dec. 1914, 2 and 4 Jan. 1915.

Protestant churches in England and Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. There was also support from Archbishop Lang and other Church of England bishops.²⁸ By the autumn of 1917, the leaders of the British Protestant churches were close to uniting in public criticism of the government's refusal to allow adequate expression of the nation's dependence on God's will.²⁹

Davidson was caught in a dilemma. He too was concerned that the nation should acknowledge its reliance on God, and that the sacrifices, anxieties and bereavements of millions should be amply recognised in public worship. But he regarded religious 'humiliation' as outmoded and a term likely to be misinterpreted by both enemies and allies as an admission of guilt or despair. Moreover, he knew that no government would now countenance its use nor, in conditions of mass mobilisation, allow a weekday suspension of war work. At the same time, he wished to avoid a public rift between the churches and the government, which might damage the nation's religious life and perhaps detract from the war effort. His solution was to devise further and more impressive occasions of special worship. A national day of prayer on a Sunday close to the new year became customary for the remaining years of the war. For the 'day' in January 1916, preparatory prayers were recommended for the preceding Friday and Saturday, and mayors and provosts throughout the United Kingdom agreed to organise formal civic attendance at the principal church services in their cities or towns, and to 'urge their fellow-citizens to a right and worthy observance of the day'.³⁰ Davidson also arranged for the Church of England, in common with other churches, to have special services on the anniversaries of the outbreak of war on 4 August in 1916 and again in 1917, although as these were weekdays they were not organised as co-ordinated national days of prayer.

²⁸ See the considerable correspondence in the Davidson papers, 367–69, especially the memorial from leaders of the British Protestant denominations, 19 June 1916 at 368/317, summarised in *The Times*, 1 July 1916.

²⁹ London, [T[he] N[ational] A[rchives], P[ublic] R[ecord] O[ffice]], CAB 24/28, Davidson to Lloyd George, 4 Oct. 1917, GT2272.

³⁰ *The Times*, 3 and 26 Nov. 1915, 31 Dec. 1915. The municipal leaders acted in response to a public appeal by the Lord Mayor of London, but this was initiated by Davidson.

Nevertheless, pressure continued for a ‘day of humiliation’ proclaimed by the state. Davidson interpreted this as a desire that the nation’s leaders should be more closely associated with special worship or, as expressed by Lang, that ‘the nation, speaking through its responsible authorities, [should] corporatively express its trust in God and desire to fulfil His Will’.³¹ After prolonged discussion and after consultation with the cabinet, it was agreed by the king’s secretary and by Lloyd George, as prime minister, that the next national day of prayer, in January 1918, should be presented as a personal initiative by the king, making a public call for prayers from the whole nation and empire.³² This was so successful with the churches and the wider public that, when further anxious appeals from English free-church and Scottish church leaders were voiced after the British armies on the western front were forced into retreat by the German spring offensive of 1918,³³ Davidson orchestrated another impressive religious occasion. The war anniversary in August 1918, which fell on a Sunday, was appointed as an additional national day of prayer, and the two houses of Parliament, by formal resolutions, joined the king and queen in a special service in St Margaret’s Church, Westminster. In Davidson’s words, this ‘official attendance’ at worship by the nation’s leaders would mark ‘our prayer, our confession, our thanksgiving in the most deliberate way possible as a national act’.³⁴

The example of these national days of prayer was followed after the armistice in November 1918, which was marked by spontaneous and crowded thanksgiving services in churches throughout Britain, as well as by the unusual style of the proclamation for religious

³¹ *York Diocesan Gazette*, xxvi (July 1917), pp. 143–4.

³² The discussions are partly reported in Bell, *Randall Davidson*, ii. 827–8, and see CAB 24/28, Davidson to Lloyd George, 4 Oct. 1917, GT2272; CAB 23/4, War Cabinet meeting 252, 18 Oct. 1917; and the king’s statement in *The Times*, 8 Nov. 1918. The statement made incidental use of the term ‘proclamation’ and it was often described as such. But it was actually a characteristic improvisation by Lloyd George, composed by his secretaries and not a state or royal order. Its unconventional character was noted in a later privy council office memorandum, CAB 21/3910, ‘Prayers and thanksgivings 1914–1919’, 23 Feb. 1940.

³³ See Davidson papers, 369/148–58, resolutions and letters from the Church of Scotland, United Free Church of Scotland, and National Free Church Council, May–June 1918.

³⁴ Davidson papers, 369/159, Davidson to Bonar Law, 1 July 1918; CAB 23/7, War Cabinet meeting 439, 2 July 1918; *5Hans Commons cviii* (17 July 1918), 1076–7, and *5Hans Lords xxx* (17 July 1918), 979; Davidson’s statement in *The Times*, 27 July 1918.

thanksgiving for the peace treaty in July 1919. It also had a more long-lasting effect. The wartime days of prayer had demonstrated that by co-ordinated action the churches could still command considerable public attention, and could oblige the government to take notice of the claims of religion. They established a practice of consultation between church leaders which was continued during the interwar years, most regularly for commemoration of the war dead but also on more particular matters of national concern, and which was expressed in joint organisation of public meetings, deputations, statements in newspapers, and appeals for prayers. Arranged most commonly between the Anglican archbishops and the English free-church councils,³⁵ increasingly with the leaders of the Church of Scotland, and sometimes also with the Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster, this co-operation ensured that, far more frequently than before, the pronouncements of church leaders on national and international issues were reported in the national media. . Among the subjects were industrial peace and the Irish troubles in 1919 and 1920; unemployment in 1930, and the world economic conference in 1933; the persecution of the Christians of Russia in 1930, and of the Jews of Germany in 1938; and disarmament conferences, League of Nations meetings or appeals for international peace in 1921, 1922, 1930, 1932 and most other years during the 1930s.³⁶ Authoritative religious and moral perspectives on current affairs were sustained in public debate, now with the additional weight of expressing the collective views of the leaders of the principal churches.

However, no national days of prayer were appointed during the 1920s. Davidson judged that, as the main crises of the period—the industrial disputes of 1921 and 1925–26—turned on divisions within the nation, a spiritual appeal to national unity would be

³⁵ The National Free Church Council of England and Wales, with individual membership, had been formed in 1896, and a Federal Council, representative of the English and Welsh free-church denominations, was established in 1919. Joint statements with leaders of other churches were signed by the chief officer of one council or the other, and sometimes both. The two councils merged as the Free Church Federal Council in 1940.

³⁶ Some instances are noted by Wilkinson, *Church of England and the First World War*, p. 206, and id., *Dissent or Conform?*, pp. 66–7, 88–9. More can be found in *The Times*, *The Scotsman*, and other newspapers, and details of the main calls to prayer are in Williamson, et al., *Worship for National and Royal Occasions*.

implausible and might easily be compromised by accusations of political partisanship (as, indeed, happened with the attempts by himself and other church leaders to encourage mediation during the General Strike and the coal dispute of 1926).³⁷ Lang, Davidson's successor as archbishop of Canterbury, nevertheless arranged a national day of prayer in January 1932, notwithstanding the sharp divisions which had followed the financial and political crises of 1931. One purpose—prayers for the world disarmament conference—had cross-party support; but Lang and other church leaders evidently regarded the creation and election of a 'National' coalition government as sufficient demonstration of a common will to overcome the nation's financial and economic problems.³⁸

If the days of prayer before and after the Sudetenland crisis in the autumn of 1938 were indicative of the churches' commitment to the prevention of another European war, the arrangement of a further day of prayer in October 1939 demonstrated their acceptance that war against Nazi Germany had become inevitable and righteous.³⁹ The main reason why national days of prayer were more numerous during the Second World War than during the First World War was that the government gave much greater support for all types of special worship. Lang would have been content with annual days of prayer on a Sunday early in each September, to mark the anniversary of the outbreak of war. But during the great crisis of May 1940 he organised another, which, at a time of military defeat and threats of air attack and invasion, made an enormous public impression. Churchill thereafter wanted more frequent national days of prayer, and Lang agreed on a pattern of two a year, in March and September.⁴⁰

³⁷ Davidson's concerns were most clearly expressed in *Chronicle of Convocation: Canterbury* (1921), pp. 298–9 (28 Apr. 1921).

³⁸ See the announcement by Lang and William Temple, archbishop of York, *The Times*, 17 Dec. 1931.

³⁹ For this shift of perspective in the churches, see Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, pp. 171–89, 233–41, 244–51; Chandler, 'Munich and Morality', pp. 79–99.

⁴⁰ Lang papers, 83/357, Lang note of discussion with Churchill, 1 Aug. 1940; [TNA, PRO], PREM 4/36/7, Lang to Churchill, 18 Feb. 1941.

The remaining wartime changes resulted from the efforts of the next archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, to ensure that these national days of prayer did not lose effect by appearing to be routine. He persuaded the government that in September 1942 the ‘day’ should be held on the exact date of the war anniversary, a Thursday—precisely because the choice of a weekday would be regarded as particularly special. Additional church services were organised in the evening, and, on the initiative of the principal cinema owners and film distributors, short services were arranged in cinemas, assisted by screenings of a film of Temple reading out prayers.⁴¹ The main feature of the day was the decision of the government to arrange for factories, offices, schools and military camps to cease work for at least 15 minutes at 11.00 a.m., in order to allow the whole nation to listen to and participate in a religious service broadcast by the BBC.⁴² This midweek ‘day’ and the suspension of work during a BBC service was repeated in September 1943 (though not in 1944, when the anniversary and therefore the day of prayer fell on a Sunday). However, the arrangements made in September 1942 had two unforeseen consequences. Firstly, the considerable organisational effort required for midweek ‘days’ could not easily be undertaken twice a year, yet these midweek observances were so obviously special that they seemed likely to overshadow days of prayer held on Sundays. Consequently, after consultations with other church leaders, Temple agreed not to organise a national day of prayer early in 1943, and so reverted to just one during the year.⁴³ Secondly, Lang and Temple had thought it right to consult the prime minister as the king’s principal adviser; now, as the government issued the directions to the BBC and to places of work, civil servants and other ministers also acquired a role in the arrangements. Much to Temple’s annoyance, this enabled the government in the

⁴¹ *The Times*, 1 Sept. 1942, and see British Pathé, film 1336.17, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/national-day-of-prayer-1/>.

⁴² *The Times*, 5 and 20 Aug. 1942, Temple and Home Office announcements, and 4 Sept. 1942, reports. The considerable preparations can be found in [LPL, Archbishop] William Temple papers, 56/18–108, and in CAB 123/208 and PREM 4/36/7.

⁴³ William Temple papers, 56/150–6, Temple correspondence with Rev. John Whale (moderator, Free Church Council) and Cardinal Hinsley, 18–19 Feb. 1943; PREM 4/36/7, Temple to Bevir (Churchill’s secretary), 1 Mar. 1943.

spring of 1944 to obstruct the churches' long-prepared plans for a national day of prayer in anticipation of the Allied invasion of north-western Europe, on the grounds that it might impair the military preparations⁴⁴—although Temple circumvented this to the extent of arranging a day of prayer just for the Church of England, on St George's Day.⁴⁵ Greater government involvement did ensure that days of religious thanksgiving were accepted as integral to official arrangements for the celebrations of victory in Europe and then over Japan during 1945. But it also led Temple's successor, Geoffrey Fisher, to assume that ministerial approval was a requirement. He secured this in 1947 from ministers still familiar with wartime days of prayer, but such approval subsequently seemed less likely, even as new crises occurred.

* * *

What significance did national days of prayer have for the churches? Most obviously, these occasions gave public witness to the conviction that the success of the nation and the causes it stood for in the world was only possible with God's assistance, as well as expressing a belief that simultaneous prayers concentrated on the same purposes from all Christians in the United Kingdom would be more effective than the prayers of the members of each church alone. In addition, they provided opportunities for the churches to engage with those who did not regularly attend public worship. They emphasised the churches' commitment to the national effort during wars and crises, and renewed the assumption that the churches fulfilled important national purposes. Co-operation for days of prayer during the First World War also gave a new impetus to the British dimensions of the ecumenical movement as expressed by the 'united services' of members of different Protestant churches held on special

⁴⁴ See below, p. XXX.

⁴⁵ *The Times*, 12 Apr. 1944, statement by the archbishops of Canterbury and York.

occasions, the Church of England's Lambeth appeal for Christian unity in 1920, the interwar discussions on union between churches, and by interdenominational movements such as COPEC and the establishment of the British Council of Churches in 1942.⁴⁶

However, the founding principle for national days of prayer had not been the prospect of unity between the churches, but their continued independence, and for the leading churches the chief institutional significance of these occasions lay in their own status and aspirations. Co-operation on a national religious occasion which was approved by the sovereign, and which received considerable attention from the print and visual media, conferred public recognition of their place in national life. For the Roman Catholic church and for the free churches, it also signified national acceptance of the legitimacy of their faith and worship, while for the established churches it was an opportunity to provide leadership for other churches, and to acquire a new type of authority in expressions of 'national' religion.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the Roman Catholic church in most areas of the United Kingdom (though not in Ireland) stood 'extraordinarily apart' in religious and political terms.⁴⁷ In 1908, the Liberal government had submitted to Protestant anti-Catholic protests and prohibited a procession of the sacrament through London streets; only in 1910 had anti-Catholic imprecations in the sovereign's accession declaration been removed. In the face of centuries of anti-Catholicism—and notwithstanding the Irish complexities—the Catholic hierarchy in England had long insisted on their church's attachment to the British state, and had sought during successive wars to demonstrate that Catholics were 'as patriotic as any Protestant'. The two world wars provided new opportunities to counteract persistent prejudices and suspicions: that Roman Catholicism was alien to British culture, subordinate

⁴⁶ There is a substantial literature on the ecumenical movement among Protestant churches, which had pre-1914 origins and international dimensions; but for the wartime impetus see, e.g., Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War*, pp. 206-8.

⁴⁷ A. Hastings, *A History of English Christianity, 1920-1985* (London, 1986), p. 131. In Ireland, given the numerical predominance of its adherents, the position of the Roman Catholic church was quite different, and became still more so after the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921.

to foreign authority, and sympathetic towards Britain's enemies.⁴⁸ National days of prayer placed the archbishop of Westminster, as the senior figure in the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, on a similar basis to the nation's other religious leaders, and led to Cardinal Bourne's participation in joint public statements with the archbishop of Canterbury and the leaders of the English free churches and the Church of Scotland, beginning in December 1914 with appeals for church collections for the casualties of the war, and continuing with wartime temperance and relief funds for Belgium.⁴⁹ From the late 1920s, the archbishop of Westminster was regarded by the BBC as entitled, in common with other church leaders, to make a special broadcast on occasions of great religious significance, particularly national days of prayer.⁵⁰ During the Second World War, Cardinal Hinsley even obtained support from Anglican bishops and prominent free churchmen for his public endorsement of Pope Pius XII's 'peace points', and for a Catholic initiative in cross-denominational Christian revival, the *Sword of the Spirit*.⁵¹ Together with larger religious and social shifts, participation in national days of prayer did much to strengthen the Roman Catholic church's status in British public life.

Nevertheless, the Catholic archbishops were careful to retain their church's distinctiveness. They maintained the papal ban on Catholics praying in the company of non-Catholics (which caused problems for the *Sword of the Spirit*),⁵² and issued their own announcements for special worship, declining to sign joint calls to prayer with Protestant churchmen. In contrast, the English free-church leaders treated national days of prayer as occasions to draw closer to the existing establishment in church and state, not only as a long-

⁴⁸ M. Snape, 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History*, xxvi (2002), pp. 317–20, 350–1; Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, pp. 114–15, 287–8; Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, pp. 44, 254–5.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 9 Dec. 1914, 8 Apr. and 27 Nov. 1915.

⁵⁰ Though see Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, ch. 4, pp. 148–54, 299, for various difficulties over broadcasting by Roman Catholics.

⁵¹ *The Times*, 21 Dec. 1940; Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, pp. 392–5; M.J. Walsh, 'Ecumenism in War-Time Britain: The *Sword of the Spirit* and Religion and Life, 1940–1945', *Heythrop Journal*, xxiii (1982), pp. 243–58, 377–94.

⁵² Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, pp. 395–6; Walsh, 'Ecumenism in War-Time Britain', pp. 252–4, 384–5.

desired confirmation of their churches' importance in national life but also as a step towards equality with the Church of England and the achievement of a widening public influence. During the First World War they seized upon the opportunities to work with the archbishop of Canterbury in arranging national days of prayer. Between the wars they were routinely consulted by the Anglican archbishops on national issues, and in some cases they initiated joint statements or special prayers: in 1922, a prayer for international peace composed by a free-church minister was read in all Church of England churches as well as the chapels of the English and Welsh free churches.⁵³ The effects, however, were to reinforce the shift in their stance which had commenced with their support for British participation in the First World War.⁵⁴ The requests of their chief officers in 1917–18 for a state proclamation of a day of humiliation were especially striking, coming from churches which had once derived vigour from dissent from the state's claims to authority in religious matters. Probably this was not as paradoxical as it seems: free-church leaders presumably expected not a state order to themselves but a stronger version of the announcements of national days of prayer, which would ask for voluntary responses from the churches (as in the proclamation for the thanksgiving in 1919). Nevertheless, these requests signified a wider departure in free-church thinking: an acceptance of the state considered as a corporate religious and moral entity, expressing the nation's conscience and capacity for righteousness.⁵⁵ Moreover, as Christian belief itself came under increasing challenge, especially from the international threats of communism and fascism, the free churches came 'to value the recognition of religion by the state as a bulwark to the practice of their own religion as well as the

⁵³ *The Times*, 7 Dec. 1922; A. Porritt, *John Henry Jowett, CH, MA, DD* (1924), pp. 265–70. The papers of Davidson, Lang and William Temple contain much correspondence with officers of the free-church councils on special worship and on joint statements on public issues.

⁵⁴ Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, chs. 1–3, and, still more critically, A. Ruston, 'Protestant Nonconformist Attitudes towards the First World War', in A. Sell and A. Cross, eds., *Protestant Nonconformity in the Twentieth Century* (Carlisle, 2003), pp. 240–63.

⁵⁵ J. Moffat, 'The Influence of the War upon the Religious Life and Thought of Great Britain', *American Journal of Theology*, xx (1916), pp. 486–8; and see J. Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (1994), p. 238, and Ruston, 'Protestant Nonconformist Attitudes', pp. 256–7.

Anglican’, and became ‘not opponents of the established Church, so much as its allies in the cause of national Christianity’.⁵⁶

Disestablishment ceased to be a leading objective of the English free churches. The shift is also clear in other aspects of national days of prayer: in the Free Church Council’s keenness for united local services arranged with the Anglican parish clergy; in adoption of the Anglican practice of printed special services instead of extempore prayers; in its much-publicised inclusion of prayers from the Church of England’s special service in its own form of service for the January 1918 ‘day’, and its seeking of the King’s approval for this service;⁵⁷ and in its readiness, during the 1940s, to share the main BBC service with the Anglican archbishops rather than have its own broadcast. On the one hand, free-church leaders celebrated a monarch’s first attendance at ‘nonconformist’ worship, for their national thanksgiving service after the armistice in November 1918, as ‘the beginning of a new day in the relations of the State to “Dissent”’ and a contribution to the ‘lifting of ... the social stigma’ from their churches.⁵⁸ On the other, they complained into the 1940s that no free-church minister was given a speaking part in the national services organised by the Church of England in St. Paul’s Cathedral or Westminster Abbey.⁵⁹ In this way, the national days of prayer assisted the English free-church leaders in advancing their national aspirations, but also contributed to what Alan Wilkinson has termed ‘the assimilation of dissent’⁶⁰—a desire for identification with the establishment which diluted the distinctiveness of their churches, and may have aggravated the falling membership of their denominations.

⁵⁶ O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church* (2 vols., London, 1966–70), ii. 438; Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, p. 162; and see E.A. Payne, *The Free Church Tradition in the Life of England* (London, 1944), p. 136.

⁵⁷ *The Times*, 5 Dec. 1917, 5 Jan. 1918; RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/WAR/QQ12/5973, Rev. F.B. Meyer (secretary, National Free Church Council) to the King, 23 Dec. 1917, enclosing *A Form of Service (including the Special Prayers to be used in common with the Anglican Church) for use in the Free Churches on the Day of Intercession, January 6th, 1918*.

⁵⁸ J. Marchant, *Dr John Clifford, CH: Life, Letters, and Reminiscences* (London, 1924), p. 235; *Christian World*, 21 Nov. 1918.

⁵⁹ E.g. for thanksgiving days after both world wars: Meyer in *The Times*, 2 July 1919; London, Dr Williams’s Library, Federal Free Church Council committee minutes, A15, 31 Aug. 1945.

⁶⁰ Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, title of ch. 3.

By 1914, the leaders of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland were already engaged in discussions for re-union of their churches. As the first was the established church and the second was nearly its equal in size, and as together they would become by far the largest church in Scotland, it might be thought that they had little reason for concern about their status. But the leaders of both churches were strongly unionist, in the sense of attachment to the United Kingdom, and, especially during wartime, they were sensitive to their place in British religion. In late 1914 they were outraged at not being consulted over the arrangements for a day of worship in England and Wales which was approved by the king and described as a ‘national’ occasion. They insisted that the king’s approval should be extended to include similar arrangements by the Scottish churches and so, as already noted, they were chiefly responsible for special days of worship becoming genuinely national religious occasions.⁶¹ Tension still arose periodically: from 1915 to 1918 over the frustration of appeals from Scottish churches for a day of humiliation—‘surely’, it was asked in 1918, ‘the Government will not turn a deaf ear to all this?’; and in summer 1942 over another failure of consultation, on the alteration of the next national day of prayer to a weekday.⁶² But from 1915 the leaders of the Church of Scotland were normally kept informed about proposed occasions of special worship, and from the 1930s they regularly participated in joint conferences or statements on the growing international crises. Recognition as a British church mattered a good deal to them; but it was also important for the position of their Church within Scotland. The national days of prayer during the First World War enabled the Church of Scotland both to cement its growing alliance with the United Free Church and to assert a representative leadership over other Scottish churches. For the ‘day’ in January 1915, the Church of Scotland and United Free Church published identical addresses calling the Scottish people to prayer, and organised a joint statement with

⁶¹Davidson papers, 367/185–212, correspondence between T. Nicol (moderator, Church of Scotland), Davidson and Lord Stamfordham (the king’s private secretary), 5–10 Nov. 1914; *The Scotsman*, 10 Nov. 1914.

⁶²Davidson papers, 369/148–9, R. Drummond (moderator, United Free Church) to Davidson, 15 June 1918; William Temple papers, 56/25–9, C. Taylor (moderator, Church of Scotland) to Temple, 21, 22 July 1942.

the leaders of the Episcopal, dissenting presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, Methodist and Roman Catholic churches of Scotland.⁶³ Further joint statements followed for later occasions of special worship or on national issues, and in 1925 the Protestant churches formed a Scottish Church Council, in effect under the leadership of the Church of Scotland.

What was true of the Church of Scotland was still more so of the Church of England. As Matthew Grimley and Simon Green in particular have noted, the Church of England was, in Grimley's words, 'in some ways in a *stronger* national position after 1918 than it had been during the late Victorian period'.⁶⁴ This was not, however, simply the result of the decline of political nonconformity in England, nor was the effect confined just to England. National days of prayer placed the Church of England as never before in an acknowledged position of leadership of the churches in the whole United Kingdom.⁶⁵ This was a position not so much asserted by the Anglican archbishops as assigned to them by leaders of the other churches. In arranging the wartime days of intercession in 1914, Davidson correctly assumed that other English churches would accept his leadership. But the Scottish demands for participation were unexpected, and for the remainder of the war he received requests from various Protestant churches in England, Wales and Scotland for further occasions of special worship. During the inter-war years, leaders of other churches turned to the archbishops of Canterbury whenever they wanted calls for prayer, public statements or meetings to have influence on a national scale and with the government and other public bodies. On the initiative of leaders of the English free churches and the Church of Scotland, Lang became from 1934 the convenor of an informal 'conference' of British protestant church leaders to prepare public statements on the spiritual aspects of the great issues in international affairs, notably during

⁶³ *The Scotsman*, 18, 19 Nov. and 25 Dec. 1914, and see, e.g., 28 Dec. 1931.

⁶⁴ Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, p. 10 (emphasis in original), and generally pp. 10–16, 183–5, 224; S.J.D. Green, 'Survival and Autonomy: On the Strange Fortunes and Peculiar Legacy of Ecclesiastical Establishment in the Modern British State, c.1920 to the Present Day', in S.J.D. Green and R.C. Whiting, eds., *The Boundaries of the Modern State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 305–12; and Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, pp. 35–55, 86–8, 311–12.

⁶⁵ See Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*, pp. 100–01, for the archbishop of Canterbury's lack of ecclesiastical authority across the United Kingdom before 1914.

the the Abyssinian, Rhineland and Sudetenland crises.⁶⁶ As a matter of course, the archbishop of Canterbury's signature came first in collective statements from the principal British churches, and his announcements for national days of prayer were printed in Scottish newspapers, alongside those from the Church of Scotland.⁶⁷ This ascendancy did not come about just because the Church of England was the largest church in Britain, or because of Davidson's, Lang's and Temple's personal spiritual authority. The chief explanation lay in a change in institutional relations. The Anglican archbishops had always been part of the central state 'establishment', acting as ecclesiastical advisors to the sovereign and the government, consulted on proposals submitted by leaders of other churches, and able to obtain attention from politicians and the national media. Now that there was greater agreement among the churches on the big issues of war, social reconciliation and international peace, the privileged position of the Church of England became less a source of resentment for other churches than an advantage to them, offering their leaders easier access to those with influence in the state and to the main newspapers and the BBC. The logical course of action for the leaders of the other churches was to approach the Anglican archbishops, seeking their assistance as intermediaries and advocates; conversely, the king's advisors, government ministers and national media came to regard the archbishops as the spokesmen for all the churches. These were the main reasons why the Church of England's 'bold claim to speak on behalf of the nation was by and large taken at face value'.⁶⁸ In December 1940 Lang observed that 'it is often recognised that the Archbishop of Canterbury may ... speak for other Christian communions besides his own', and indeed since the national days of prayer during the First World War Davidson and Lang had been so confident of their

⁶⁶ Correspondence Dec. 1933–May 1934 in Lang papers, 54, and statements by Lang and other church leaders in *The Times*, 17 May 1934 (disarmament), 23 Oct. 1935 (Abyssinia), 24 Mar. 1936 (Rhineland), and 1 Oct. 1938 (Sudetenland).

⁶⁷ E.g. *The Scotsman*, 15 Aug. 1940, 15 Aug. 1941, 19 Mar. 1942, 5 Aug. 1942, 12 Aug. 1943, 17 Aug. 1944.

⁶⁸ Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, p. 223.

leadership of British religion that they issued public statements addressed to ‘all Christian citizens’, and asking for prayers in ‘all places of worship’.⁶⁹

* * *

During the early twentieth century the monarchy’s position in British religious life was widened and deepened. National days of prayer were as integral to this as the more familiar religious aspects of royal presentation and popularity, such as the elaboration and multiplication of rituals to mark major royal events, increased royal philanthropy, the sovereign’s Christmas broadcast, and exemplary personal conduct and family life, reaffirmed by Edward VIII’s abdication.⁷⁰ Whereas in the worship on royal occasions, the churches and congregations prayed for the sovereign, on national days of prayer, the sovereign asked the churches and congregations to pray for the nation and its people, honouring their work and sacrifices. In earlier centuries, the sovereign had issued state orders for worship in the established churches; now, the sovereign published a personal request which conferred national significance on all the churches. In doing so, a new relationship between the sovereign, the churches and the people was made explicit: the monarch was impartial between the different faiths, and ecumenical in his approval of all religious bodies. The sovereign’s supreme governorship of the Church of England ceased to be an irritant for other churches, and increasingly came to be regarded as a desirable emblem of the monarchy’s religious commitment. In religion, as in politics, a monarchy more distanced

⁶⁹ Lang papers, 185/146, Lang to W. Temple, 26 Nov. 1940, and see, e.g., archbishops in *The Times*, 14 Jan. 1919, 17 Dec. 1930, 16 Nov. 1932, 16 Sept. 1938, 25 Aug. 1939.

⁷⁰ See esp. D. Cannadine, ‘The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: the British Monarchy and the “Invention of Tradition”, c.1820–1977’, in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 120–54; W.M. Kuhn, *Democratic Royalism: The Transformation of the British Monarchy, 1861–1914* (Basingstoke, 1996); F. Prochaska, *Royal Bounty: The Making of a Welfare Monarchy* (New Haven, CT, 1995), chs. 4–7; I. Bradley, *God Save the Queen: The Spiritual Dimension of Monarchy* (London, 2002), pp. 131–41; P. Williamson, ‘The Monarchy and Public Values, 1910–1953’, in A. Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 246–55; J. Wolfe, ‘Protestantism, Monarchy and the Defence of Christian Britain, 1887–2005’, in C.G. Brown and M. Snape, eds., *Secularisation in the Christian World* (Aldershot, 2010), pp. 57–74.

from particular attachments became still more attractive as a general symbol—of the nation as a spiritual body, and of a close connection between religion and patriotism.

This was a symbolic role to which all religious bodies responded enthusiastically, and which many who were not regular worshippers were willing to respect and value. It was not, however, a role which George V and his advisors at first considered obvious or without problems, notwithstanding a long history of free-church and Roman Catholic expressions of loyalty to the throne. For the king to give his approval, as from late 1914, for national days of prayer publicly arranged by church leaders was straightforward, without risk of controversy or of harm to the monarchy's reputation. But for the king himself to take the initiative and issue the call to prayer, as was proposed in 1917, did seem to have risks. The king and Lord Stamfordham, his private secretary, were worried that it would place the king personally in an 'unnatural' position and might be ignored by those with little religious faith, with the result that it could 'fall flat' and 'impoverish' his public influence.⁷¹ This was another instance of the wartime crisis of confidence in the Palace about the survival of the monarchy caused, as Frank Prochaska has documented, by the greater prominence of socialism in Britain, the Russian revolution and overthrow of the king's cousin the Tsar, and the criticism of the royal family's German background and relationship with another of the king's cousins, the Kaiser. Faced with the agitation of church leaders for royal proclamation of a day of humiliation, Davidson offered a solution: a personal appeal from the king for the prayers of his people and for the blessings of God on the nation's war effort would 'evoke & concentrate the enthusiastic support of the great body of religious people of all denominations'. This would be all the more valuable because it was 'on these people that H.M. [His Majesty] might have to rely in hours of national strain & confusion'.⁷²

⁷¹Davidson papers, 6/18, Stamfordham to Davidson, 25 Mar. 1917; 369/33, 36, Davidson to Lang, 30 Mar. 1917, Stamfordham message, 26 Apr. 1917.

⁷²Davidson papers, 6/19, Davidson to Stamfordham, 21 Apr. 1917. For the context, see F. Prochaska, *The Republic of Britain: 1760–2000* (London, 2000), pp. 156–74.

The remarkable public responses to the king's call for the national day of prayer in January 1918, and to his attendance the following August at the national service for the anniversary of the war, fulfilled Davidson's expectations, and encouraged the king and his advisors to have a more active and broader attitude towards the churches and public expressions of religion. Except for specifically royal events, it had been rare for previous sovereigns to attend public worship, and very rare indeed for them to be present at great church services, even for national occasions.⁷³ This was now changing. George V had already been more ready to attend public services than Queen Victoria and even his father, Edward VII, with all his love of ceremonies. After the armistice in 1918 the king attended the 'national' thanksgiving services of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland and the English free churches, and sent a representative to the main Roman Catholic service. Attendance at 'national' services now became an established part of the duties of senior members of the royal family, and in a further new development the sovereign often attended not in ceremonial 'state' but less formally, with an implication that despite his rank he was still an 'ordinary' worshipper, in touch with and representative of his people. The king and the royal princes took prominent roles in the rituals of war remembrance. During the 1930s, George V and George VI publicly supported the churches' arrangement of days of prayer and other special prayers. George VI was especially conscious that the monarchy's functions should include spiritual leadership. He was prepared to take the initiative in proposing days of prayer to the archbishop and the prime minister.⁷⁴ In public he often spoke with the words and tones of a preacher, and he used radio broadcasts in May 1940 and March 1942 to publicise national days of prayer.⁷⁵ As a German invasion threatened in July 1940 he gave

⁷³ Williamson, 'State Prayers', pp. 131–2.

⁷⁴ E.g. after the Prague crisis in March 1939 and again in early 1940, though Lang demurred on these occasions: RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/3860, Hardinge–Lang letters, 21–22 Apr. 1939; Lang papers, 83/207–8, Lang to Hardinge, 23 Mar. 1940.

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 26 May 1940, 30 Mar. 1942. See also J.W. Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI: His Life and Times* (London, 1958), pp. 449–50, and note Bradley, *God Save the Queen*, pp. 136–7, for the 'markedly sermonic character' of the royal Christmas broadcasts.

public approval to an appeal by Lang and Temple that ‘every day’ should now be a ‘day of national prayer’, with everyone pausing each noon to say a prayer for the nation’s safety.⁷⁶ His broadcast on D-Day in June 1944 was a remarkable evocation of the Allied invasion of Europe as a religious crusade, and included another call for daily prayer: ‘that we may be worthily matched with this new summons to destiny, I desire solemnly to call my people to prayer and dedication’.⁷⁷ These actions all contributed to the sovereign becoming more firmly a central figure in public religion, for those in all churches and in none. The national day of prayer in 1947 was proposed while the effects of the harsh winter were still being felt; but as the royal family was then on a visit to South Africa, it was delayed until the summer so that the king could be present at the national service in St Paul’s Cathedral.⁷⁸

* * *

During the wars of the first half of the twentieth century, governments became more, not less, favourable towards special occasions of national worship. As with the fast or humiliation days of the early Victorian period, the attitudes of prime ministers towards these events were shaped not by their personal religious opinions but by their assessments of the likely public reactions and the probabilities of desirable public effects. Salisbury, though a committed Anglican, regarded Archbishop Frederick Temple’s proposal in 1899 for a state-ordered day of national humiliation as simply ‘inexpedient’: sectarian objections would ‘find expression in a kind of criticism which will not advance the interests of religion’.⁷⁹ Asquith and Lloyd George, who had the ecclesiastical instincts (though no longer the religious faith) of nonconformists, were slow to appreciate how the First World War had altered the free

⁷⁶ *The Times*, 2 July 1940.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 7 June 1944, and Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI*, pp. 607–8.

⁷⁸ See material from March 1947 in [LPL, Archbishop] Fisher papers, 32/49–73, and in PREM 8/617.

⁷⁹ Frederick Temple papers, 33/103–04, Salisbury to F. Temple, 24 Dec. 1899. For earlier prime ministers, see Williamson, ‘State Prayers’, pp. 155–6.

churches' attitudes towards corporate prayer and the state. For Asquith, it was 'in accordance with general sentiment to avoid State interference in what most people believe to be a matter of individual conscience and feeling'.⁸⁰ In practice, they welcomed the churches' own arrangements for special worship as valuable for civilian morale and support for the war effort. In August 1915, Asquith obtained the king's help in persuading Davidson to arrange an anniversary service for the nation's leaders in St Paul's Cathedral, despite Davidson's doubts about the church's involvement in a nationwide 'patriotic campaign'—in effect, for military recruitment—of which the service was a centrepiece.⁸¹ As Davidson had anticipated, for both Asquith and Lloyd George the main objection to the state issuing orders for nationwide appeals for God's help in the war was that this might be 'misunderstood' as a sign of despondency by enemies, allies and perhaps domestic opinion.⁸² Lloyd George referred Davidson's alternative arrangements for the two national days of prayer in 1918 to cabinet decision only under a powerful form of political pressure: the threat of united public criticism from all of the Protestant churches. Like the king, he too was impressed by the public response to these 'days', to the extent that on receiving news of the armistice he initiated a dramatic political display of religious thanksgiving, with both houses of Parliament resolving to repeat their attendance at a service in St Margaret's, Westminster. Davidson was moved to write that 'I do not suppose there has ever been in our history a more significant recognition of the Divine Presence and aid than in this sudden attendance of the Houses at Divine Service'.⁸³

Religion remained part of the texture of political life during the interwar years, even though—or rather, because—differences over ecclesiastical issues were no longer a leading

⁸⁰ Davidson papers, 368/351, M. Bonham-Carter (Asquith's secretary) to Gooch, 18 July 1916.

⁸¹ Davidson papers, 368/155, Davidson to Henry Cust (chairman, committee of national patriotic organisations), 16 June 1915, and 368/187–9, Davidson to W.R. Inge (Dean of St. Paul's), 13 July 1915.

⁸² Davidson papers, 368/165, Davidson to Canon Webb-Peploe, 28 June 1915, and 369/27, J.T. Davies (Lloyd George's secretary) to Davidson, 2 Mar. 1917; Bell, *Davidson*, ii. 827–8 (memorandum, 20 June 1917).

⁸³ Viscount Ullswater, *A Speaker's Commentaries* (2 vols., London, 1925), ii. 242–3; *The Times*, 12 Nov. 1918; Bell, *Davidson*, ii. 916 (memorandum, 17 Nov. 1918).

element in the struggle between the political parties. With the various churches drawn closer together, and with the parties less identified with particular churches, religious opinion became a more generalised political resource. This was the moral influence which church leaders sought to exercise in their joint public statements and calls to prayer on national and international issues. It was also a body of opinion which Baldwin helped to make one of the electoral bases for the Conservative party and later the National government, notably using his ecumenical appeal to outmanoeuvre Lloyd George's narrower efforts to revive political nonconformity before the 1935 general election.⁸⁴ Governments were attentive to church leaders, though they preferred to preserve some public distance. In part this was because the churchmen sometimes expressed or implied political criticism, as over the industrial disputes of 1926 and the Soviet persecution of Russian Christians in 1930.⁸⁵ But more often it was because the influence of the churches was politically helpful, and could be made still more so by ensuring that it remained ostensibly 'non-political'. When, in December 1931, Lang asked Ramsay MacDonald, as prime minister of the newly-elected National coalition government, for a public statement on the next national day of prayer, the cabinet advised against this on the ground that it might cause the occasion to be 'misrepresented as a day of partisan thanksgiving'. They had no objection, though, to the king expressing his approval of the 'day'. There was a similar outcome in May 1933, when Lang asked for statements in support of a public call for prayers for the world disarmament and economic conferences.⁸⁶ Again, the cabinet decided against a political involvement that might jeopardise the helpful moral influence of the churches and the king. However, the extraordinarily large attendances

⁸⁴ Williamson, 'Christian Conservatives', pp. 628–34; also P. Williamson, *Stanley Baldwin: Conservative Leadership and National Values* (Cambridge, 1999), esp. ch. 9.

⁸⁵ For the clash between Conservative ministers and various churchmen in 1926, see esp. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, pp. 116–27. For Labour ministers in 1930 prohibiting the reading at military services of the churches' prayers on behalf of Russian Christians, because they were 'political in character', see *The Times*, 1, 3 and 7 Mar. 1930; *5 Hans Commons ccxxxvi* (4 Mar. 1930), 251–7 and *5 Hans Lords lxxvi* (6 Mar. 1930), 806–40.

⁸⁶ CAB 23/29, Cabinet 85(31), 7 Dec. 1931, and Lang papers, 113/319–20, MacDonald to Lang, 8 Dec. 1931; CAB 23/76, Cabinet 36(33), 24 May 1933, and Lang in *Chronicle of Convocation: Canterbury* (1933), pp. 221–2 (31 May 1933).

in places of worship for the day of prayer and throughout the war crisis over the Sudetenland in September 1938 had a similar effect on prime-ministerial assessments of the value of special worship as had the wartime days of prayer in 1918. Neville Chamberlain never had any religious beliefs but, as political criticisms of his policy of appeasement became stronger, he was unusually grateful for all expressions of support. During the House of Commons debate on the Munich settlement he said that the ‘prayers of millions have been answered’, and he told Lang privately that the ‘prayers ... for the success of my efforts’ had ‘helped to sustain’ him.⁸⁷ Chamberlain continued to appreciate the value of religious support. In the spring of 1939 he addressed the general assembly of the Church of Scotland, and expressed ‘great interest’ in (eventually abortive) proposals for an ecumenical mass prayer meeting for peace. After the outbreak of war he assisted Lang’s arrangements for the national day of prayer in October 1939, and in early 1940 himself raised the possibility of another.⁸⁸

Churchill had few affinities with orthodox and institutional Christianity. But he had a deist belief in Britain’s special destiny in the world, and during the late 1930s he became more alert to the importance of religious faith in shaping public attitudes on the fundamental political and moral issues raised by the European diplomatic crises and the prospect of war. After the Munich settlement he made increasing use of the Christian references which would become a feature of his wartime speeches.⁸⁹ Once he became prime minister, Churchill was an enthusiast for occasions of special worship. For the national day of prayer in May 1940, he directed that every available government minister and senior civil servant should join the king and queen at the service in Westminster Abbey, notwithstanding Home Office warnings

⁸⁷ *5Hans Commons cccxxxix* (3 Oct. 1938), 41, and K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), p. 375. For Chamberlain’s agnosticism, see A. Ruston, ‘The Chamberlains and Unitarianism’, *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, xxiv (2008), pp. 106–8.

⁸⁸ PREM 1/338, Rucker (prime minister’s secretary) to Rev. W. Elliot, 18 May 1939; *The Times*, 27 May 1939; Lang papers, 83/121, 123, Lang-Chamberlain letters, 4, 7 Sept. 1939, and 83/199, Lang memorandum, 20 Feb. 1940, with related material in PREM 1/412.

⁸⁹ Williamson, ‘Christian Conservatives’, pp. 607–9.

of the risk that the nation's leaders might all be killed by a single German bombing raid.⁹⁰ Repeated parliamentary requests from an Ulster Unionist backbench MP and presbyterian cleric for further days of prayer received remarkably sympathetic ministerial replies, and prompted Churchill in February 1941 to ask Lang to make the arrangements for the 'day' held that March.⁹¹ At Churchill's request the churches arranged special prayers in January 1942, in order to 'associate' the United Kingdom with a day of prayer held in the United States after its entry into the war.⁹² Prayers were requested at various times for Britain's other allies—even, uneasily, for Soviet Russia—and for the conquered or oppressed peoples of Europe. The cabinet gave full support to Temple's proposal in 1942 for a midweek national day of prayer, directing government departments to assist the churches in the arrangements.⁹³ In May 1943, again on Churchill's initiative, churches were asked to have thanksgiving prayers for the Allied victory in North Africa.⁹⁴ Ministers, departments and the armed services also multiplied special 'days' to honour the contributions of various groups to the war effort—including Battle of Britain day, civil defence day, farm Sunday and United Nations day—and expected the archbishop of Canterbury to provide prayers for them. Special prayers at government request, a type of wartime erastianism, became so common that in September 1943 they provoked criticism in newspapers, and an exasperated comment from Temple: ministers 'have not yet asked me to ear-mark Easter Sunday for the anniversary of the founding of the NAAFI, but no doubt they will'.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ CAB 65/7/33, War cabinet 138(40), 25 May 1940; *The Times*, 27 May 1940. For the previous day of prayer Chamberlain had heeded similar warnings and prohibited a 'national' service in the Abbey: PREM 4/36/7, Chamberlain to Lang, 21 Sept. 1939.

⁹¹ The Rev. James Little (1868–1946) was minister of the Castlereagh Presbyterian Church, Belfast, Grand Chaplain of the Orange Order, and MP for Down 1939–46. From 1940 to 1944 he asked thirteen parliamentary questions on days of prayer, which usually caused a flurry of civil-service activity: see material in PREM 4/36/7.

⁹² CAB 65/20, War cabinet 136(41), 26 Dec. 1941; *The Times*, 29 Dec. 1941, Lang announcement.

⁹³ See material in PREM 4/36/7 and CAB 123/208, July–Aug. 1942.

⁹⁴ PREM 4/36/8, Churchill–Attlee telegrams, 10–13 May 1943; CAB 65/34/21, War cabinet 68(43), 13 May 1943; *The Times*, 14 May 1943, official notice.

⁹⁵ *The Times*, 13 Sept. 1943; *Sunday Express*, 19 Sept. 1943; D. Hart-Davies, ed., *King's Counsellor: Abdication and War. The Diaries of Sir Alan Lascelles* (London, 2006), p. 164 (26 Sept. 1943).

This considerable increase in government involvement in special worship is explained by the circumstances of the war: the Allied defeats during 1940 and 1941, the starkest of ideological conflicts, a home front exposed to bombardment and invasion, and the enormous endurance and effort needed to secure victory. Together with the activities of the religious division of the Ministry of Information and the religious department of the BBC, special worship was a means to take a stand on the highest spiritual ground, to project a common cause to friendly powers and to express moral solidarity with allies and resistance movements.⁹⁶ It was also considered important for soothing and stiffening British civilian and military morale. This was the judgement of the cabinet committee which approved the midweek day of prayer for September 1942,⁹⁷ and recognition of the government's priorities led Temple to add the term 'dedication' to the title of these occasions: 'national day of prayer and dedication'. Churchill was particularly concerned to stress the willing acceptance of great sacrifices. He even repeatedly suggested a revival of the old term 'day of humiliation', because he wanted 'the horrible things' needed to win the war to be faced with realism as well as hope: 'it would be a good thing to humble ourselves before the Almighty and to prepare ourselves to meet [these sacrifices] and possibly Him!'.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, much still depended on circumstances. In March 1944, Churchill endorsed the Home Office's judgement that Temple's suggested national day of prayer in preparation for D-Day was 'inexpedient', partly for security reasons but also because 'drawing attention to the coming shock' might have the effect of 'unduly depressing the troops'.⁹⁹ Conversely, in March 1947

⁹⁶ I. McLaine, *Ministry of Morale: The Home Front and the Ministry of Information in World War II* (London, 1979), pp. 150–3; Wolfe, *The Churches and the BBC*, pt. 3; and see Dianne Kirby's work on the Church of England's part in British propaganda in the 1940s and 1950s, including 'The Archbishop of York and Anglo-American Relations during the Second World War and Early Cold War, 1942–1955', *Journal of Religious History*, xxiii (1999), pp. 327–45. The ministerial concern to promote a Christian message is considerably understated in K. Robbins, 'Britain, 1940 and Christian Civilisation', in D. Beales and G.F.A. Best, eds., *History, Society and the Churches* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 280.

⁹⁷ CAB 123/208, minute of Lord President's committee, 21 July 1942.

⁹⁸ PREM 4/36/7, Colville to Martin (Churchill's secretary), 16 Feb. 1941, Lang to Bevir, 13 Mar. 1942,; William Temple, *Some Lambeth Letters, 1942–1944*, ed. F.S. Temple (London, 1963), p. 176 (12 July 1944).

⁹⁹ [TNA, PRO,] HO 45/36/7, Temple correspondence with Herbert Morrison (Home Secretary) and further material Feb.–Mar. 1944; PREM 4/36/7, Morrison to Churchill, 21 Feb., 3 Mar. 1944; W.S. Churchill, *The*

Attlee overruled Home Office doubts and accepted Archbishop Fisher's proposal that as 'the nation is now facing an extremely critical period', it would be helpful to make 'a real call to the character of our people and [their] spiritual values'—not least because the government itself was preparing a 'propaganda drive' to 'get across to the nation the seriousness of the position'.¹⁰⁰

* * *

In early twentieth-century Britain, worship remained an important part of public life and faith in God remained a central element in public doctrine. What can national days of prayer and their related types of worship reveal about the public meanings of prayer? A difficulty is that public prayers have not so far received historical study for this period,¹⁰¹ and it is therefore difficult to define the particular contribution of national days of prayer. There is, however, no shortage of evidence. The Church of England continued the long practice, dating from fast and thanksgiving days, of issuing a special 'form of prayer' for use in its places of worship on days of prayer, and the National Free Church Council and the Church of Scotland adopted this practice from January 1915 onwards. Together with other published statements, pastorals, sermons and radio addresses by leading churchmen, these services provide a very large number of texts on the purposes of national days of prayer. These texts await detailed analysis, but some suggestions can be offered.

One point is certain: wartime days of prayer left an enduring legacy of special public worship in the creation of Remembrance Sunday, in ways obscured by studies that focus on

Second World War, V: The Closing of the Ring (London, 1952), pp. 608, 610; CAB 65/41/29, War cabinet 29(44), 6 Mar. 1944; William Temple papers, 56/319, Morrison to Temple, 6 Mar. 1944.

¹⁰⁰ PREM 8/617, Fisher to Attlee, 24 Mar. 1947, Petersen (Home Office) to Bevir, 28 Mar. 1947, Attlee to Fisher, 29 Mar. 1947; Fisher papers, 32/57, Sir Stafford Cripps reported in Mervyn Stockwood to Fisher, 31 Mar. 1947.

¹⁰¹ For the continued importance of religion in public ideas during this period, see M. Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine in Modern England* (3 vols., Cambridge, 1980–2001), and Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*. However, neither is concerned with worship, nor with texts published by the churches.

the civil ritual of Armistice Day. Within British Protestantism, religious commemoration of the war dead began with the Church of England's special wartime services in 1900 and 1914, which included prayers for those who had 'fallen' in military action. In both cases the archbishops had to defend themselves against evangelical 'Protestant' complaints that the prayers were a 'Catholic' innovation of 'prayers for the dead'.¹⁰² But during the First World War the pastoral pressures of ministering for mass bereavement became inexorable, and there were soon few complaints. The English free churches raised no objections, and from 1915 the Church of Scotland's services for national days of prayer also included prayers of remembrance for the 'departed'. The Church of England's service for the war anniversary in 1917 expressed the prevailing mood. One prayer asked that those who had 'laid down their lives' for their country might 'be accounted worthy of a place among thy faithful servants in the kingdom of heaven', with the implication that all those killed on war service, whether or not they had led religiously 'faithful' lives, were to be honoured before God.¹⁰³ This mood became especially clear when the national day of prayer in August 1918 was given the additional designation of a 'national day of remembrance', and was marked in many locations, notably in Hyde Park, by large crowds placing flowers at specially erected 'shrines'.¹⁰⁴ During 1919 the Anglican bishops considered remembrance of the war dead as a possible theme for an annual national day of prayer.¹⁰⁵ This was at first overtaken by the government's creation of Armistice Day, with its two-minute silence, originally observed strictly on 11 November even if this was a weekday. Yet the desire of many of the grieving for much more than a silence, for communal prayers of praise for the dead and solace for

¹⁰² For 1900, see Frederick Temple papers, 42/136–414, and, *4Hans lxxx* (9 Mar. 1900), 466–71 (Temple speech in the House of Lords); for 1914, Davidson papers, 367/71, 79, 238–9, 310–11, 318, 335–7, 343–4, 357.

¹⁰³ Bell, *Randall Davidson*, ii. 828–31, has misled later commentators by stating that 'prayers for the dead' were new in 1917. For further discussion of this type of prayer see esp. Wilkinson, *Church of England and the First World War*, pp. 176–87; and M. Snape, 'Civilians, Soldiers and Perceptions of the Afterlife in Britain during the First World War', in P. Clarke and T. Clayton, eds., *The Church, the Afterlife and the Fate of the Soul* (Studies in Church History, 45; Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 375–9.

¹⁰⁴ *The Times*, 8 July, 1 and 8 Aug. 1918; images in *Illustrated London News*, 18 Aug. 1918, and British Pathé, film 1898.19, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/remembrance-service-part-1>.

¹⁰⁵ LPL, BM 7, Bishops' meeting, 21–22 Oct. 1919.

their relatives, was so strong that the churches soon arranged special services on a neighbouring Sunday, at first independently, but increasingly co-ordinated in order to ensure that the services were held on the same Sunday. The first Church of England special service for this Sunday was published in 1920, and in 1922 the Anglican archbishops and the Federal Free Church Council issued a joint call for special prayers on the day. During 1925 the British Legion secured the agreement of all English and Scottish churches for regular observance of what was now popularly known as ‘Remembrance Sunday’,¹⁰⁶ and by the 1930s it was firmly established in the religious calendar of all churches and communities. When, after the outbreak of war in September 1939, the government ordered a wartime suspension of Armistice Day, because midweek ceremonies raised problems for war work and air-raid precautions, Lang obtained the agreement of the king, the government and the English and Scottish church leaders that for the duration of the war Remembrance Sunday should take its place.¹⁰⁷ In 1946 the Labour government formally merged the civil and religious ‘days’ and established Remembrance Sunday as the ‘national day of remembrance’ for the dead of the two world wars. Announced each year in the name of the sovereign, this was in effect a revival of the annual days of special worship which had been held in England from the seventeenth century until 1859. These earlier religious days had, however, been Protestant commemorations of episodes relating to the monarchy; this was an ecumenical commemoration of the sacrifices of ordinary men and women.¹⁰⁸

Attention to the ordinary participants in wars was also a marked feature of church services for national days of prayer. This had never been the case with services for the fast days of earlier centuries, which, aside from the standard provision of prayers for the

¹⁰⁶ *The Times*, 1 Nov. 1922, 29 Aug. 1925; *The Scotsman*, 21 May 1925. This agreement led to the Church of Scotland publishing a service for use on Remembrance Sunday.

¹⁰⁷ *The Times*, 12 Oct. 1939, Government and Lang statements (similar annual announcements were made up to 1944); material in Lang papers, 83.

¹⁰⁸ *Hans Commons cdxiv* (20 June 1946), 179–80, Attlee statement; A. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day, 1919–1946* (Oxford, 1994), pp. 215–21. For the abolition of the earlier annual ‘days’ (except the service for the monarch’s accession day) in 1859, see Williamson, ‘State Prayers’, p. 163.

sovereign, had included only general references to commanders, armies, fleets and allies. In 1900 and 1914, however, the special wartime services and ‘days’ were for ‘intercession’, with prayers on behalf of more specific groups, and not just those in the armed forces: for soldiers and sailors, but also for the sick and the wounded, for those in anxiety and sorrow, for widows and orphans. As the First World War proceeded, the special prayers lengthened to include airmen, prisoners of war, ‘men under training’, munitions workers, ‘women ... engaged in special tasks’ and ‘absent friends’. During the Second World War still more particular groups were added as greater recognition was given to the ‘home front’: doctors and nurses, merchant seamen, miners, agricultural workers, and fishermen.¹⁰⁹

These were prayers both for a more democratic age and for wars of mass mobilisation. They were also expressions of prolonged changes in religious thought and worship which had been occurring since the early nineteenth century, changes which are especially evident in understandings of the purpose of special days of national worship and the nature of divine providence. In broad terms, there were two types of belief, with the balance shifting from one towards the other. For some, the purpose of national days of prayer was to petition for divine intervention on behalf of the nation, in a long tradition of belief in ‘special’ or ‘particular’ providences suggested by episodes in the Old Testament and in the further belief that Britain was a favoured or elect nation in the sight of God—beliefs which had been expressed in the appointment of fast and thanksgiving days. This was especially true of those who, during the South African War and the First World War, wanted the state to proclaim a ‘day of humiliation’. The outbreak of the wars, the early defeats and, from 1914, the immense costs of military stalemate were God’s judgements, a punishment and ‘chastening’, on a nation which had departed from His word. Corporate repentance of national sins and acknowledgement of the nation’s dependence on the divine will were

¹⁰⁹ A. Marrin, *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War* (Durham, NC, 1974), p. 215, notes the early proliferation of these types of prayers. For the full texts, see Williamson, et al., *Worship for National and Royal Occasions*.

needed to regain the favour of God, ‘the only giver of victory’. The days of humiliation during the Crimean War (in 1854 and 1855) and the Indian ‘mutiny’ (1857) provided the models of how God’s forgiveness had been sought and obtained, enabling the final victories to be won.¹¹⁰ Successful battles in 1900 and in 1917–18 were God’s merciful responses to days of intercession or national days of prayer. After British armies captured Jerusalem in 1917 and returned the Holy Land to Christian control, some evangelicals even turned towards pre-millenarian beliefs, in expectation of the imminent second coming of Christ.¹¹¹ Some again detected (and still detect) evidence of divine interventions during the Second World War.¹¹² Such beliefs were not confined to the evangelical enthusiasts. At certain times and to some degree, they were also expressed by ‘mainstream’ leaders of the churches. The Church of England’s wartime services in 1900 asked for help from God as the ‘judge’ who could ‘decide the issue of the war’ and ‘as in the days of old save and deliver us from our enemies’. During the First World War, the Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram, gave support to a common view that Britain was engaged in a holy war, as the agent of divine providence.¹¹³ Archbishop Lang publicly noted that after the national day of prayer in August 1918, the British armies were ‘suddenly enabled’ to counterattack successfully against the German armies.¹¹⁴ When announcing the day of thanksgiving in October 1938, he described the Munich settlement as ‘an answer’ to the national day of prayer observed two weeks earlier.¹¹⁵ During the early summer of 1940, William Temple expressed a common belief that the evacuation of the British army from Dunkirk during June was a ‘deliverance’

¹¹⁰ See many letters for 1900 in F. Temple papers, 32–33, and from 1914 to 1918 in Davidson papers, 367–9, especially 368/317, memorial from Protestant church leaders, 19 June 1916.

¹¹¹ *Christian World*, 8 Nov. 1917, letter from the ‘Advent Testimony’ movement, and see D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London, 1989), pp. 192–3.

¹¹² E.g. General Sir William Dobbie (governor of Malta), *A Very Present Help* (London, 1945), and recently in ‘Evangelicals Now’ (May 2005), at www.e-n.org.uk/p-2997-When-the-nation-prayed.htm, and D. Baldwin, *Royal Prayer: A Surprising History* (London, 2009), pp. 88–92.

¹¹³ Marrin, *Last Crusade*, pp. 124–41; Wilkinson, *Church of England and the First World War*, pp. 251–5.

¹¹⁴ *York Diocesan Gazette*, xxvii (Sept. 1918), p. 167.

¹¹⁵ *The Times*, 1 Oct. 1938.

or ‘miracle’—as God’s response to the national day of prayer in May.¹¹⁶ It seems probable that belief in this kind of divine intervention was a large element in popular understandings of the purpose of national days of prayer, and that it contributed to sustaining religious belief and church attendance after the victories in each of the two world wars.

Such beliefs were, however, becoming less common or were less commonly expressed by churchmen. Hensley Henson, later bishop of Durham, publicly protested in 1900 against ‘presumptuous’ assertions that military fortunes were attributable to ‘the direct interference of the Almighty’.¹¹⁷ By the 1930s, numerous clergy and religious commentators treated the belief that petitionary prayers could invoke divine intervention as a ‘superstition’, a type of ‘pagan magic’.¹¹⁸ It is probably significant that the archbishops alluded to divine intervention only after the event, in thanksgiving. The more usual conception now was of divine providence as general and immanent, working within and through the course of human affairs. Prayers and repentance were the means by which men and women discerned, accepted, and tried to fulfil the will of God. Commenting on the national day of prayer for January 1932, Canon Quick contrasted ‘ancient prayers’, seeking God’s protection and deliverance from evil, with the modern understanding that ‘the Divine presence and power’ was manifested in ‘the ordering ... of secular activities’. Accordingly, the purpose of prayers was to obtain ‘guidance in secular affairs’.¹¹⁹ This was, perhaps, a shift from an Old Testament towards a New Testament perspective. For the national day of prayer in May 1940, Lang declared that ‘God acts through human wills. In prayers we submit our will to Him. We put ourselves at His disposal’; and in 1944 William Temple wrote that people must pray ‘not that what we want shall be done, but that what God wants shall be done, and that

¹¹⁶ *York Diocesan Leaflet*, no. cxlv (July 1940); and see, e.g., *The Times*, 6 and 14 June 1940, Lang and Hensley letters, and Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?*, p. 278.

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, 27 Mar. 1900.

¹¹⁸ *Christian World*, 21 Sept. 1939, W.B. Selbie, ‘Prayer in Time of Need’; and see, e.g., *The Times*, 7 Sept. 1940, editorial.

¹¹⁹ *The Times*, 31 Dec. 1932. See M. Grimley, ‘The Religion of Englishness: Puritanism, Providentialism and “National Character”, 1918–1945’, *Journal of British Studies*, xcvi (2007), pp. 903–4, for the term ‘low-key providentialism’.

we may be used for doing it'.¹²⁰ A popularised version in the *Daily Mirror* for September 1941 was that 'instead of continually asking God for something, we ought to offer everything to Him'.¹²¹ The grander expression in the king's call for prayer on D-Day was that 'we shall ask not that God may do our will, but that we may be enabled to do the will of God'.¹²² Prayer was now less about the power of God than the qualities of those who prayed: their faith, righteousness, commitment and resolve. The purpose of prayer was to discipline the human will.

From here it was a short step to another type of religion. Those who have detected a British 'civil religion' have found their evidence chiefly in royal rituals, the sovereign's Christmas broadcast, and commemoration of the war dead.¹²³ But national days of prayer provide both clearer instances and fuller explanations of its sources. Most church leaders were certainly aware of the danger that religion could become conflated with patriotism, and insisted that the Christian message was universal and must not be regarded as simply supporting the aims of the state. Such critical detachment was not always easy, and, as is well established, it was not always maintained, particularly during the First World War.¹²⁴ But there was also a broader effect, more pervasive than the statements of particular churches and churchmen. For national days of prayer, each church retained its own doctrines and forms of worship. Nevertheless, the main features of these 'days' were participation by all religious groups and efforts to engage those without a practising or orthodox faith, all with the public support of the sovereign and the civil authorities. Considered in these terms, national days of prayer projected a religion which was non-denominational, non-doctrinal and generalised. They drew the churches into close association not just with 'diffusive

¹²⁰ *The Times*, 24 May 1940, Lang letter; Temple, *Some Lambeth Letters*, p. 145 (Feb. 1944).

¹²¹ *Daily Mirror*, 8 Sept. 1941, editorial.

¹²² *The Times*, 7 June 1944.

¹²³ See esp. R. Boccock, 'Religion in Modern Britain', in R. Boccock and K. Thompson, eds., *Religion and Ideology* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 207–33; J. Wolffe, 'The Religions of the Silent Majority', in G. Parsons, ed., *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, I: Traditions* (London, 1993), pp. 317–27; J. Wolffe, *Great Deaths: Grieving, Religion and Nationhood in Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 7, 253–4, 261–4, 283–6; G. Parsons, *Perspectives on Civil Religion* (Aldershot, 2002).

¹²⁴ See esp. Wilkinson, *Church of England and the First World War*, and id., *Dissent or Conform?*.

Christianity’ but also with what John Wolffe has termed ‘quasi-religion’.¹²⁵ As a newspaper noted in 1899, ‘the Agnostic and even the Atheist should ... recognise the need and the advantage of bringing to bear upon a national crisis the devotional side of human nature’.¹²⁶ Because national days of prayer marked times of threat to the nation or celebration for escape from these threats, their tendency was to give religious endorsement to, and in some sense to sanctify, the nation’s secular purposes. During the First World War, an argument for days of special worship was that victory required mobilisation of the nation’s ‘spiritual forces’ as well as its material forces. The king summoned his people to prayer in January 1918 so that ‘we may have the clear-sightedness and strength necessary to the victory of our cause’ and be ‘fortified in our courage in facing the sacrifices we may yet have to make’.¹²⁷ During the Second World War, Remembrance Sundays as well as national days of prayer were given the additional appellation of days of ‘dedication’—dedication to the war effort. For the national day of prayer during the drive for increased production and exports in 1947, the leaders of the main churches stated that ‘we must examine our motives and resolve to lay aside all selfish and sectional interests that hinder unity of purpose and hard work at this time’.¹²⁸ The religion of each church, a generalised religion approved by the state, and the quasi-religion of those outside the churches: together these were meshed into a civil religion which ‘sacralised’ the particular purposes of the nation, however much they were also identified with the best interests of all nations.

* * *

¹²⁵ Wolffe, *God and a Greater Britain*, pp. 10–19, 92–3, 156–7. Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, p. 185, notes the Anglican readiness to embrace this ‘undogmatic and unobservant religion’ as ‘Christian’.

¹²⁶ *The Observer*, 31 Dec. 1899.

¹²⁷ *The Times*, 8 Nov. 1917, and see the Anglican documents quoted in Wilkinson, *Church of England and the First World War*, pp. 216, 220.

¹²⁸ *The Times*, 1 July 1947, appeal by the archbishops of Canterbury and York and the moderators of the Church of Scotland and Free Church Federal Council.

Examination of national days of prayer not only enhances understanding of particular aspects of religion and public life, which affected the churches themselves, the monarchy, the government, commemoration of the war dead, and public belief. National days of prayer also establish a general point: that the churches and religious belief retained considerable importance in British public life. In doing so, they have implications for two recent debates among historians of British religion during the early decades of the twentieth century. The first is on the place of religion in national identity. It has been argued that distinctions in religious culture between the different parts of the British Isles tended to become more pronounced after 1914. In addition to the creation of the largely Catholic Irish Free State in 1921, Welsh nonconformity triumphed with the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales in 1920, and in Scotland presbyterian dominance was consolidated with the union of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland in 1929. Grimley has argued that in England the decline in political conflict between the free churches and the Church of England brought with it a stronger sense of ‘Englishness’ based on the sense of a ‘common English Protestantism’. Stewart Brown and John Maiden have found resurgences of Protestant anti-Catholic conceptions of ‘national’ identity, directed in Scotland against Catholic immigrants from Ireland during the 1920s and 1930s, and in England against Anglo-Catholics during debates on the Church of England’s revised prayer book in 1927–8.¹²⁹ However, national days of prayer provide further evidence for the common observation that identities are multiple and fluid, with the balance between different identities shifting according to the prevailing issues and circumstances. English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish forms of Protestant religious consciousness had long co-existed with a wider British Protestant consciousness, which had helped to sustain ‘the legitimacy and coherence of

¹²⁹ Grimley, ‘Religion of Englishness’; John Maiden, *National Religion and the Prayer Book Controversy, 1927–1928* (Woodbridge, 2009); S.J. Brown, ‘Presbyterians and Catholics in Twentieth-Century Scotland’, in S.J. Brown and G. Newlands, eds., *Scottish Christianity in the Modern World* (Edinburgh, 2000), pp. 255–72.

“Greater Britain”¹³⁰. National days of prayer organised during ‘total wars’ which, as Wolffe has argued, strengthened the links between religion and patriotism,¹³¹ reinforced this sense of the larger religious unity of Britain. Now, though, it had a new element: the Roman Catholic church in England, Wales and Scotland was admitted into the religious conception of the British nation. This supports Hugh McLeod’s argument that, after the wartime alignment in 1914 with Catholic Belgium and France, Protestant Britain had been replaced by ‘a more inclusive Christian Britain, which found place for Catholics and those with no particular denominational identity’.¹³² The sense of British religious identity could be even more expansive. For national days of prayer it was regarded as embracing the Christians of the British Empire.¹³³ In January 1915, churches in Britain were linked with churches of its European allies for what Lang called ‘an Alliance in Prayer’.¹³⁴ As Keith Robbins has noted, during 1940 many presented Britain as leading the defence of ‘Christian civilisation’.¹³⁵ Indeed, as the Jewish community also observed national days of prayer and as the chief rabbi was added in 1940 to the archbishop of Canterbury’s list of religious leaders to be notified of the arrangements for these ‘days’,¹³⁶ a fuller term might be defence of ‘Judaeo-Christian civilisation’. Defence of continued Protestant dominance in England and Scotland during peacetime did not seem inconsistent with the defence of Christian principles or religious faith in general against militarism, atheism or paganism during world wars and international ideological struggles.

¹³⁰ Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain*, p. x.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19, 235–52, 260–2. For the complexities of religious and ‘national’ identities in the early twentieth century, see Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales*.

¹³² H. McLeod, ‘Protestantism and British National Identity, 1815–1945’, in P. van der Veer and H. Lehman, eds., *Nation and Religion* (Princeton, NJ, 1999), pp. 45, 63–5.

¹³³ The king’s statement for January 1918 and the proclamation for July 1919 explicitly called for prayers from the churches and peoples of the Empire. During the Second World War the king’s announcements were routinely sent to governors of the dominions, colonies and Indian states: see RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/4723, 4931, 5265, 5504, 5709, 5808, 6036, 6567, 7122, and TNA, PRO, CO 323/1731/8, Colonial Office telegrams to colonial governors, May and Sept. 1940.

¹³⁴ *York Diocesan Gazette*, xxiv (Jan. 1915), p. 4.

¹³⁵ Robbins, ‘Britain, 1940 and Christian Civilisation’, *passim*.

¹³⁶ RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/4931, Lang to Hardinge (king’s private secretary), 17 Aug. 1940, and William Temple papers, 56/14, Hertz to Temple, 23 June 1942,.

The second area of debate is the chronology of the decline in the public position of the churches and in religious belief. In Britain, the First World War had ‘profoundly ambiguous religious consequences’.¹³⁷ Army chaplains were shocked by the poor understanding of Christianity among many working-class troops, and wartime dislocations in observance, experience and faith tended to weaken or destroy the allegiance of some to the churches, to orthodox doctrines, or to belief in God. Churchmen feared for the nation’s religious and moral condition. Yet these were not the only religious effects of the war. The state’s encouragement of moral and religious justifications for the war, the tighter links made between patriotism and religion, the craving for hope and ultimate purpose, the honouring of sacrifice for a larger cause, the solace sought by and offered to the wounded and bereaved, and the final victory, after terrible adversities, which seemed to confirm that Britain was indeed a divinely-favoured nation: all gave religion and the churches a renewed place in British life.

Simon Green directs attention to the aftermath of the First World War as the period when religious decline became evident. This, he argues, was largely because of a series of political changes. The secession of much of Catholic Ireland from the United Kingdom, the decline of the ‘political nonconformity’ of the free churches, and the rise of the Labour party led ‘very quickly after 1920’ to the removal of religious issues from politics, and to a ‘desacralisation’ of political life which weakened the social influence of religion.¹³⁸ Yet the religious effects of these political changes were as ambiguous as those of the First World War. Denominational distinctions certainly ceased to be central to the conflict between the main parties: *party* politics was largely ‘desacralised’. But this was not true of politics in a more general sense, nor of the public projection of the main institutions of state. This was because, as Green recognises, the ‘demise of denominational politics’ made it easier for the

¹³⁷ Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, p. 311.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 33–60, 87–8, 311–12. For a rather different emphasis on the 1920s as the decisive period, see S.J.D. Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline: Organisation and Experience in Industrial Yorkshire, 1870–1920* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 380.

leaders of different churches to work together and to express agreed positions on national issues, in what he terms ‘political ecumenicalism’.¹³⁹ Co-operation actually began earlier, with the national days of prayer and joint public statements during the First World War; but the larger point is that disentanglement from party politics and ‘political ecumenicalism’ gave the churches and religion a new position and a renewed influence in public affairs. When all or most of the churches co-operated and expressed shared Christian perspectives on national issues, they commanded greater public attention and respect than when they had been in conflict and were a source of political division. This not only helped the churches to remain prominent in public life, but also established conditions in which Christian perspectives continued to have political and ideological importance and in which the monarchy and the government could convincingly maintain their claim to sacred purposes. It was this co-operation and the collective public statements by church leaders, as well as the contributions of churchmen to political ideas which Grimley has studied, that explain why in 1939 it could be observed that ‘religion has come to have much greater significance in the eyes of politicians and publicists than it had thirty years ago’.¹⁴⁰

* * *

Religion continued to be prominent in British public life into the 1950s; indeed, Callum Brown has suggested that, with a remarkable increase in audiences for religious broadcasting, ‘more British people were listening to Christian hymns, preaching and debate than at any time in history’.¹⁴¹ There was even innovation in special worship for politicians: at the start of the general election campaigns in 1950 and 1951, a special ‘service of prayer and dedication’ was held in St. Paul’s Cathedral for the leaders, MPs and candidates of the main political

¹³⁹ Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, pp. 54–5.

¹⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson, quoted in Grimley, *Citizenship, Community and the Church of England*, p. 11.

¹⁴¹ See Brown, ‘The Unholy Mrs Knight’, p. 356. .

parties.¹⁴² After the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, the churches co-operated in organising and publicising prayers for international peace on the annual United Nations day in October.¹⁴³ The Festival of Britain in 1951 was opened with a service of dedication and a broadcast by the king from St Paul's Cathedral, and the British Council of Churches published a special service for use in all places of worship.¹⁴⁴ Church leaders were much impressed by the great public interest in the religious rituals for the coronation in 1953, and some thought it might lead to a popular religious revival.¹⁴⁵

There were, however, no more national days of prayer. The 'day' in July 1947 was the last, and after the prayers for peace in October 1950 church leaders made very few joint calls to the whole nation for special prayers—far fewer than during the interwar years. This was so even though—in the period of the Cold War, a nuclear arms race and decolonisation—there certainly continued to be crises, wars and peace conferences, and even though days of prayer or calls for prayer continued to be proposed to church leaders, prime ministers and sovereigns.¹⁴⁶

Why did national days of prayer end, and what does this reveal about the changes in the public position of the churches and religion? One of the answers lies with the government, but most relate to the archbishops of Canterbury in their implicit role as the leaders of British Christianity. As a result of the wartime arrangements made from 1942, the archbishops (and indeed civil servants) assumed that national days of prayer required the approval of the government as well as the various church leaders and the sovereign.

Archbishop Fisher was gratified when in December 1956, in the aftermath of the Suez and

¹⁴² *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1950 and 5 Oct. 1951, and see the photograph of the party leaders in the front pew in *Illustrated London News*, 11 Feb. 1950.

¹⁴³ Announcements by church leaders in *The Times*, 9 and 10 Oct. 1950, and *The Scotsman*, 9 Oct. 1950, and see the expression of government approval in *5Hans Commons cdlxxviii* (25 Oct. 1950), 346–7.

¹⁴⁴ *The Times*, 4 May 1951; LPL, G199.53.43, *A form of divine service for use during the Festival of Britain, 1951*.

¹⁴⁵ See esp. Fisher in *The Times*, 10 June 1953, and the correspondence about a proposed annual Queen's day, in Fisher papers, 129/316–56; and more generally, see the observations in Hastings, *History of English Christianity*, pp. 424–5, 491.

¹⁴⁶ They were also raised twice more in parliamentary questions: *5Hans Commons cdlxxviii* (18 Sept. 1950), 1550, and *cdxcviii* (25 Mar. 1952), 204–05.

Hungarian crises, the 5th Marquis of Salisbury (as both a leading lay churchman and the lord president of the council) was prepared to ask the prime minister to appoint a national day of prayer. Anthony Eden took seriously the argument that this might help the nation to face its problems in a renewed spirit of unity, to the extent of raising the matter with the cabinet early in January 1957.¹⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Fisher was not surprised when the government rejected the proposal. In ignorance of how national days of prayer had been organised before 1940, he had already lamented that these could not be arranged just by the church leaders and the queen, without the complications and discouragement likely to result from consultation with the government.¹⁴⁸ Yet actual or potential obstruction from governments was not the main reason for the end of national days of prayer. What was much more significant was that, after 1947, Fisher did not propose any himself, either to prime ministers or to the sovereign. In part this was because he anticipated objections of the kind which were eventually raised by government ministers in the aftermath of Suez. A national day of prayer would be inappropriate when the proposed subject was a source of division in the nation, and when the government's political opponents were likely to claim that it had a partisan purpose. It was also difficult to select one particular date of such manifest significance that the appointment of special worship would be amply justified, a difficulty which was the main ground of the cabinet rejection in January 1957. It was precisely the ever-present tensions of the Cold War, fear of nuclear devastation and colonial insurgencies which made it seem impossible to identify a 'decisive moment' and a 'special sense of urgency'. This was why Fisher had not sought a national day of prayer during the Korean War but instead arranged special prayers on a day already designated in the public calendar, and it was one reason why he discouraged

¹⁴⁷ See correspondence and notes, 14 Dec. 1956–10 Jan. 1957, in Fisher papers, 177/278–294, and in PREM 11/1984. Eden directed that the discussion should not be recorded in the cabinet minutes: PREM 11/1984/4, J. Hunt to F. Bishop (Cabinet Office officials), 4 Jan. 1957.

¹⁴⁸ Fisher papers, 177/292, Fisher to Archbishop Garbett of York, 28 Dec. 1956.

later proposals for any kind of special worship.¹⁴⁹ The point was best expressed by his successor, Michael Ramsey, when in 1961 he too rejected a request for a day of prayer: ‘in these years there is little to choose between one time and another as being really critical. We live in constant crisis’.¹⁵⁰

It was as if particular days of prayer had been made redundant by the perpetual sense of imminent doom. Constant crisis, the archbishops argued, required ‘constant prayer’. Yet this response also expressed a deeper concern: that special occasions of worship might obscure the need, or seem to be a substitute, for regular prayer. Fisher’s usual reply to requests for days of prayer was that, in addition to the duty of weekday prayer, ‘every Sunday is appointed by the Church for such a day of national prayer’.¹⁵¹ Ramsey’s reply was that

great days of prayer lend themselves to a rather mechanical view of what prayer means, and that far more good is done spiritually by constantly teaching Christian people about the meaning of prayer so that we are all the time building up in the world a community of praying people.¹⁵²

To insist on constant prayer at the expense of national days of prayer expressed a shift in understandings of the meaning and efficacy of prayer. This may have been related to what John Wolffe and Matthew Grimley have suggested: that confidence in divine providence—or at least the assumption that Britain was a nation specially favoured by God—declined as Britain ceased to be a great power and lost its empire.¹⁵³ Perhaps, too, the notion of ‘national prayers’ seemed less plausible or appropriate amid the new hopes for the United Nations and other international organisations. But this emphasis on constant prayer and the references to ‘a community of praying people’ also indicate a further and still more fundamental shift in the attitudes of church leaders.

¹⁴⁹ Fisher papers, 78/80–01, Fisher to Rev. W.E. Farndale (moderator, Free Church Federal Council), 5 Sept. 1950; and see Archbishop Garbett of York in *The Times*, 1 Sept. 1950.

¹⁵⁰ [LPL, Archbishop] Ramsey papers, 10/146, Ramsey to Basil Hordern, 27 Oct. 1961.

¹⁵¹ *Canterbury Diocesan Notes*, no. cccxxiii (Oct. 1956).

¹⁵² Ramsey papers, 10/153, Ramsey to R.E. Woods, 3 Aug. 1961,.

¹⁵³ Wolffe, *God and a Greater Britain*, pp. 252, 262; Grimley, ‘Religion of Englishness’, p. 905.

There was nothing new about these concerns of Fisher and Ramsey. At various times Davidson and Lang had similarly discouraged proposals for national days of prayer because of political divisions or the risk of political misrepresentation. They too had sometimes found it difficult to single out particular moments of crisis for special worship. They too had been concerned that by multiplication days of prayer might ‘become mere tinsel, so recurrent as to lose all freshness or special interest’, and that ‘dramatic’ occasions of worship could detract from ‘the need [for] continuous prayer’.¹⁵⁴ But for all their occasional doubts or hesitations, Davidson, Lang and William Temple had remained confident that the leaders of the churches could plausibly ask the whole nation to join together in special prayers.

There were certainly sceptics and critics, even among the devout (and indeed among advisors to the king).¹⁵⁵ In a Mass-Observation sample of 1944, 20 per cent considered days of prayer to be a ‘bad thing’.¹⁵⁶ Contrary to what church leaders hoped and on some occasions tried to promote, the ‘days’ did not appear to bring about religious revivals.¹⁵⁷ Probably a good number of the additional persons who attended churches or listened to broadcast services did so rather more for patriotic than strictly religious reasons and, at particularly anxious times, as forms of ‘crisis-praying’ or ‘coping’. After considerable evangelistic efforts and the BBC service for the weekday day of prayer in September 1942, Temple noted that there was ‘no sign of a return on any considerable scale to habits of regular attendance at church services’.¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the public responses seemed to be good.

¹⁵⁴ Davidson papers, 200/149, Davidson to Cripps, 29 July 1921; RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/18146/34, Lang to Wigram (King’s private secretary), 24 Feb. 1933.

¹⁵⁵ See e.g. C. Williams, ed., *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill* (London, 1943), p. 289, for an Anglican religious, and pacifist, writer (‘I suppose ... we shall see an explosion of patriotic Christianity. I do hate these “days of prayer”’); the pacifist Bishop Barnes of Birmingham, in Parker, *Faith on the Home Front*, pp. 91–2; and the King’s private secretary in Hart-Davies, *King’s Counsellor*, pp. 21, 53 (‘an insult both to us and to God’).

¹⁵⁶ Mass-Observation Online, FR1994 (Jan. 1944).

¹⁵⁷ It should be noted, however, that the days of prayer during and after the Sudetenland crisis in 1938 boosted a League of Prayer and Service which eight months later claimed two million members (see *The Times*, 1 Nov. 1938; PREM 1/338, Revs. W.H. Elliot and S. Berry to Chamberlain, 16 May 1939), and that the ‘day’ in May 1940 prompted a movement which persuaded the BBC to have a ‘silent’ minute—usually called the ‘dedicated minute’—for prayer or spiritual reflection by its listeners before its news programme every evening, a practice which continued into the late 1950s (Wolfe, *The Churches and the BBC*, pp. 158–70).

¹⁵⁸ *Chronicle of Convocation: Canterbury* (1942), p. 317 (14 Oct. 1942).

Mass-Observation estimated that in London around 25 per cent of the population attended places of worship on wartime ‘days’, which in terms of levels of church attendance since the mid-nineteenth century was impressive. Mass-Observation itself judged this to be a ‘big proportion’, given that many people had to undertake war work even on Sundays;¹⁵⁹ in other parts of Britain, which had higher levels of regular church attendance, the proportion would have been greater; and these estimates do not include the many who participated in prayers in their workplaces or at home. Moreover, into the 1940s the Church of England had an expansive understanding of the Christian community, which included not only irregular church-goers and those attending other religious meetings but also the growing audience for religious broadcasts, as well as the many with even looser attachments to the churches. Temple stated that the public response to the day of prayer in September 1942 revealed ‘the deep faith in God in the hearts of our people’,¹⁶⁰ and the wartime prominence of religion in public belief seems to have helped sustain church attendance into the 1950s. It would be hard to judge whether popular interest in the 1947 national day of prayer was less than in that of, say, 1932.

Nevertheless, in contrast to Davidson, Lang and William Temple, by the mid-1950s Fisher and Ramsey were not confident that they could meaningfully appeal for prayers from the nation. Fisher observed in reply to a request for a day of prayer in 1950 that ‘a call to the Nation means a call to the people who do not go to Church and do not normally pray’¹⁶¹—and at some time after the excitement of the coronation, he decided that it was hardly worth trying to reach them. ‘There is’, he wrote in September 1956, ‘something slightly unreal in calling the whole Nation to an act of prayer when such a large proportion hardly know what prayer means’. Three months later, his firmer view was that national days of prayer

¹⁵⁹ Mass-Observation Online, FR872 (Sept. 1941), FR1199 (Apr. 1942), FR1994 (Jan. 1944).

¹⁶⁰ *Chronicle of Convocation: Canterbury* (1942), p. 317 (14 Oct. 1942).

¹⁶¹ Fisher papers 78/70, Fisher to C.W. Judd, 21 July 1950.

are resented by a large number of the people not accustomed to praying at all. The real work of prayer is done by those who faithfully and regularly pray in and with the church Sunday by Sunday and day by day.¹⁶²

Now the nation was regarded as divided between the religious and the irreligious; and while the churches would always strive to increase the numbers of the religious – the ‘community of praying people’ – at any one moment they could hope to appeal only to existing church-goers, not to the wider nation outside the churches. Occasions of ‘national’ worship did not cease altogether, but they became much more limited affairs. Some were symbolically ‘national’ services held only in the great places of worship in London, for example the thanksgiving service in St Paul’s Cathedral after the end of the Falklands War in 1982. In the early 1970s the churches revived ‘days of prayer’ on national issues, such as the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the national strikes in the winter of 1973–4, and various later crises including the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in the USA on 11 September 2001. But these occasions had a significantly different quality from the national days of prayer from 1915 to 1947. They were not announced with the approval of the sovereign, still less the government, and there was no expectation of engaging the general population: these were church affairs, no longer addressed broadly to the nation, ‘the people’ or ‘all Christian citizens’, but just to ‘church congregations’.¹⁶³

The ending of national days of prayer in the 1950s matches the chronology of decline in church attendance and in religious belief noted in recent studies, particularly those by Callum Brown on ‘the death of Christian Britain’. What is also clear is that it marked a profound change in the place of religion in public life and public belief. Perhaps church leaders were just accepting realities—that the churches could no longer withstand the forces of secularisation. Or perhaps they lacked the will. Simon Green has concluded, from his

¹⁶²Ibid., 177/275, Fisher to Lady Verity, 17 Sept. 1956, and 177/277, Fisher to Rev. R. Hobday, 10 Dec. 1956.

¹⁶³E.g. *The Times*, 28 Dec. 1973, archbishop Coggan announcement. On days of prayer during the 1970s I am grateful to Peter Webster for a copy of his unpublished paper, ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury and National Days of Prayer in Britain, 1966–1974’. For 5 October 2001 as a day of prayer after ‘9/11’, see http://www.cofe.anglican.org/news/church_leaders_issue_joint_invitation_to_prayer.html.

study of regional religious organisations, that ‘some time during the 1920s the local religious classes lost heart’;¹⁶⁴ it is clear that at some time in the mid-1950s the national religious leaders also lost heart.

University of Durham

PHILIP WILLIAMSON

¹⁶⁴ Green, *Religion in the Age of Decline*, p. 380.

DAYS OF WORSHIP ON PUBLIC ISSUES 1900-1950

Year	Date (Sunday unless stated)	Occasion
1900	21 January	Church of Scotland: day of intercession during the war in South Africa
	11 February	Church of England: day of intercession on behalf of the forces in South Africa
1912	17 March	Church of England and English Free Churches: day of humble prayer and intercession during industrial strife and unrest
1914	21 August Fri	English churches: special day of prayer and intercession on behalf of the soldiers and sailors of the king
1915	3 January	day of humble prayer and intercession on behalf of the nation and Empire in this time of war
1916	2 January	special day on intercession ‘on behalf of the nation and empire in this time of war, and for thankful recognition of the devotion ... in the manhood and womanhood of the country’
	4 August Fri	day of humble prayer on the second anniversary of the outbreak of war
	31 December	special day of prayer and intercession and of ‘thankful recognition of the devotion ... of the manhood and womanhood of the country’
1917	4 August Sat	services of intercession on the third anniversary of the outbreak of war (special services also on the following Sunday)
1918	6 January	day of national prayer and thanksgiving on behalf of the nation and Empire in this time of war
	4 August	national day of prayer and remembrance on the fourth anniversary of the outbreak of war
	17 November	services of thanksgiving for the cessation of hostilities
1919	6 July	national day of thanksgiving on signing of the Versailles treaty
1932	3 January	national day of prayer ‘for our nation in its manifold needs’ and ‘for God’s guidance ... for the future peace of the world at the Disarmament conference’
1938	18 September	day of national prayer in this time of crisis
	2 October	day of national thanksgiving for deliverance from the danger of war
1939	1 October	day of national prayer and intercession at this time of war
1940	26 May	day of national prayer on behalf of the nation and Empire, their allies and the cause in which they are united

	8 September	day of national prayer: first anniversary of the outbreak of war
1941	23 March	national day of prayer for strength and guidance in the days to come and of thanksgiving for blessings received
	7 September	national day of prayer: second anniversary of the outbreak of war
1942	29 March	national day of humble prayer for our country and its allies at this time of grave anxiety
	3 September Th	national day of prayer and dedication: third anniversary of the outbreak of war
1943	3 September Fri	national day of prayer and dedication: fourth anniversary of the outbreak of war
1944	23 April	Church of England: day of prayer and dedication
	3 September	national day of prayer and dedication: fifth anniversary of the outbreak of war
1945	13 May	national day of thanksgiving and prayer ‘for the victory in Europe of the arms of the United Nations’
	19 August	national day of thanksgiving and prayer ‘for the complete victory granted to us and our allies, and of humble dedication’ in the responsibilities before the nation and the United Nations
1947	6 July	national day of prayer and dedication ‘in view of the tasks and duties which the nation is called to meet’
1950	29 October	day of prayer for peace and the United Nations

NOTE: National days of prayer, with contemporary designations, are indicated in bold. Related days of special worship are also noted. Unless otherwise stated, the days were observed by churches throughout the United Kingdom.

Sources: Lambeth Palace Library (special forms of prayer); *The Principal Acts of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland*; *The Times*; *The Scotsman*.